

## Knowledge, identity, and difference in project organisations

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### **Introduction**

It seems intuitive that boundaries, and the processes through which they are constructed, reinforced, transcended, or dissolved are an important aspect of organisation, as well as of social life more generally. People are constantly parcelling up their worlds, and having their worlds parcelled up for them, by a series of distinctions between inside and outside, identity and difference. However, there are many pitfalls on the road to theorising organisational boundaries. This paper attempts to identify some of the more serious of these as a prelude to thinking about the ambiguous boundaries of project organisations. These, perhaps more than other organisational forms, make it difficult to ignore the multiple and cross-cutting character of constructions of identity and difference. The multi-functional and often multi-organisational nature of projects, bringing together diverse individuals and groups, lend them a hybrid character of being simultaneously inside and outside, of difference within identity. Alternative conceptions of boundaries within organisation theory will be explored to consider how far they are able to address the hybridity of project organisations. These vary from unitarist treatments of organisations which tend to depict their boundaries as precise limits of containment, to approaches which see boundaries in more open terms as zones of interaction, to social constructionist accounts which emphasise the constitution of boundaries through ongoing processes of inclusion and exclusion, and finally to approaches which have questioned the appropriateness of the boundary metaphor altogether.

A central feature of these alternative ways of characterising boundaries is the different implications they hold for the theorisation of identity and difference. Attributions of Self and Other are inescapably bound up with the marking of boundaries, which is about identifying and imposing distinctions. The key question concerns whether these distinctions are self-contained, implying a singular and internally coherent identity, or whether there is always some slippage between categorisations of Self and Other. In thinking about the hybridity of project organisations, the notion of a lucid and homogeneous identity would appear to be problematic. However, we are then left with the challenge of how to think of the coexistence or interpenetration of identity and difference. This theme is explored, first more generally through an account of the plurality and partially overlapping character of boundary-constituting processes in and around projects, and then more specifically in relation to the problems of communication and inter-subjective understanding between the diverse groups of individuals involved in projects. This latter focus of attention is predicated on the belief that, since there is a crucial discursive aspect to the constitution of identity and difference, an examination of the nature of communicative practices should yield some interesting insights into the conditions through which such boundary-defining processes are played out.

### **Alternative conceptions of boundaries in organisation theory**

Although the language of boundaries regularly makes an appearance in organisation theory, efforts to conceptualise them have remained, by and large, less than explicit. The intention here is to foreground the notion of 'boundary' on the belief that a more nuanced treatment of this concept helps us to address a number of key issues about the meaning of organisation and organising. While boundaries have tended to be peripheral to the dominant themes of organisation theory (no pun intended), it is nevertheless possible to detect, if sometimes only by inference, a number of alternative ways in which they appear within discourses on organisation. Moreover, investigating the manner in which metaphors of boundary are employed by different bodies of theory is informative for revealing some of the key assumptions these approaches make about the nature of organising and the character of social action. It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive review of the labyrinthine twists and turns of organisation theory, but it is worthwhile to take some time to consider a few of the broader contours of how different

accounts vary in their treatment of boundaries. For these purposes it is useful to distinguish between four styles of approach which lie at different points on a continuum stretching from portrayals of boundaries as object-like and absolute entities, at one extreme, to conceptualisations which appear to deny any significant relevance to boundaries, at the other. The four styles are considered under the following headings: boundaries as a metaphor of containment; boundaries as permeable membranes; boundaries as socio-culturally constructed; and network metaphors and the dissolution of boundaries.

### *Boundaries as a metaphor of containment*

Here the treatment of boundaries follows the largely common-sense notion of a boundary as a clear line of demarcation between an inside and an outside. Inside and outside are depicted as radically distinct with minimal interactions between the two. Grabher (1993), borrowing a rather clumsy term from Georgescu-Roegen (1971), describes such non-overlapping states as *arithmomorphic*, where there is no scope for recognising that concepts often contain elements of their opposites. In organisational terms this corresponds to approaches which portray organisations unproblematically as object-like, coherent, and clearly circumscribed units of economic or other activity. Such treatments can be found in classical organisation theory, where organisations are anthropomorphised into independent actors seemingly possessing their own intentionality, a point which has become a major bone of contention in recent debates about whether organisations can be said to learn (e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1978; Easterby-Smith, 1997; Hayes and Allison, 1998; Kim, 1993; Mueller and Dyerson, 1999). The problem with an anthropomorphised treatment is that it promotes an excessively stable, one might say naturalised, image of organisations where internal differences and competing beliefs and actions are glossed over. The boundaries of organisation are those of a passive container, a legal, bureaucratic, or administrative shell, within which the key problem of co-ordination has been effectively resolved because it is assumed that the goals and activities of an organisation and its members are one and the same.

Another important feature of accounts which see organisational boundaries in these terms is that they follow a binary logic. The socio-economic landscape is clearly subdivided between the

organisation and everything that lies beyond its borders. This dichotomous image is clearly evident in theories of the firm based on the economics of transaction costs (hereafter TCE), at least in their earlier variants, where economic activity is neatly dissected into markets and hierarchies (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975). As Richardson (1972, 883) expressed it, the picture here is one of “islands of planned co-ordination in a sea of market relations”. Almost inescapably, such discourses create the impression of organisations as sites of order and stability in the midst of a chaotic external environment. For Granovetter (1985), this is symptomatic of underlying assumptions about the character of social life, similar to Rawls’s ‘original position’ or Hobbes’s ‘state of nature’, in which it is assumed that people, collectively, have an innate tendency towards disorder so the question becomes one of explaining how order emerges out of chaos (compared with the opposing and equally incomplete view that humans are fundamentally co-operative and order-desiring animals).

It is not my intention to get drawn too far into the detailed debate between TCE and its critics (for contributions to this debate see, for example: Berger *et al.*, 1993; Bradach and Eccles, 1989; Grabher, 1993; Granovetter, 1985, 1992; Håkansson and Johanson, 1993; Johanson and Mattsson, 1991; McGuinness, 1990; Ouchi, 1980; Powell, 1987; 1990; Tsang, 2000). However, since TCE seems to provide, for many at least, a not implausible explanation of why organisational boundaries exist, it deserves more than a passing mention. Taking its inspiration from the work of Coase (1937), TCE is primarily concerned with the question why it is that some economic transactions occur within markets while others happen within firms. The emergence of organisations, according to TCE, is largely a response to market failure; it is more efficient (i.e. it costs less) to conduct certain types of transaction (those which are repetitive, uncertain, and involve high asset specificity) within a firm rather than through open market exchange. Despite more recent modifications to the transaction costs approach through its recognition of “transactions in the middle range” (Williamson, 1985, 83), it has remained basically wedded to this internalisation versus externalisation or make or buy problem, simply adding to the number of alternative governance forms available (see also, Ouchi, 1980; Williamson, 1991).

As Grabher (1993) has suggested, the addition of intermediate or hybrid arrangements falling between the extremes of market and hierarchy does little to undermine the disjunctive logic of

treating varied forms of governance and co-ordination as discretely identifiable (one might equally say, clearly bounded) alternatives. Even with the modified scheme, different governance forms are depicted as a menu of well-defined options from which economic decision-makers make a boundedly rational choice by calculating the arrangement most likely to minimise transaction costs given the specific conditions of uncertainty, frequency, and asset specificity associated with the transaction. A major criticism with this approach is that it is poorly placed to supply a genuinely dynamic conceptualisation of organisational forms. For McGuinness (1990) the dynamic component of TCE is primarily limited to what might be called a comparative statics approach in which temporality is reduced to a progression of static ‘solutions’ based on efficiency considerations. This tends towards a hypostasised image of organisational forms, almost existing as predetermined blueprints independent of the processes, relations, and actions through which they are constituted. Furthermore, as Nooteboom (2000, 920) argues, “transaction cost theory commits the functionalist fallacy ... that since organizations exist, they must yield optimal efficiency, because if they were not optimal, they would not have survived”. Imai (1989, 124) has captured something of the importance of moving from a static depiction of organisational arrangements as discrete, off-the-peg, efficiency-maximising alternatives, towards a more dynamic, socio-economically embedded, process-based understanding:

... the crucial strategic consideration for the modern-day firm is not choosing the ‘best’ hierarchical organizational form within the fixed boundary of the firm or choosing the ‘best’ mixture of internal production/outside purchase. Instead, the crucial consideration must be to build a social and economic context conducive to spontaneous and varied interactions of people inside and outside the firm. The boundary separating the interior and exterior ... is not constant but is formed and continuously updated as a result of interactions.

The distinction here is roughly that between *organisation* as a structural unit, a straightforward container in which activity is played out, and *organising* as an ongoing accomplishment of social interactions, sense-making processes, and linked activities (cf. Coopey *et al.*, 1997; Czarniawska, 1996; Weick, 1979, 1995). Granovetter (1985, 1992), in developing his embeddedness approach, has offered convincing arguments against what, borrowing a term from Wrong (1961), he sees as an *oversocialised* conception of human action in the hierarchies side of the markets and hierarchies formula. Accordingly, once a hierarchical arrangement has been selected as the

most appropriate governance form, individuals are portrayed as mechanistically acting out patterns of behaviour driven by internalised customs, habits, or norms determined by their role position. However, as Granovetter (1985, 486, emphasis original) suggests, “culture is not a once-for-all influence but an *ongoing process*, continuously constructed and reconstructed during interaction”. In more recent work, Williamson (1996, chapter 9) appears to accept this argument, but then goes on to suggest that insights generated by the embeddedness approach can largely be reduced to questions of economising behaviour, thus seeming to miss Granovetter’s point that economic and non-economic motivations are always coexistent and tend to be interwoven in complex ways.

One corollary of the economic-rational, mechanistic model of organisational behaviour associated with TCE is that it promotes a unitarist view of organisation. It is unitarist in the twin sense that it implies one best organisational arrangement for any given set of transactional conditions (the flip-side of the functionalist fallacy mentioned above), as well as portraying organisations as internally coherent, homogeneous entities whose co-ordination is assured because individuals blindly follow pre-determined behavioural patterns. Moreover, a unitarist view of organisation is simultaneously an image of organisation as self-sufficiently contained within discrete boundaries. Wheatley (1992, 28) sees a close relationship between mechanistic approaches and the drawing of boundaries:

A world based on machine images is a world filled with boundaries. In a machine, every piece knows its place. Likewise, in Newtonian organizations we’ve drawn boundaries everywhere ... These omnipresent boundaries create a strong sense of solidity, of structure that secures things, a kind of safety.

As we shall see in the next three sub-sections, the reassuring solidity of organisational boundaries encouraged by the container view is, to varying extents, shown to be illusory.

### *Boundaries as permeable membranes*

Approaches which characterise organisational boundaries in this second way share several points of contact with the container view, particularly in tending to make dualistic distinctions between organisation and environment. However, the absoluteness of the distinction, and the lack of

conditioning interactions between the two, are partly dissolved through attempts, of varying ingenuity, to theorise how the inside and outside of organisations interrelate. In some cases, such as contingency theory, the conditioning influences seem to be practically unidirectional (e.g. Burns and Stalker, 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967a, 1967b; Lorsch and Morse, 1974; Thompson, 1967; Woodward, 1965), whereas in others, such as some of the more sophisticated accounts of autopoietic systems, organisation and environment are in a co-conditioning, or even co-defining relationship (e.g. Luhmann, 1995; Maturana, 1999; Maturana and Varela, 1980, 1987).

For all its weaknesses, one of the contributions of contingency theory was the way it began to challenge the consensualist and unitarist assumptions of classical organisation theory. Firstly, the whole problematic of integration in the face of internal differentiation was recognised as an important issue in organisation and it was no longer assumed that the internal coherence of organisations was guaranteed (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967a, 1967b). Secondly, the notion that there is a single blueprint for efficient organisation, whether it be Fordist-Taylorist bureaucracy, the M-form organisation, or whatever, was challenged through the empirical identification of a diversity of organisational forms which were seen to be a response to varying environmental conditions. Burns and Stalker (1961), for example, described a continuum of organisational structures varying from mechanistic to organic, arguing that the former are more suited to stable, straightforward, and relatively predictable tasks and environments, while the latter are more appropriate where there is greater instability and uncertainty. The focus on turbulence and uncertainty was also evident in the work of Lawrence and Lorsch (1967a, 1967b) who saw a connection between environmental instability and organisational complexity. Organisations in unstable environments tend to exhibit greater complexity because they are increasingly differentiated into distinct subsystems which concentrate on specific task areas and relate to limited segments of the external environment relevant to their activities.

Rather than being closed and self-sufficient entities, organisations are envisaged as open systems which can not be insulated from the outside world because their boundaries are necessarily and continuously crossed by inputs and outputs, the character of which impose constraints and contingencies relative to the technological and task environments of the organisation. In this sense, the outward-facing boundaries of organisation are considered less like the solid walls of a

container and more like a permeable membrane or zone of interaction. Such open systems thinking was explicitly developed by Thompson (1967), who also gave direct consideration to the character of organisational boundaries, particularly through his notion of boundary-spanning components. These units are established in an attempt to buffer the core activities of an organisation from environmental fluctuations by limiting the range of relevant contingencies through filtering and segmentation. Thus, while organisational boundaries are portrayed as open, there are continuous attempts to moderate this openness and insulate the interior of the organisation from excessive turbulence.

However, whilst contingency theory marked a crucial step forward in identifying a plurality of organisational forms and recognising the internal differentiation of complex organisations, it was ultimately limited because it depicted boundary-spanning influences as primarily unidirectional (from environment to organisation). Constraints and contingencies are seen to flow principally from an environment over which organisational decision-makers appear to have no control. Their role is limited to identifying the relevant contingencies and modifying the structure of the organisation accordingly - the reference to *structure* being purposeful here because contingency theorists overwhelmingly identified formal structural solutions to the problems they identified, which included such things as liaison roles, departmentalisation, taskforces, projects, and matrix arrangements (e.g. Galbraith, 1977; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967a, 1967b).

The functionalist fallacy mentioned above in the context of TCE applies with equal force to contingency theory because there is the assumption that any given organisational formation is an optimally efficient response to the environmental conditions surrounding it (cf. Hannan and Freeman, 1989, for a broadly similar argument from a population ecology perspective). Thus, although a diversity of alternative organisational forms are portrayed, contingency theory betrayed a *de facto* unitarism because it suggested a one-way matching of environment and organisation which downplayed the possibility of divergent organisational arrangements emerging in response to a given set of contingent conditions. According to Child (1972), contingency theory was unable to account for such diversity because it lacked an adequate understanding of managerial agency in shaping organisations. More recently, the literature on organisational cognition and sense-making has further problematised this one-to-one matching of

organisation and environment by highlighting variations in, and limitations to, management attention, absorptive capacity, perspective-taking, and environmental search processes (e.g. Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Daft and Weick, 1984).

Other approaches with a systems theoretic emphasis have attempted to supply a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between organisation and environment. Drawing on the idiosyncratic arguments of Maturana and Varela (1980, 1987) concerning the autopoietic character of living systems, these approaches have challenged the view of environment as something that is pre-given, a distinct phenomenon that is 'out there'. According to Maturana and Varela, the unity of an autopoietic system is defined by the self-regulation and recursive generation of components in interaction. Importantly, any such unity is always from the point of view of an observer. Thus, "[t]he basic operation that an observer performs ... is the operation of distinction; that is, the pointing to a unity by performing an operation which defines its boundaries and separates it from a background" (Maturana, 1999, 161). This operation of drawing distinctions is central to defining an autopoietic unity. As Luhmann (1995, 177) has argued, "[f]or the theory of self-referential systems, the environment is ... a presupposition of the system's identity, because identity is possible only by difference". It is through making these distinctions that the boundaries of systems are specified. While intriguing, I personally find the arguments around autopoiesis somewhat abstract and difficult to follow. In particular, it is hard to grasp the autopoietic character claimed for social systems because autopoiesis applies solely to closed and self-referential systems. The answer appears to lie in the fact that, despite being closed, autopoietic systems are not immune to influences from outside. Luhmann (1995) has suggested that systems can be simultaneously closed and open. "Using boundaries, systems can open and close at the same time, separating internal interdependencies from system-environment interdependencies and relating both to each other" (Luhmann, 1995, 29). On similar lines, Seidl (2000) has written about organisation as a distinction between medium and form where the former is not something pre-given which acts upon the form embedded in it, as in conventional accounts of organisation and environment. Instead, medium and form are in a co-conditioning and co-evolving relationship.

### *Boundaries as socio-culturally constructed*

The third group of approaches to conceptualising organisational boundaries take us even further away from the passive and object-like depiction of boundaries as the limits of containment characteristic of unitarist treatments. With Luhmann, it has already been seen that the production and redefinition of boundaries are an integral part of the functioning of self-referential systems, whereby, in the case of social systems, “the difference between system and environment is mediated exclusively by *meaning-constituted boundaries*” (Luhmann, 1995, 194, emphasis original). This points towards a conception of boundaries as actively produced and reproduced by systems through making distinctions between identity and difference. The operation of constructing and negotiating identity and difference, with concomitant implications for inclusion and exclusion, provides the focus for accounts which see boundaries as socio-cultural constructs. In contrast to approaches which encourage an essentialist image of boundaries as overwhelmingly fixed and stable, social constructionist accounts regard boundaries as the outcome of dynamic, ongoing, and potentially contested processes of inclusion/exclusion. Boundaries are not simply put in place and then left to their own devices; they are actively maintained and reproduced through continuing action and interaction.

Arguments consistent with this perspective can be found in cultural theory, anthropology, sociology, feminist theory, and ethnomethodology where concepts of Self and Other have received considerable attention (e.g. Benhabib, 1992; Berg and Kearns, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Oberoi, 1994; Salih, 2000; Shildrick, 1997). Here there is frequently an emphasis on the discursive construction of identity and alterity through the employment of categorisations which designate and delimit self from non-self. Rose (1995), for example, finds such boundary-constituting processes in the construction of traditions. She argues that “[t]raditions are constructed: written, spoken, visualized, taught, lived. Traditions are representations of a past and ... the construction of a particular tradition is also always a practice of inclusion and exclusion” (Rose, 1995, 414). Similarly, Lamont and Fournier (1992) have focused on the symbolic practices through which areas of a social territory are marked off, thereby defining the terms of admission and exclusion. Central to the articulation of identity/difference and inclusion/exclusion are the construction and valuing of knowledge claims, which will be of

particular relevance to some of the themes I would like to discuss below. As an example of this, McLaughlin and Webster (1998), in a study of professional identities in medicine, argue that knowledge, discourse, and power continually interact in the construction of identity. “The body of knowledge and the professional identity develop *together*; shaping the meaning of each other and constructing the boundaries which mark out the status and legitimacy of one field over other forms of knowledge and expertise” (McLaughlin and Webster, 1998, 784-785, emphasis original).

Processes of inclusion and exclusion are unavoidably political, which becomes especially evident where boundaries are heavily policed or subject to contestation. An important consideration here concerns the degree of reciprocity or symmetry in the recognition of boundaries between those admitted and those excluded. Three limit cases can be thought of as follows: there is a symmetrical (but not necessarily benign) identification by two groups who construct a common boundary between themselves, defined in both cases in opposition to the other (reciprocal bounding); alternatively boundaries can be imposed from the outside (ascriptive bounding) - which is precisely what Ryen and Silverman (2000) argue early anthropologists did around so-called ‘native’ populations; or finally boundaries can be internally constructed by those seeking to mark themselves off, although this is not necessarily recognised, or perhaps even noticed, by those outside the group (elective bounding). Recognising both symmetrical and asymmetrical forms of boundary constitution helps us to remember that social boundaries hold both positive and negative connotations. They can imply security, solidarity, and belonging; but equally, and often simultaneously, they are about exclusion and alienation.

This point sometimes seems to be missed by accounts which depict a plurality of identity projects and life-style choices which we are supposed to be able to move between freely as an aesthetic expression of our inherent multiplicity. This is arguably applicable to the work of Maffesoli (1993, 1995, 1996), who has written about an irrepressible and effervescent sociality which bubbles up despite the atomisation and disenchantment of modernity. Neo-tribalism, or the emergence of an elective communality based around participation in a multitude of actively created collectivities, is regarded as a celebration of the “polydimensionality of the lived experience” (Maffesoli, 1989, 4).

In the context of a complex society, everyone lives through a series of experiences which can only be understood in an overall sense. Participating in a multitude of tribes, which are themselves interrelated, allows each person to live his or her intrinsic plurality. These various 'masks' are ordered in a more or less conflictual way and fit together with other surrounding 'masks'.

Maffesoli (1995, 147)

While Maffesoli's pluralist and vitalist sentiments are to be welcomed (particularly in connection with the troubling theorisation of identity which we will return to below), the danger is that an aestheticised reading of shifting participation in different collective groupings promotes an unbalanced view of these involvements as primarily being about positive choice or simply a matter of taste (Osborne, 1997). Bauman (1992) offers a rather more pessimistic interpretation, suggesting that these multiple acts of self-identification are inevitably fragile because they depend for their continued existence on an excluded Other. This, in turn, tends to promote paranoia and uncertainty and often means that "such a community lives under the condition of constant anxiety and thus shows a sinister and but thinly masked tendency to aggression and intolerance" (Bauman, 1992, 235). The argument here is that it is a short step from the positive affirmation of self-identity to the aggressive exclusion of others who are seen to threaten that identity. However, this simply appears to be replacing a celebratory view of solidary groupings reflecting the *puissance* of the human spirit, with a dystopian view of conflict, intolerance, and exclusion. A more balanced view of the social construction of boundaries would recognise the potential for their constitution to be played out in more or less benign or malignant ways.

Since, following a social constructionist view, organisational boundaries only exist relative to human observers and participants, there is a sense in which they are arbitrary phenomena and, as such, there is an inherent ambiguity in where to locate any line of division. As we shall see below, this ambiguity is particularly prescient when one considers multi-organisational projects where it could be argued that the project is simultaneously inside and outside any of the participating organisations. However, it is important not to conflate the claim that socially-constituted boundaries are arbitrary with the suggestion that they therefore have no 'real' existence, nor that they are completely plastic and can be revised without resistance. Certainly some boundaries are ephemeral in the extreme, such as those implied by the fleeting processes of

participation associated with transient collectivities such as festivals, demonstrations, performances, spectacles, and even natural and human disasters (cf. Pipan and Porsander, 2000). However, other boundaries which are more enduring can take on a perceived solidity (or facticity) such that they begin to be regarded in naturalistic or object-like terms. This is the point made by Berger and Luckmann (1966, 106, emphasis original) about reification or “the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something other than human products”. Moreover, the suggestion that organisational boundaries are arbitrary does not mean that it makes no difference where they are drawn. Indeed, the way in which we portion up the world according to perceived similarities and differences has important implications for where we focus our attention, how we act, and how others experience our actions (cf. Goodman, 1984).

### *Network Metaphors and Dissolving Boundaries*

The final group of approaches I want to consider are less concerned with how boundaries are constructed and more interested in finding new metaphors of organisation to replace what they see as the problematic concept of the boundary. In some cases, this is simply about making a straightforward empirical claim about the diminishing relevance of boundaries in contemporary organisational life. The most extreme examples of this can be found in the more unconditional and unchecked narratives of globalisation and corporate restructuring which claim the emergence of a ‘borderless world’ with ‘boundaryless corporations’ (e.g. Ashkenas *et al.*, 1995; O’Brien, 1992; Ohmae, 1990, 1995; Reich, 1991). Others, in a rather more measured vein, have argued that the language of boundaries leads to an atomistic and insular vision of an external socio-economic environment punctuated by clear-cut organisational entities which is ill placed to represent what is better regarded as a complex web of flows, relations, and interdependencies. These approaches “have in common that they see the need to focus on the system of interconnections rather than single firms in the study of how production chains are structured” (Rusten, 1993, p.2). Thus, Castells (1996, 96) has spoken of a constantly shifting web-like industrial structure which “relies on a combination of strategic alliances and ad hoc cooperation projects between corporations, decentralized units of each major corporation, and networks of small and medium enterprises connecting among themselves and/or with large corporations or networks of corporations”. However, he moderates this image of flux by introducing a tension

between the space of flows and the space of places, where the latter is made up of more stable locales “whose form, function and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity” (Castells, 1996, 423).

A key metaphor here is that of the network and variations around this theme have attracted considerable support in recent years (e.g. Håkansson, 1989; Håkansson and Johanson, 1993; Johanson and Mattsson, 1991; Nohria and Eccles, 1992; Powell, 1990; Uzzi, 1997). These accounts portray a situation where the traditional boundaries of organisation are being decomposed into intricate clusters of relationships where the image of organisations as absolutely bounded entities is replaced by that of nodes, hubs, and connections of varying density, duration, and intensity. As Wells and Cook (1991, 17) have suggested, the “globalised firm has indistinct and shifting boundaries, we may expect it to be networked or distributed in organisational structure rather than being hierarchical, and it may penetrate or exploit space by proxy or in cooperation with other firms rather than in ‘isolation’”. A network approach to organisation has much to recommend it, particularly because it shifts attention away from formally defined organisations, such as the legally-bounded firm, as the privileged unit of analysis, leaving it free to seek out those boundary-crossing and interpenetrating clusters of interaction through which socio-economic activity tends to be played out. As Cowling and Sugden (1987, 62) have pointed out, an organisation “conceived as the means of coordinating production from one centre of strategic decision-making need not coincide with a ‘legal firm’. Indeed, it may encompass many legal firms”.

However, there are some who caution against seeing the intensely fluctuating interconnectedness of the socio-economic landscape as signalling an end to organisational boundaries or even the death of the corporation. Dicken and Thrift (1992), for example, are keen to reassert the continuing significance of the business enterprise, particularly of large corporations, arguing that “we cannot afford to forget the sheer organizational resources of large corporations and the social power into which these translate” (Dicken and Thrift, 1992, 288). Equally, the idea that organisational boundaries have lost any relevance is not consistent with the point made by Teece (1998, 2000) that, as production becomes more and more interlinked, organisational decision-makers have become increasingly concerned with protecting the knowledge assets of the

organisation through such mechanisms as the exercise of intellectual property rights (see also, Boisot and Griffiths, 1999). Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) have also argued that the so-called 'boundaryless corporation' actually involves the formation of new boundaries based on new criteria rather than the disappearance of boundaries altogether.

Other approaches have challenged the boundary metaphor less on the empirical grounds that networks provide a more accurate representation of current organisational forms and more because it is a fundamentally limited and limiting concept. As soon as one thinks of a boundary it is hard not to impose an uncrossable cleavage between inside and outside, separating out both sides and according each a lucid and self-sufficient identity grounded in presence (cf. Malavé, 1998). Law (1999, 6) interprets this as consistent with a specific topological understanding based on Euclideanism, where "[o]bjects with three dimensions are imagined precisely to exist within a comformable three dimensional space". Such a topology is homogenising and so alternative metaphors alluding to different topological possibilities are a way of opening out towards complexity. Law (1999, 6-7) goes on to suggest that "the notion of 'network' is itself an alternative topological system ... [where o]bject integrity ... is not about a volume within a larger Euclidean volume. It is rather about holding patterns of links stable". In trying to think about the intricate interpenetration of identity and difference, continuity and change, Law and Mol (2000) draw on and extend Latour's notion of the *immutable mobile* to take the topological possibilities even further (Latour, 1987). The employment of oxymoronic terms such as *immutable mobile* is intended to sidestep the disabling paradoxes of identity within difference, or continuity within change. An *immutable mobile* can be thought of through the example of a vessel which holds its shape despite moving through space. To this, Law and Mol (2000) add three other possibilities - *immutable immobile*, *mutable mobile*, and *mutable immobile* - to represent the simultaneous interplay of different possibilities of similarity and difference.

A similar concern with unsettling conventional conceptions of identity and difference in straightforward terms of presence and absence can be found in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (e.g. Deleuze, 1983, 1994; Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 1988). Again, standard metaphors are considered misleading and in need of replacement. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari (1988) propose to replace what they regard as dominant metaphors of arborescence, with their emphasis on

vertical, branching, hierarchical, 'tree-like' thinking which seeks out identity according to the principle of root or origin, with the more horizontal, uncentred, and multiply interlinked metaphor of the rhizome, which is a device for thinking about connectedness without thinking about a 'specious unity' (Deleuze, 1995, 30). The intention is, to borrow a phrase from Werner Marx, to think multiplicity as multiplicity (Marx, 1985). As Deleuze (1983, 157) has suggested, "a theory does not [should not?] totalize; it is an instrument of multiplication and it also multiplies itself" (Deleuze, 1983, 157). Rhizomatic thinking is a style of 'nomad thought' which "does not lodge itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority ... Rather than analyzing the world into discrete components, reducing their manyness to the One (= Two) of self-reflection, and ordering them by rank, it sums up a set of circumstances in a shattering blow. It synthesizes a multiplicity of elements without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging" (Massumi, 1992, 5-6). By acknowledging constant leakages across the ostensibly discrete boundaries of categories of thought as self-concept, the whole notion of boundedness is problematised. As Lechte (1994, 102) has suggested, the radical horizontality of the rhizome "does not entail the firming of boundaries between identities, as is the case with representational thought based on the Same, but leads instead to the permeability of all boundaries and barriers".

Thinking through alternative metaphors, such as network or rhizome, is useful because it opens up new ways of seeing and unsettles the assumptions that have congealed around the notion of boundary. However, there is a crucial ambiguity in such exercises because there is considerable slippage between the descriptive and prescriptive facets of these claims. That is to say, we are left in a state of uncertainty as to whether the radically horizontal possibilities of these ways of thinking are a more adequate representation of the complexity, interconnectedness, and ambiguity of states of affairs in the world, which vertical and hierarchical thought fails to capture; or whether this horizontality is something which these accounts think the (social) world *should* conform to more closely. To speak of the former would be to pursue an altogether modernist concern with unmasking conceptual errors, and yet, while such accounts would be unwilling to admit such an orientation, it is difficult to see what other role the challenging of arborescent thought occupies. The latter, prescriptive reading is one which appears from considering the political implications of Deleuze and Guattari (1983), who appear keen to assert

the creativity and vitalism of deterritorialising impulses which break down the boundaries of vertical thought, with both malevolent and liberating possibilities. As Pearson (1997) has argued, the critical task “can only be that of decoding and deterritorializing the prevailing administrative and regulatory machines - in the State, in philosophy, in science, in culture and information - that have defined and restricted the present by despotically blocking the free flow of energy and knowledge throughout the social machine”. One way of working with the ambiguity of description/prescription flows from considering the peculiar position of thought in human action. Thus, it may well be that social realities rarely submit easily to discrete categorisation as there is always horizontal slippage between identity and non-identity, but at the same time human agents are consistently bringing such a state of affairs into existence precisely by categorising the world into similarities and distinctions and then acting upon these thought objects. While a world without fixed boundaries may offer a liberating potential, this is constantly being frustrated by attempts to reduce plurality to a difference based on identity. In other words, people routinely behave *as if* the world is cross-cut by boundaries of similarity and difference.

To summarise the argument so far, I have attempted to show that the conceptualisation of boundaries appears in numerous guises in organisation theory (and social theory more generally), most of which have something to offer to the understanding of boundaries. Transaction cost economics, as well as responses from resource- and knowledge-based theories of the firm, for all their problems, have the benefit of posing questions about where the boundaries of organisation are located. Systems-based approaches have raised issues about the boundary-crossing influences between organisation and environment, as well as challenging the image of organisations as internally coherent entities. Social constructionist accounts have provided a theorisation of boundaries as being actively constituted through the complex interplay of constructions of identity and difference. Finally, the introduction of alternative metaphors, such as network or rhizome, have helped to supply different ways of thinking which unsettle conventional concepts of boundedness. In the next section, I want to consider how this multiplicity of conceptions relating to organisational boundaries might offer interesting insights into the character of organising within temporary projects.

## **The ambiguous boundaries of project organisations**

Studying project organisations is useful because they disrupt many deeply held assumptions about organisations. Contrary to images of organisation as sites of stability, consensus, and continuity, project organisations represent temporary groupings where multiple roles, identities, tasks, and activities intersect for a time before being dissolved and recombined into new projects. For those managing projects, the challenge can be thought of in terms of how to achieve some degree of coherence out of this diversity so as to achieve some overall task negotiated for the project. Meyerson *et al.* (1996, 167) have captured something of the tensions faced by temporary project groups, portraying them in the following terms: “Temporary groups often work on tasks with a high degree of complexity, yet they lack the formal structures that facilitate coordination and control ... They depend on an elaborate body of collective knowledge and diverse skills, yet individuals have little time to sort out who knows precisely what. They often entail high-risk and high-stake outcomes, yet they seem to lack the normative structures and institutional safeguards that minimize the likelihood of things going wrong”. The problematic of integration and differentiation is one that has long been recognised by organisation theory. Thus, as we have already seen, Lawrence and Lorsch (1967a, 1967b) regarded organisational differentiation as an appropriate response to complexity. However, such differentiation tends to generate differences “in cognitive and emotional orientation among managers in different functional departments” (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967a, 11), which makes their integration difficult. One of the solutions proffered by Lawrence and Lorsch was the project structure, which was seen as a way of integrating diverse functions for the performance of uncertain and complex tasks. However, the simple introduction of a project form of organisation is no guarantee that integration will actually be achieved, in part because the problem of differentiation is simply displaced from the relationship between functional departments to reappear at the project level.

To express this problematic in the language of boundaries, projects might be thought of as an attempt to construct, at least temporarily, a boundary of identity and coherence around a disparate collection of people and activities. However, any coherence is constantly in danger of being undermined because projects tend to be cross-cut by any number of contours of difference.

The principal distinctions are around specialist tasks, roles, and occupational groupings since projects are typically composed of a diversity of functions (e.g. planning, design, implementation, commissioning, procurement, contracts management, finance, human resource management) and technical disciplines (e.g. electrical and electronic engineering, mechanical engineering, structural engineering, software engineering, systems integration, architecture). Having said that, there are also likely to be differences around gender, ethnicity, educational background, levels of experience, language, national and local cultures and sub-cultures, personal interests, styles of working etc. etc. Such heterogeneity is central to project organisations, particularly those engaged in complex tasks, because they usually demand the bringing together of different yet complementary skills, competences, knowledge-sets, and experience. Indeed, some have argued that the variety of perspectives, values, knowledge, and experience accompanying such diversity encourages a generative tension, or what Leonard (1995) has called 'creative abrasion', which is beneficial for problem-solving and knowledge formation. Consequently, projects are presented with the paradox that they simultaneously require both identity and difference. Without some minimal identity based on shared (or at least compatible) goals and objectives, it is unlikely that inter-dependent tasks will be satisfactorily co-ordinated and there will be fragmentation, conflict, and dissociation. However, if coherence is achieved at the expense of heterogeneity, then projects run the risk of 'groupthink' (Janis, 1974), lack of creativity, and defensive isolation. This tension between identity and difference is not resolvable in a once and for all manner, but is an always emergent, reversible, and potentially unstable process of negotiation.

In the spirit of the multiple account of boundaries offered earlier, it is useful to think about the formation of boundaries around and within projects through a variety of different conceptual lenses. One way of approaching this is through theorising project boundaries according to the overlapping categories of the social, the spatial, and the temporal. It has already been suggested that projects tend to be cross-cut by socio-cultural differences, but this says rather little about the processes through which such differences are created, enforced, or potentially overcome. It is important to avoid culturalist arguments here, whereby it is assumed that it is possible to read off particular normative characteristics of people according to their occupation, role, gender, nationality, or whatever. Norm conforming behaviour is not an expression of innate differences

which permit no alternative expressions. Where collective norms can be identified, they are always created, reaffirmed, updated, or destroyed through ongoing action and interaction. Any consideration of norms as something exhibited by (or expressive of) cohesive groups is problematic. This is because individuals are likely to orientate themselves to a multitude of overlapping identity positions, especially in highly differentiated societies. Consequently, to claim that an individual conforms to group and role expectations as, for example, a structural engineer, a project member, a member of a professional institution, a husband, wife, or partner, a keen tennis player or golfer etc. raises the question as to which of these identity orientations one should seize upon as informing behaviour under a particular context. A plausible answer is that it is unlikely to be any single one of these; but at the same time, neither will all be equally relevant. Here Mead's notion of the complex self made up of an interlocking collection of elementary selves is useful (Mead, 1934). Similarly, Goffman's arguments about alternative presentations of self to different audiences are informative (Goffman, 1959). The construction of identity according to a range of different bases opens up the possibility for internalised conflicts where, say, one's role as a structural engineer and a member of a project might come into a situation of incompatibility.

Having depicted a multiplicity of identity-constituting conditions and their potential for inconsistency, this is not to say that there is no such thing as the development of group cohesion based on shared norms, values, and expectations of behaviour, nor that the multiple boundaries of identity are wholly permeable, such that one can move between identity positions effortlessly and without being challenged. In the case of project organisations, there would seem to be a range of different boundary-defining processes of greater or lesser formality which are involved in constituting identities and differences. More formal mechanisms include contractual arrangements and designated organisational structures which lay out the objectives of the project, apportion roles and responsibilities, establish reporting procedures, and define property rights and the allocation of commercial gains and losses. These operate to create boundaries around the project as a whole, as well as partitioning it up into specific functions and activities. There also tend to be relatively formal boundaries around different occupational and professional groupings which are often maintained through institutional mechanisms, such as the regulation of membership and codes of practice of professional bodies. However, there are also less formal

and less easily identifiable boundary-constituting processes. These include inter-personal ascriptions of belonging and non-belonging which may be expressed through such practices as inclusion in (or exclusion from) networks of communication. Such ascriptions can be based on any number of identity markers including the recognition of shared interests or values, status, experience, language, etc.

The boundaries of project organisations also need to be considered according to their spatial and temporal aspects. A visual bias in imagining boundaries means that it is easy to think of them in terms of a particular topology - that of a contiguous space encircled by a border. However, project teams are not always contained within a single locale and may be spread out widely over a number of locations. Where projects are more dispersed, it is tempting to think of them as being cut across by boundaries of physical space which have inevitable implications for social relations within the project. However, there is a long tradition of work in geography which has recognised the dangers of a reified and absolute conception of space, warning against attributing it independent causal powers (Benko and Strohmayer, 1997; Gregory, 1994; Gregory and Urry, 1978; Harvey, 1982; Massey, 1984; Merrifield, 1993; Unwin, 2000). It is not sufficient to point to the spatial configuration of a particular project and simply read off necessary characteristics from this configuration, such as the frequent claim that communication in co-located project teams is always richer and more intense than that in dispersed teams. Spatial relations, while carving out a more or less constrained zone of possibility, are mediated through social, institutional, political, and technological practices. The simple fact that members of a project are in the same location is no guarantee that they will communicate effectively. A more fruitful way of thinking about the interplay between social and spatial relations can be found in the writing of Lefebvre (1991), who argued that social relationships produce, or are expressed through, a particular organisation of space, which at the same time reacts back upon them. There is a continuous dialectic between the social production of space and the spatial production of society. Thus, project organisations bring into being a particular space which rebounds by opening up certain possibilities and closing off others.

The typically spatialised or topological conception of boundaries should not blind us to the suggestion that boundaries can equally be constituted through temporality, which should also be

conceived in relative, socially produced/productive, rather than absolute and abstract terms. For projects, the most obvious point to recognise is that, by their very nature, they are temporally bounded. That is to say, they have a finite timescale, the duration of which can have important implications for identity-forming processes. While longer projects permit more long-lasting interaction between project members, making it more likely for an overall project identity to emerge, there may not be time on shorter projects for this to occur. In addition, the discontinuous temporality of project work acts to set projects apart from other more continuous organisational activities which follow a different, less punctuated, temporal rhythm (cf. Clark, 1985, and his distinction between ‘even and ‘event’ time). Different experiences of time between project and non-project elements of organisations can make any interfaces between them problematic. Projects may also be cross-cut by internal temporal divisions. The most evident of these are the separation of projects into variously structured phases which may or may not overlap. While a core group of key individuals may follow a project continuously from inception through to completion, more often than not projects involve a changing progression of specialist groupings entering to undertake their tasks and then exiting. This influences the continuity of social relations, learning processes, and communication within the project.

While I have considered the social, spatial, and temporal dimensions surrounding the formation of project boundaries separately, this should not be taken to suggest that they are not interconnected. Indeed, in highlighting the relative, socially constituted and constituting character of time-space, it should be clear that all three dimensions are inseparable (cf. Urry, 1985). This further contributes to the image of project boundaries as plural, partially overlapping, and ambiguous. One consequence of this multiplicity and ambiguity is that it makes it difficult to conceive of projects as sites of stability where clear and routine patterns of interaction are possible. Focusing on one aspect of this, Goodman and Goodman (1976, 495) have suggested that when the “task is complex with respect to interdependence of detailed task accomplishment, so that it is not easy to define tasks clearly and autonomously ... [then] members must keep interrelating with one another in trying to arrive at viable solutions”. This is an image of emergence in which continuous interaction is crucial. The emergent character of projects means that ongoing communication to resolve issues as they arise is critical. However, since language and communication also play a central role in constituting identity and difference,

the likelihood arises that the internal differentiation of projects will make communicative interactions potentially problematic. Consequently, the remainder of the paper focuses in on issues of communication and inter-subjective understanding, partly to explore the barriers to communication and the conditions for overcoming them, but also to demonstrate that different approaches to these issues hold their own implications for conceptualising identity and difference.

### **Projects and the problem of inter-subjective understanding**

There is a long-standing view that the problems encountered by projects can largely be traced to pathologies in communication. This was one of the key conclusions of the socio-technical systems work conducted by the Tavistock Institute in the 1960s into project organisations in the construction industry (Crichton, 1966; Higgin and Jessop, 1965). Given the conditions of uncertainty, complexity, and interdependence typically associated with projects, these authors argued that the fragmentation of project activities into specialised task areas, solidified by historically specific processes of institutionalisation around crafts and professions, contributed to serious problems in communication. More recently, a series of major reports on the construction industries of the UK and US reached a broadly similar conclusion, arguing that the ineffective performance of projects could be traced to poor communication and persistent conflict in a climate of distrust between project participants (e.g. Construction Industry Institute, 1989; Latham, 1994). Accordingly, these reports suggested that project performance could be improved by finding ways of encouraging mutual understanding between project members.

However, the work by the Tavistock Institute and, to a lesser extent, these more recent reports, all tended to regard the problem of communication in terms of an absence of information. That is to say, the differentiation of projects into distinct yet interdependent task areas, which are also often split into separate phases, disrupts the flow of information. Thus, to take a regularly mentioned example, project planners and designers involved in the early stages of a project often do not have the benefit of information from those responsible for implementation as to how easy their design will be to implement. However, this focus on informational disruptions, which is largely consistent with an information processing view of organisation (e.g. Galbraith, 1977),

fails to recognise that improving the circulation of information will not necessarily resolve the issue. Even if those responsible for design and project implementation do communicate, this does not mean that they arrive at a shared interpretation of the issue at hand. The information processing view tends to conflate knowledge and information, promoting an object-like and static view of knowledge as a stable bundle of representations which can be transferred and decoded unproblematically. Cook and Brown (1999) have termed this sort of depiction of knowledge an *epistemology of possession*. A conceptualisation of knowledge as a collection of stable representations lies behind the recent emphasis in so-called knowledge management on capturing, transferring, and re-using knowledge, often with a heavy reliance on information technology (e.g. Gore and Gore, 1999; Gupta *et al.*, 2000; Haerem and Sgholt, 1995; O'Dell and Grayson, 1998). An epistemology of possession encourages an impoverished understanding of the crucial social dimensions of knowledge as situated, contingent, and context-dependent, constituted through negotiated processes of inter-subjective meaning formation and shaped through mutually intelligible communicative practices (cf. Blackler, 1995; Gherardi, 1999; Orlikowski and Yates, 1994). In short, it downplays the importance of social context in achieving understanding.

One theoretical tradition which has attempted to address the social context of understanding is hermeneutics. It is therefore useful to consider some of the contributions of this tradition, as well as critical responses to it. The starting point for hermeneutics is the recognition that there is a fundamental limitation in our ability to know the concerns and experiences of other people because, of necessity, inter-subjective understanding is symbolically mediated, with language being the principal, but by no means only, system of symbolic exchanges. As Gadamer (1976, 25) has suggested, “there would be no hermeneutical task if there were no mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in a conversation must search for and find again together”. In its early forms, as in the writing of Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was concerned with the interpretation of canonical texts, but it was through Dilthey that the wider relevance of hermeneutics for all aspects of social interaction came to be recognised (Dilthey, 1989). However, Dilthey’s notion of ‘empathic excavation’ has been interpreted by critics of hermeneutics as involving some sort of quasi-mystical process of transposing oneself into the mind of others in order to appreciate or *empathise* with their point of view (e.g. Abel, 1948).

Consequently, writers in the hermeneutic tradition have been at pains to outline a more robust foundation for inter-subjective understanding than the concept of empathy.

One of the main inspirations for hermeneutics came from the phenomenology of Husserl (1931, 1970), although it attempted to move beyond his search for *epoché* as a way of finding a presuppositionless space from which to construct a secure theory of knowledge. *Epoché*, or transcendental reduction, refers to the 'bracketing' of ego's flux of experience, an act of withdrawal involving the suspension of engagement in direct experience in order to adopt a reflective attitude, which is seen as the condition of possibility for grasping some ideal or originary meaning. Hermeneutics also marked a departure from the effectively subject-object orientation within Husserl of an individual standing in relation to an external reality which enters consciousness via a stream of lived experience. According to Lash (1999, 149), phenomenology "is much less equipped to deal with the relation of the ego to other human beings. Husserl had no satisfactory way of moving from the transcendental reduction of objects by the ego to the understanding of the 'alter ego' or 'other'". For hermeneutics, transcendental reduction on the part of an external observer is incapable of getting behind the pre-interpreted character of the social world. As Heidegger (1962 [1927], 191-192) argued, "[w]henver something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us". Ego encounters a world which can never be conceptually pristine because one finds a world which is already symbolically structured by those 'others' acting within it. Similarly, for Schütz (1962, 5-6), the social world "has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking, and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it is these thought objects which determine their behavior, define the goals of their action, the means available for attaining them".

The crucial features of social conduct emphasised within the hermeneutic tradition are inter-subjectivity as a condition of understanding, as well as the role of pre-existing shared interpretative resources which make such understanding possible and shape the processes of meaning generation. The significance of inter-subjectivity for hermeneutics can be found in its

recognition that the self only exists as it does in relation to other selves. In part this flows from the observation that, in order to participate with adequate competence in inter-subjectively conditioned acts of reaching understanding, one must have access to shared interpretative resources, including relevant aspects of what Schütz and Luckman (1973) called the *social stock of knowledge*. This taken-for-granted knowledge is socially distributed and forms the background assumptions, typificatory schemes, and symbolic resources which individuals in interaction draw upon. “I live in the common-sense world of everyday life equipped with specific bodies of knowledge. What is more, I know that others share at least part of this knowledge, and they know that I know this. My interaction with others in everyday life is, therefore, constantly affected by our common participation in the available social stock of knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 56). A key characteristic of the social stock of knowledge is its differentiation according to zones of familiarity and relevance, with more detailed and complex knowledge about those areas which are more familiar and relevant to an individual. Furthermore, all aspects of the social stock of knowledge as a whole are not brought into focus uniformly at any given time. Instead, drawing on Husserl’s concept of *attention*, the concentration on different areas of knowledge shifts according to context, such that as “some zones of reality are illuminated, others are adumbrated” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 59).

It is the recognition of a set of taken-for-granted assumptions which forms the basis in hermeneutics for addressing the problem of inter-subjective understanding without recourse to empathic arguments. It is the joint participation in the social stock of knowledge which creates the conditions of possibility for inter-subjective understanding. Crucially, understanding may be severely truncated without such participation. It is through the ‘merging of horizons’, according to Gadamer (1989), or the synthesis of background knowledges, according to Schütz (1972), that the mutual understanding of ego and alter can emerge. As Lash (1999, 150-151) explains, “the more closely contexts of experience match, the more possible it is to achieve simultaneous flow of experience ... The less that the other is part of this ‘We’, the greater the extent to which I see his or her acts as ‘external facts’ ... The more, on the other hand, I can enter into a We relationship with you and come to grasp your project, your ‘in-order-to’ motives, the more genuine understanding, i.e. *verstehen*, is at issue”.

Here again the significance of context comes to the fore. Consistent with this is the work of Garfinkel (1984) which highlights the context-dependency of language, whose normal operation depends on the presumption of a shared understanding of context permitting the suspension of the disruptive requirement to make explicit the background assumptions lying behind any utterance, which in theory could result in an infinite regress of explication. Of course, any presumption of mutual contextual understanding or shared access to the same provinces of the social stock of knowledge may prove to be unfounded. A mismatch of assumptions or ignorance of conventions may thus be a fertile source of misunderstanding. This is exactly the problem often encountered by multi-disciplinary and multi-functional projects. Different groupings, around occupation or technical discipline, for example, are likely to develop their own language communities exhibiting different zones of relevance and drawing on aspects of the social stock of knowledge which do not necessarily overlap. This is similar to the later Wittgenstein's arguments about a plurality of language games. Crucially, "this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten ... Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953, 11).

As a consequence, it is important not to think of the context of communication as an immutable backdrop, but rather as something which is created, reproduced, or changed through acts of communication. Thus, while barriers to understanding may well be maintained between different project groupings, they are not pre-given. Indeed, it may be that through continued interaction during the course of a project different groupings may collectively come to participate in new language games based on shared experiences in working on the project. At the same time, such collective experiences may form the basis for a shared identity whereby project members associate themselves more closely with the project than with their respective roles, functional departments, or organisations (e.g. Merali, 2000). However, since temporal boundedness is one of the key characteristics of projects, there is considerable uncertainty as to whether there is the time for collective understanding and identities to emerge. Here again, project members *in lieu* of direct and extensive participation in a joint context of action are likely

to inter-relate more on the basis of surrogates, such as generalised role expectations (cf. Meyerson *et al.*, 1996).

### **Critical responses to hermeneutics and the question of identity**

While the focus in hermeneutics on shared interpretative resources as the basis for inter-subjective understanding provides a plausible account of how meanings are negotiated, this does not mean that it has been without its detractors. Criticisms have come mainly from two directions; one side arguing that it has gone too far in portraying “an indefinite multiplicity of interpretative possibilities” (MacIntyre, 1990, 205), while the other suggests that it has not gone far enough. In an intellectual climate where metaphysical certainties have been challenged and it is difficult to hold to a conception of truth as a direct mirror of reality (cf. Rorty, 1980), these two sides of the debate can be characterised (or should that be caricatured?) according to whether or not they are searching for a new ground upon which to secure the validity of certain knowledge claims over others. This, in turn, has important implications for how identity and difference are theorised.

The first style of criticism can be found in critical theory and critical realism. For these approaches, there is the danger of what Wellmer (1971) termed ‘hermeneutic idealism’. The concern here is that hermeneutics, by focusing on the possibilities and limitations of linguistic interaction, reduces all social conduct to the question of interpretation and understanding. Bhaskar (1979, 136), for example, argues that hermeneutics, “correctly perceiving ideas to be distinctive of social reality, incorrectly infers them to be exhaustive of it”. Linked to this criticism is the concern that hermeneutics ultimately encourages an indifferent relativism. This stems from the hermeneutic assumption that the social world of human actors remains necessarily opaque to those who do not participate in that particular social setting. Since genuine understanding can only be gained through an appreciation of the context-dependent rules and conventions guiding the interpretation of concepts and ideas, it is considered difficult and inappropriate to search for external reference points from which to evaluate the knowledge claims made within any given social setting. As a consequence, these contingent and localised knowledge claims, the so-called lay knowledge of everyday life, are depicted as inherently

authentic and (to borrow Bhaskar's term) incorrigible, that is to say, they are not susceptible to challenge and correction from outside. For Bhaskar (1979), this, in turn, reflects an ignorance of the intransitive dimension of social reality which exists independently of thought. In other words, there are aspects of social reality which are relatively enduring (not intransitive in the sense of eternally unchanging) and which hold regardless of the beliefs that people entertain about them (to make matters more complicated, such beliefs may themselves become part of the intransitive dimension). *Practical adequacy*, not absolute truth, is the watchword here: "although the nature of objects and processes (including human behaviour) does not uniquely determine the content of human knowledge, it does determine their cognitive and practical possibilities for us" (Sayer, 1992, 70).

Practical adequacy and the intransitive dimension provide the foundations in critical realism for steering a course between the twin misapprehensions of theory-neutrality and theory-dependency and for engaging in an emancipatory critique of societies. The same style of argument, somewhat differently approached, can be found in the attempt by Bourdieu (1977) to develop a theory of practice which permits an objective analysis aware of its own limitations, and in the work of Habermas (1984, 1987a), who endeavours to demonstrate the guiding rationality of all communicative interactions as a way of finding a universal basis from which to launch a critical theory. For the latter, hermeneutics contains the seeds of its own destruction because it unleashes a problematic that it is unable to resolve. By emphasising the conventional character of truth claims and by highlighting the centrality of interpretative capacities as a condition of all social conduct, hermeneutics undermines any privileged claims to knowledge of observer relative to observed. "As soon as we ascribe to the actors *the same* judgmental competence that we claim for ourselves as interpreters of their utterances, we relinquish an immunity that was until then methodologically guaranteed ... We thereby expose our interpretation in principle to the same critique to which communicative agents must mutually expose their interpretations" (Habermas, 1984, 119, emphasis original).

For critical realism and critical theory, the question appears to be one of how to rescue claims to knowledge from a damaging relativism by finding a secure position from which to arbitrate over alternative validity claims. By contrast, those with sympathies towards what might broadly

speaking be termed postmodernist themes and styles of argumentation appear less concerned by any loss of privileged insight and indeed eschew any search for an Archimedean point from which to achieve such an arbitration. From this perspective the weakness of hermeneutics does not so much lie with its recognition of the socially-constructed, symbolically-mediated, and contingent problem of understanding, but rather with its inadequate treatment of questions of identity and difference. In particular, hermeneutics is criticised for not going far enough in collapsing the Cartesian dualism between subject and object because it consistently returns to an egological reading where the intentional self is ultimately favoured. As Soja (1989, 135) has observed, the “dilemma connects back to ... the problem of ‘divided being’, the powerful separation between the thinking subject and the ‘grounding’ object, the transcendental ego and the world as lived”.

It might come as a surprise that postmodernist thinking is being portrayed here not as a sympathiser but as a critic of hermeneutics. However, to draw too close an identity between the two sets of ideas is to collapse postmodernist writing into interpretative approaches, and the latter into hermeneutics, which is precisely the error committed by Bauman (1988) in his desire to trace the emergence of postmodern sociology to a particular conjuncture of cultural impulses during the 1960s. On closer inspection, the relationship between postmodernist thought, especially French post-structuralism, and hermeneutics is rather ambiguous. This stems, in part, from the peculiar characteristics of post-structuralism in France as a critical, yet incomplete, departure from structuralism, reproducing many of the latter’s anti-phenomenological arguments (Dews, 1987). Arguably the rift between phenomenologically-inspired hermeneutics and post-structuralist variants of postmodernist thinking can be effectively summarised, following Jameson (1991), as the difference between ‘depth models’ and ‘depthlessness’. Continuing to pay homage to Husserl’s transcendental reduction of the flux of experience, albeit in the revised form of a transcendental inter-subjectivity, hermeneutics ultimately remains concerned with uncovering the hidden essences of things-in-themselves (*noumena*). Post-structuralism, on the other hand, involves “for the most part a conception of practices, discourses, and textual play ... [where] depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces” (Jameson, 1991, 12). Characteristic of this is the notion of the *hyperreal* in Baudrillard (1983) and Eco (1987), where,

to use the former's phrase, the map precedes the territory - the image collapses into reality to become reality.

For post-structuralism, the search for essences through the interpretative productions of the constituting subject is flawed. So too is the emphasis in hermeneutics on attempting to grasp meaning by reconstructing the context of experience. Derrida (1976), for example, questions attempts within textual analysis to access the original meaning intended by an author through striving to reassemble the context surrounding the production of a text. This assumes that it is possible to speak of a stable meaning of which the author is aware, or alternatively, if the assumption of full intentionality is dropped, that it is possible to uncover what the author *really* meant through reference to historical, biographical, or psychological influences. In contrast, Derrida (1976, 154), outlines as a negative justification his principles for a task of reading as follows: "To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer insinuates in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language". Central to Derrida's deconstruction is a demonstration of the undecidability of meaning inherent in language itself. There is no simple identity between signifier and signified, but neither can there be a rigorous separation between the level of the signifier and the level of the signified. Instead, we are left with a situation where "the thing signified is no longer easily separable from the signifier" (Derrida, in Wood and Bernasconi, 1988, 88).

Derrida is constantly at pains to expose ambiguities and ambivalences in the use of language that derive, not from lapses in argumentation, but rather from conditions of usage which the author is unaware of and which are beyond his or her control. Thus, he points to a number of examples of words which have double meanings, such as *pharmakon* in Plato (both poison and antidote), *supplement* in Rousseau (both surplus and necessary addition), or *hybris* in Foucault (both madness and fury) (Derrida, 1976, 1978, 1981), not so much to show that words can have more than one meaning, but rather to argue that, even where the author takes great care to specify which sense is being used, the alternative sense inescapably reappears, wanted or not, in the form of a *trace*. These provide instances of one way in which there is always some slippage of

meaning in the use of language. Linguistic meaning is never complete and final, based on an unproblematic *presence* in words. It is unstable and open to potentially infinite interpretation and reinterpretation, an infinite play of substitution. Signification is not about presence, or a fixed identity between signifier and signified, but neither is it about difference in positive terms, that is to say, the difference between two identities (cf. Saussure, 1983). Instead, it is about difference without positive terms, neither identity nor difference, but *différance* (a neologism which draws on another double meaning, in this case deriving from both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’). In one sense, therefore, meaning might be thought of as difference deferred, indefinitely suspended due to the possibility for any number of future reinterpretations.

This problematising of identity and difference is part of a more general concern within Derrida to unsettle the reliance in Western philosophy on binary oppositions which are ultimately based on a ‘metaphysics of presence’ which tries to reduce the ‘other’ to the ‘same’. By pursuing the *logical* conclusions of philosophical assumptions, the limitations of formal logic are revealed. Thus, for example, Derrida makes a particular target of French structuralism, with its search for the underlying structures that determine human activity. If only it could be fully uncovered, this system of structures would be a totality beyond which there would be no need for further explanation. However, this can never succeed because totality always alludes to something beyond itself (total presence implies absence, inside implies outside), thus undermining its status as totality. More than this, totalisation is meaningless “not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field - that is, language and a finite language - excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play* ... One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center’s place in its absence - this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*” (Derrida, 1978, 289). As he suggests elsewhere (Derrida, 1976), the filling of an absence or lack by a supplement necessarily undermines the finitude or self-sufficiency of that which needs to be supplemented.

Others have approached a critique of totalisation on similar grounds. Levinas (1981, 1987), for example, considered that the Western philosophical tradition includes within it a powerful totalising tendency which commits violence on the ‘other’ by constantly attempting to reduce it

to the 'same'. Furthermore, by conflating the 'same' with 'self', and the 'other' with 'another self', an equivalent violence is committed on the alterity of other individuals, on what Levinas called the *absolutely other*. Proceeding from Husserlian phenomenology in order to criticise it, Levinas recognised the impossibility of knowing fully the experience of others. Knowledge, in this view, is limited to the interior of the self, while other selves are beyond the horizon of the individual self, belonging to a domain of exteriority. "There is in knowledge, in the final account, an impossibility of escaping the self; hence sociality cannot have the same structure as knowledge" (Levinas, 1982, 60). Others are constituted for us through our ideas about them, thereby assimilating their otherness to familiar systems of categories (knowledge as *adequation*) and reducing their alterity. Lyotard (1984) has also expressed a suspicion of totality which he sees as pervading Enlightenment metanarratives. These metanarratives, it is argued, have lost their credibility and legitimacy. Consequently, instead of attempting to enforce unity by subsuming everything within all-embracing systems of thought, we are left with the more modest task of constructing 'little narratives' addressing more localised or situated concerns. The postmodern engrossment with respecting difference and heterogeneity comes out forcefully in Lyotard's (1986) notion of the *differend*. Contributing further to the critique of reducing the 'other' to the order of the 'same', a *differend* alludes to the intractability of a dispute where the discourses supporting the claims of each party are incommensurable. The *differend* is the party to a dispute which is silenced or excluded because their claims do not fit with the dominant discourse applied to resolve the dispute.

To add a further level of complexity, another strand of postmodernist thinking has problematised the relationship between identity and self by speaking of the heterogeneous subject. As we saw earlier, Maffesoli (1995) questions the transparent unity of self, pointing instead to the construction of multiple identities through engagement in diverse social aggregations as an expression of our 'intrinsic plurality'. One consequence of this 'intrinsic plurality' is that it becomes difficult to speak of any straightforward 'authenticity' to a single coherent self, which in turn casts doubt on the ultimately egological bias in hermeneutics. From this perspective, a respect for 'otherness' can not simply derive from a relationship between ego and alter ego based on *identity*, whereby I can see in other people another self like me and vice versa. Given a plural

conception of self, we are also opened up to the possibility that 'otherness' is integral to selfhood (cf. Ricoeur, 1992; Levinas, 1981).

We have seen that the 'solution' to the hermeneutic problem is sometimes framed in terms of a merging of horizons in which the here-and-now of an action context is privileged as the site of a productive co-interpretation (c.f. Gadamer, 1989). However, this leaves aside the question of how far this meshing of horizons to provide shared interpretative resources needs to proceed in order for some level of understanding to be possible. As Bhaskar (1979) has observed, total identity and total difference in meaning frames are both antithetical to communicative acts of reaching understanding because, in the former case, their complete overlap makes communication pointless, while in the latter it is impossible. Having said that, there is considerable room for variation in the degree of overlap between these two extremes. One source of variation is in the diverse experiences and identity projects which people bring to action contexts, some of which may (partially) coincide, while others are quite contradictory. This suggests an open-ended process of negotiation, drawing upon different dimensions of identity in which there is likely to be some slippage between varying frames of meaning, belief, and value. One crucial aspect of this is that these differing interpretative lenses are not hermetically sealed off from each other and there is the potential for a creative dialogue between them as existing frames encounter new contexts.

For critics of postmodernist thinking, the difficulty with deconstruction, the de-centring of self, and the recognition of an infinite play of meaning is associated with the risk of complete relativism where there are no longer *any* reference points from which to evaluate alternative validity claims (e.g. Eagleton, 1996; Habermas, 1987b; 1992; Jameson, 1991). Unfortunately, arguments around this issue tend to become polarised into either/or positions such that any claim to valid understanding is dismissed as totalitarian, and any appreciation of the transience and instability of meaning is dismissed as relativistic. It is not surprising therefore that the alternative perspectives from which these caricatured positions derive are often portrayed as incommensurable (e.g. Wood and Foster, 1997). Part of the difficulty comes from attempting to resolve paradoxes which by their nature are unresolvable. The hermeneutic circle, specifying the simultaneous subject-object status of individuals, is a case in point. To reiterate, mutual

understanding is only possible given shared frames of meaning - without these communication is impossible - yet if they coincide exactly then it is unnecessary. Perhaps the issue is not either aiming for complete understanding of the 'other', or alternatively despairing at the impossibility of any such understanding, but rather about a balanced scepticism which appreciates the limits of (self-)understanding without seeing them as absolute. It is about understanding as movement towards rather than as destination. As Sonderegger (1997, 204-205, emphasis original) has argued:

The two reading strategies - the 'violent' understanding of a text and the submission to one - both lead, taken in isolation, to a 'bad infinity in the Hegelian sense: one either sticks fast in impenetrable arrogance, or remains a child forever ... Instead of differentiating between violent and non-violent readings it would be better to think of the whole process of understanding as a violent *conflict*, an irresolvable conflict between two moments that are constitutive of the process of understanding ... Understanding is not a fusion of horizons, or a reconciliation between the interpreter and her 'object'. It is a process of mutual questioning.

### **Concluding remarks on the politics of knowledge and identity**

Unfortunately (especially as I fear the reader may now be getting weary), the achievement of inter-subjective understanding is by no means the end of the story. As Rorty (2000) has pointed out, shared understanding between actors in no way implies mutual agreement. Participants in a dispute may reach a satisfactory appreciation of each other's position, but this does not mean that they necessarily agree with the alternative views presented. It is for this reason that it is important to acknowledge the potential for interests to diverge even when understandings converge. This point is not always fully appreciated. For example, Tenkasi and Boland (1996, 87) have suggested that "developing a comprehensive knowledge base among a community of highly differentiated yet reciprocally dependent individual specialists requires an ongoing process of mutual perspective taking where individual knowledge and theories of meaning are surfaced, reflected on, exchanged, evaluated and integrated with others in the organization" (Tenkasi and Boland, 1996, 87). This position, closely allied to the work of Argyris and Schön (1978) and their distinction between espoused knowledge and theories-in-use, has the benefit of recognising that organisational members are often unaware of the values and beliefs that they hold. It is proposed that a process of 'surfacing' these assumptions offers possibilities for

productively resolving disputes and reducing misunderstanding. However, even if hidden interests and assumptions are brought into the open, this still does not necessarily mean that individuals will be willing to abandon them.

As Habermas (1971, 1974, 1984) has emphasised, it is important to recognise that, while participants in communication may orientate themselves towards inter-subjective understanding through participation in a shared action context (even if we extend this to include the surfacing of unconscious beliefs), this does not mean that their goal-directed actions are the same. Given that projects are made up of different groupings, each focusing on a different sub-set of project activities, it should come as no surprise that their goal-directed actions often diverge. This is particularly likely where multiple organisations are involved in a project since disputes over the performance of respective actions and the distribution of commercial gains and losses often come to the fore. However, contra Habermas, I do not believe that an ‘ideal speech situation’, where communication is undistorted by all relations of force (should such a state of affairs ever be found to exist), is sufficient to resolve all disputes because there are times when opposing claims are simply incommensurable. In such cases, it is more likely that any resolution, should one actually emerge, will be an expression of power relations.

There is not the space here to consider power in any detail, except to say that recent debates in organisation theory on this issue have been strongly influenced by the work of Foucault (e.g. 1977, 1980). The concept of power in Foucault departs from conventional conceptions of power as personalised and prohibitive (e.g. Lukes, 1974; Pfeffer, 1981), being seen instead as ubiquitous, anonymous, and productive, as in the ‘power of normalisation’ of carceral society. Rather than thinking of power as something possessed (or not possessed) by individuals and groups which constrains the ‘real’ interests of those upon whom it is exerted, Knights and McCabe, 1999, 203) argue that “power can be theorized as a medium of ‘relations’ in which subjectivity, as a complex, contradictory, shifting experience, is produced, transformed or reproduced through the social practices within which such power is exercised” (Knights and McCabe, 1999, 203). This brings us back to a consideration of identity and difference because such a view of power challenges the notion of an independent self as a lucid, coherent, and immutable identity. This, in turn, opens the way for a conceptualisation of the interplay between

power, knowledge, and identity-formation which questions the existence of transparent and unitary knowledge-guiding interests and instead permits an appreciation of the identity-constituting struggles which individuals and groups are often engaged in.

As an example of this, Fleck (1996) has considered the relationship between claims to expert knowledge, group identity, and power in professional organisations. His concept of the *credibility cycle* depicts how the validation of expert knowledge is conditioned by the emergence of identity-affirming group processes. Power relations have a central part to play in this cycle. In the most developed cases it becomes virtually self-generating and expertise may become effectively sedimented if expert groups are themselves able to define the criteria of value and efficacy through which expertise is recognised. This provides an important reminder that power is never far away when knowledge claims are at stake. Indeed, in opposition to those who claim an infinite stream of interpretative possibilities, there are always countervailing influences which attempt to effect closure on the field of possible meanings, which are simultaneously relations of power. That is to say, by making certain knowledge claims or promoting certain discourses, there is always a process of inclusion and exclusion which attempts (always incompletely) to deny the feasibility of other interpretations.

There is the danger in this discussion of simply substituting a pastoral view of consensus, co-operation, and solidary organisational communities, with an equally inaccurate dystopian vision of ever-present contestation, domination, and conflict, which is not my intention. It is important to recognise conflict and consensus as always emergent, often coexistent, and ceaselessly shifting conditions which are produced and reproduced with the unfolding of social relations under concrete situations. Thus, while the construction of difference may lead to a politics of incommensurability, this needs to be counterbalanced by a recognition of the perpetual development of “communities of need and solidarity in the interstices of our societies” (Benhabib, 1986, 353). I have tried to show that the tension between identity and difference is irresolvable, but this does not mean that it can not be stabilised, at least for a time. The key point here is that, by recognising their ongoing negotiation rather than attempting to force upon them a static categorisation, our attention is directed to the conditions through which this negotiation takes place. This seems to be the route taken by theorists concerned with ethical dilemmas.

Putnam (1990), for example, has sought ways to encourage an openness to mutual questioning as a means of keeping the debate going:

To adjudicate ethical problems successfully, as opposed to 'solving' them, it is necessary that the members of the society have a sense of community. A compromise that cannot pretend to be the last word on an ethical question, that cannot pretend to derive from binding principles in an unmistakably constraining way, can only derive its force from a shared sense of what is and is not reasonable, from people's loyalties to one another, and a commitment to 'muddling through together.

Coming from a different perspective, Apel (1999, 160) sees some sort of procedural agreement as the basis for approaching dilemmas even where discursive consent is impossible.

In all of these discussions today, deep-rooted differences, and possibly conflicts, between different cultural traditions come into play. And we cannot expect always to reach solutions of the problems through discursive consent. But ... it has to be demanded that, even in cases of persistent dissent, we try at least to reach a discursive consent about the reasons of the dissent and its unresolvability in order to facilitate juridical compromises. For this purpose, in a multicultural society permanent efforts of communicative understanding - also in the *hermeneutic* sense - between different traditions of 'strong values' ... are required.

Whether or not these conditions of negotiation are feasible is another matter. However, the recognition of the need for continually working through such tensions, rather than expecting a definitive solution, is at least a fruitful starting point. Given the emergent, polydimensional, and ambiguous character of projects, with their attendant plurality of boundary-constituting processes, ongoing negotiation rather than absolute agreement is likely to be the rule rather than the exception.

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