

# ***Reconstituting the subject: Changing representations of the worker in managerial and anti-managerial meta-narratives of work***

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## **ABSTRACT**

As Matts Alvesson and others have noted social identities are often constituted in the form of narratives – that is, written or verbal accounts with a focus on common themes or issues and which link a set of ideas or a series of events. Where applied to worker identity these narratives have assumed “meta-like” attributes and in so doing they have influenced thinking about worker identity and thus our understanding of worker ‘wants’, ‘needs’, ‘expectations’ and ‘motivation’. We argue that whether managerialist or anti-managerialist in nature, these meta-narratives amount to constructivist and highly normative representations of worker identity.

Using a discursive framework of analysis which distinguishes between discursive concepts, discursive objects and discursive subjects, we explore the normative assumptions underpinning each of these meta-narratives, their impact on conventional thinking about workers’ wants, needs and motives, and the ways in which they lock their proponents into essentialist positions about the nature of the ‘human resource’. In doing so we argue that each represents a particular way of constituting the employee subject. In line with Potter and Wetherall’s (1987: 6) observation that: discourses “do not just describe things; they do things”, we also show how these meta-narratives have influenced approaches to both the practice and study of management.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first outlines a conceptual framework that draws on a discourse analytic approach. The section explains the value of this framework and discusses its relevance to the chapter.

In the second section, we discursively analyse three key meta-narratives in ‘modern’ management thought: Scientific Management; Human Relations; and commitment-based or ‘soft’ Human Resource Management. We show how each can be seen as promulgating its own distinct meta-narrative about employee identity and what it is that the employee wants/needs/expects from the employment relationship. Earlier management meta-narratives represented the employee as seeking to satisfy various constellations of individual material and/ or socio-cognitive needs. More recent versions emphasise the employee as being needful of empowerment and high involvement or as seeking trust/justice.

A third section applies the same mode of analysis to the work of critical management writers such as Hugh Willmott and Barbara Townley and identifies a parallel process of identity projection and shaping at work. In contrast to managerialist constructions, critical management perspectives variously emphasise either pride in work, game-playing, instrumental attachment to work, or the desire for freedom from work itself.

The final section considers the wider implications of our discursive study. It suggests that studies which combine social identity theory with discourse analysis offer the best chance of obtaining rich and innovative insights into worker wants, needs and expectations.

