Creative Selves? Critically Reading ‘Creativity’ in Management Discourse

Craig Prichard

In broad terms the critical tradition in organization studies (Marsden & Townley, 1996) is concerned with understanding and questioning the elaboration of power relations in worksites, particularly as they induce oppressive and exploitative practices. This paper begins by outlining some of the key features of what might be regarded as a traditional critical reading of creativity in work organizations. This initial discussion is presented via an analysis of two texts from Fortune magazine’s account of the performance of Apple CEO Steve Jobs. Without dealing in detail with some of the problematics and limitations of these approaches, the paper then outlines the key features of a Foucauldian critical discourse approach to the analysis of creativity. The discussion proceeds to identify key features of such an account. These include the position of academic experts as agents of knowledge in the production of ‘creativity’, the organizational prescriptions and devices used to visualize and normalize ‘creative’ managers and professionals, and the ontological and epistemological tradition that is drawn on in the production of both the agents of knowledge of creativity and the devices that identify, classify and regulate ‘creativity’ with respect to managing and organizing workplaces. Using the term ‘economy of identity’, the concluding section discusses the implications of this approach, including the oppressive and exploitative dimensions of ‘creativity’.

Introduction

Extract 1: From Fortune Magazine (Schlender, 2000: 66-72):

Steve Jobs, the personal-computer industry’s chief aesthetic officer, is in his element. Here in the boardroom at Apple Computer’s Cupertino, Calif., headquarters, he’s the only person seated – reclining, actually. Hands clasped behind his head, he stares pokerfaced at a couple of Web pages displayed side by side on an outsized 22-inch-wide Apple Cinema flat-panel monitor. Twelve weary-looking men – programmers, marketers, graphic designers and Web experts – stand in pensive poses, forming an arc behind him, some scribbling notes on Palm hand-held devices whenever the 44-year-old iCEO comments.

‘The icon for “real estate” doesn’t do anything for me at all,’ announces Jobs, snapping out of his reverie and leaning forward. ‘But this old-fashioned highway sign for “cars,” now that’s cool. I love it! You instantly know exactly what it means.’ (Schlender, 2000)

Extract Two: Earlier, at the computer convention (Mardesich, 2000):

People practically flew to their feet and there was a spontaneous combustion of applause. The enraptured crowd started chanting, ‘Steve! Steve! Steve! Steve! Steve!’ I wouldn’t have been surprised to see tears or screaming or people speaking in tongues. It was as charged as a rock concert or religious revival.

On stage, Steve Jobs was soaking it all in. At first, [he] didn’t seem that psyched to be there on the Macworld stage. Wearing the uniform (jeans and a black mock turtleneck), giving us the same history, the same spiel. But as he started unveiling one cool new thing after another, from new Internet services that are blended into the Mac operating system, to a whizzy new version of the operating system itself, he started to perk up. ‘We made the buttons on the screen look so good you’ll want to lick them,’ he says. (from Fortune magazine: Mardesich, 2000)

Steve Jobs, as the above stories suggest, is widely regarded as one of the most creative members of the new economy’s
business elite. The companies he has founded and currently heads (Apple Computers, NeXt, Pixar), and the products they produce (Apple II, Macintosh, iBook, iMac; ToyStory), have been ground breaking works using state of the art technology, exciting design and consumer affability. What also makes Steve Jobs interesting in the above extracts is the way in which his presence seems to evoke creativity.

This paper is concerned with a critical reading of ‘creativity’ in work organizations. It begins with an assessment of the above extracts drawing on what might be regarded as traditional critical resources. Without dealing with either the problematics and limitations of these ‘traditional’ approaches, nor with more recent contributions and extensions of such approaches, the paper outlines the key features of a Foucauldian-inspired discourse approach to the critical analysis of ‘creativity’. Analysis in this vein is primarily concerned to show how knowledge about ‘creativity’ works to normalize and organize ‘creativity’ with respect to work organizations. Such an approach is not concerned with the validity or truthfulness of current knowledge about creativity. Rather it is concerned with the power effects of such knowledge. The analysis will explore the position of academic experts as agents of knowledge in the production of normalizing ‘creativity’ for the workplace. It will touch on the organizational prescriptions and devices used to visualize and normalize ‘creative’ managers and professionals. And it will identify the underpinning assumptions that guide the production of both these agents of creativity knowledge and the devices that identify, classify and regulate ‘creativity’ with respect to managing and organizing workplaces. The paper’s final section discusses the implications of this approach including the contribution of ‘creativity’ to oppressive and exploitative workplace relations.

Critically Reading the ‘Creativity’ of Steve Jobs

Critical social science is concerned broadly with the appraisal of the intersection of social, economic and political relations (Fay, 1987). It has tended to dismiss ‘creativity’ as a topic of debate and research. Marxist and feminist works, as Rapley notes (1998), tend to regard creativity as a bourgeois or masculinist myth. The creative person or those features associated with creativity – divergent thinking, spontaneity, novel behaviour, intrinsic motivation – are ideological or discursive ploys which fetishise the autonomous, often male, subject, and deny the complex historical, social and economic relations which preceed and constitute such a subject, its practices and relations.

We can illustrate these points using the stories above. Consider for a moment why the first extract, which goes on to describe the recent renaissance of Apple Computers, uses these descriptions of Jobs. One reason would have it that there are some magical, charismatic features to the embodied presence and posture of Jobs himself. These features challenge those normally ascribed to one domain (e.g. the corporate boardroom), and/or allow practices normally associated with another domain to be transferred to the first domain. The first piece suggests that the boardroom has been transformed into a design loft via Jobs’ posture. The second suggests that Jobs’ presence has the same effect on the sales convention, turning it into a rock concert or religious revival. The implication is that such transformations provoke a sense of joy and euphoria, or creativity and commitment amongst the followers.

Fortune’s stories of Steve Jobs can be read as conforming to this mythical or ideologically individualized reading of creativity. They do not for instance attribute creativity to the historical, social, political and technological networks that bring huge numbers of people together to build computers or assemble movies. Rather than address creativity as interdependent with technological change, or with capitalism’s proclivity for waves of creative destruction, or with gender power relations that position men – and no women – around this ‘iCEO’, the stories attribute creativity to Steve Jobs himself. We might identify this as the ‘great man’ theory of creativity (Bennis and Biederman, 1997). The words, the gestures and the clothes are features of this presence that are described, even idolized, in the context of adoring audiences and attentive workers. Critical social science challenges this narrow inference by suggesting that there are implicit interests at work in such stories.

For example the Jobs’ stories might be read as ideological fictions – ideas in support of corporate interests – that the corporation known as Apple Computers (US$7 Billion turnover in 2000) needs in order to reassert itself. Jobs is a powerful rhetorical figure re-acquired by the corporation (after he left following a dispute in the late 1980s) to stave off diminishing returns, and to attempt to re-acquire profits lost to competitors. The journalists in this reading conspire in this ideological pretence. Using the tools of the now not so ‘New Journalism’ (Wolfe, 1975) their reports conceal both the contrived
nature of the events reported, and the economic relations that demand them. The reports are written as if they are ‘windows’ into Apple’s boardroom and the MacWorld convention. When ‘really’, critical social science argues, they are painted pictures. The colour and detail of the descriptions are designed to counter dis-belief among readers and support the claim that this description is really what occurred. Critical social science questions, in a number of ways, the basis of the claim to truth made implicitly in these stories. Both stories are grounded on a rhetorical claim to ‘being there’ or ‘presence’. This obscures the management of the readers’ experience and economic and political interests that precede, construct or build the ‘frames’ around these images or ‘windows’.

And further to this critical social science might also suggest that more humanly satisfying stories ought to be told ahead of the above. Such stories might tell us of the power relations that fill the Apple boardroom with men and no women. They might explain why the workers stand and the boss sits. They might identify who was in the convention and support the claim that this description is really what occurred. Critical social science have ‘labour’, ‘language’ and ‘power’ (Habermas, 1976). ‘Labour’ refers to embodied practices and embodied knowing. ‘Language’ refers to those texts and discursive practices through which we communicate and which are drawn from and can be said to form part of broad ‘discursive formations’ (Foucault, 1972). ‘Power’ can be regarded as embedded in practices that attempt to induce relations of domination, or exploitation, or subjection in or between subjects (be they individuals, or organizations, or states). Power itself might be understood as a variably unstable and dispersed force/energy that has the effect of forming assemblages of practices (e.g. practices that make certain things visible, practices of labour, and of force) that work to establish these relations. For Marx it was the relations of production, and not the forces of production that distinguished one mode of production from another and relations between different modes. While the current mode might be distinguished by its forms of technological production (petro-chemical and computer-chip based technologies), the salient feature from this point of explanation, for both Marx and Foucault (in Foucault’s terms), is the relations of production: the politics that surround the formation of knowledge-able labour, its access to and combination with these forces of production.

While Foucault recommended political economic argument as one way of explaining the transformation and dispersal of discursive
explore how management and popular based on such questions, for instance, might draw upon in such production? Analysis knowledge and truth about human being are being put to work? What forms of self and new ways of working on the body ants and practitioners in the field of 'creativity'.

'human-ness' is constantly under contention, contrary, resistance signals points where 'creativity' in the form outlined below. On the political economic complex – that 'demands' that variably cohere to reproduce the current power bloc – that alliance of forces approach does not assume the security of the terrain in which we are located. This approach does not simply one site in a series where power-induced relations between labour and language are said to articulate through our bodies, on its surface, in its depths, in what Burrell identifies as 'visceral morphological flows' (1996: 657) in the production of various identities. Power relations in the workplace are not directly linked to exchange relations or bureaucratic domination, but involve a range of practices and knowledge that work to produce an economy of identity. The plethora of pedagogically orientated practices that make up this economy of identity include what McDowell and Court outline as the manipulation of patterns of desire, fantasy, pleasure, and self image, in which gendered notions of appropriate behaviour and expressions of sexuality in this widest sense are important mechanisms in the establishment of particular norms of acceptable workplace behaviour. (1994:773)

This broad focus suggests a way of extending our understanding of our relationship to work and the reconstruction of labour in post-industrial settings. For instance if we were asked to account in traditional political economic terms for the current attention given to 'creativity' in work organizations we might suggest that the answer lies with changing business needs or the ongoing reconstruction of capitalism. In a post-Fordist economic environment attention has turned to the more intensified study of 'creativity' in work organizations and 'organizations' are conceptualised quite differently from those understandings that appear in management and organization literatures. The workplace is understood as simply one site in a series where power-induced relations between labour and language are said to articulate through our bodies, on its surface, in its depths, in what Burrell identifies as 'visceral morphological flows' (1996: 657) in the production of various identities. Power relations in the workplace are not directly linked to exchange relations or bureaucratic domination, but involve a range of practices and knowledge that work to produce an economy of identity. The plethora of pedagogically orientated practices that make up this economy of identity include what McDowell and Court outline as the manipulation of patterns of desire, fantasy, pleasure, and self image, in which gendered notions of appropriate behaviour and expressions of sexuality in this widest sense are important mechanisms in the establishment of particular norms of acceptable workplace behaviour. (1994:773)

Given this methodological position, the critical questions become: what 'new' forms of self and new ways of working on the body are being put to work? What forms of knowledge and truth about human being are drawn upon in such production? Analysis based on such questions, for instance, might explore how management and popular knowledges and practices are involved in the production of 'creative' or innovative body-subjects for a so-called 'knowledge economy/society' (OECD, 1996).

Given these assumptions 'labour', 'work' and 'organizations' are conceptualised quite differently from those understandings that appear in management and organization literatures. The workplace is understood as simply one site in a series where power-induced relations between labour and language are said to articulate through our bodies, on its surface, in its depths, in what Burrell identifies as 'visceral morphological flows' (1996: 657) in the production of various identities. Power relations in the workplace are not directly linked to exchange relations or bureaucratic domination, but involve a range of practices and knowledge that work to produce an economy of identity. The plethora of pedagogically orientated practices that make up this economy of identity include what McDowell and Court outline as the manipulation of patterns of desire, fantasy, pleasure, and self image, in which gendered notions of appropriate behaviour and expressions of sexuality in this widest sense are important mechanisms in the establishment of particular norms of acceptable workplace behaviour. (1994:773)

Critical social science however suggests that communicative practices do not just transmit these changing relations of production, distribution and exchange. They are at the core of its instantiation and dispersal. The crucial feature is a reconfigured understanding of how power relations work through language and communicative practices. Power relations do not simply station us in subordinate positions by force, rather discursive formations explain the truth about particular ways of being human, and enjoin, or entice or seduce us to recognise and enact
these truths ourselves – through intensive communicative activity e.g. counselling and dialogue. For example when we join organizations or take up new positions we do not so much get told ‘our place’, but are required to be discursively skilled at ‘taking our place’ in the complex subject positions, relations and knowledges which organize work sites. In these processes we become, to varying degrees, the subject of the statements made, and subject to the particular forms of knowledge. While we might not become thorough converts (Casey, 1995), we do come to recognise part of ourselves in the production of particular statements and discursive practices (e.g. ‘I’m a creative, intuitive person’).

Creativity’s discursive formation – agents of knowledge

In order to develop this form of critical knowledge about knowledge, so to speak, Foucault suggests that we plot the ‘discursive formations’ that establish themselves in particular fields. A discursive formation can be regarded as a group of statements linked together by a whole range of discursive practices (speaking, writing, interviewing, publishing, lecturing etc.). These allow particular objects, for example ‘creativity’, and particular subjects, e.g. the creative employee, to be identified and articulated. More specifically the formation delimits this field of objects in particular ways. For instance the formation around ‘creativity’ is particularly concerned to configure its object as useful and task focused. It is not rebellious or chaotic. To support this re-configuration the formation includes and provides a position for agents of knowledge who define and elaborate legitimate knowledge and perspectives. The formation provides a position which can be taken up which speaks for the object. In relation to ‘creativity’ academics such as Howard Gardner, John Kao and Teresa Amabile occupy such positions. Alongside these are the ‘creatives’ themselves; people whose stories elaborate, embody and articulate the discourse, e.g. Steve Jobs. These ‘agents of knowledge’ positions identify various truths, norms and practices for the further elaboration of the field (e.g. Feldman & Csikszentmihalyi, 1994; Gardner, 1993; Kao, 1997; Amabile, 1983, 1997) and generally provide a ‘play of prescriptions that designate its exclusions and choices’ (Foucault, 1977:199).

In order to explore this further it is useful to provide a counterpoint to the discourse. D. H. Lawrence suggested that creativity is inherently rebellious (1955). Creativity as under-

taken by artists, those ‘enemies of convention’, involves exposing us to raw ‘reality’ (It is worth quoting this at some length. Thanks to Richard Hull for drawing my attention to this reference). As Lawrence wrote:

Human beings fix some wonderful erection of their own between themselves and the wild chaos, and gradually go bleached and stifled under the parasol. Then comes the poet, enemy of convention, and makes a slit in the umbrella, and lo! the glimpse of chaos is a vision. But after a while getting use to the vision and not liking the genuine draught from chaos, commonplace people daub a simulacrum of the window that opens on to chaos, or patch the umbrella with the painted patch of the simulacrum. . . The wild sky moved and sang. Even that became a great umbrella between human kind and the sky of fresh air, and then it became a painted vault, a fresco on a vaulted roof, under which men bleach and grow dissatisfied. Till another poet makes a slit on to the open and windy chaos. (1955:90–91)

While popular, consultant and academic forms of business and management discourse often note the rebellious character of creative effort (and then distinguish their reading from this one), they do not advise managers to take a knife to their ‘parasols’ or ‘hose-off’ the simulacrum. Rather they focus on establishing the boundaries and supports for ‘useful creativity’ (Amabile & Conti et al., 1988; Bennis & Biederman, 1997 Handy, 1999; Rickards, 1999; Kao, 1989; 1997; Kanter, 1983; Leonard & Swap, 1999; Wallace & Graber, 1989). This is creativity which may challenge convention but which has an appropriate objective. Teresa Amabile, social psychologist and Harvard professor of creativity, whose work is liberally spread across the discourse – due in part because it addresses the tension between extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of creativity – argues that creativity is simply the production of novel, appropriate ideas in any realm of human activity from science, to the arts, to education, to business to everyday life. The ideas must be novel – different from what’s been done before – but they can’t be simply bizarre; they must be appropriate to the problem or opportunity presented. Creativity is the first step in innovation, which is the successful implementation of those novel appropriate ideas. Because the business world is seldom static, and because the pace of change appears to be rapidly accelerating, no firm that continues to deliver the same products
and services in the same way can long survive. By contrast, firms that prepare for the future by implementing new ideas orientated toward this changing world are likely to thrive. (1997:40)

Creativity here does not address our existential questioning. It does not seek to expose us to the ‘vision’ or fundamental ‘terror’ of our reality. Creativity is not bizarre or destructive. To be known as ‘creativity’ at all it must, according to the advice of this agent of knowledge, be socially appropriate and orientated toward (particularly business) objectives. The statement, which can be read as a microcosm of the discursive formation around ‘creativity’, goes on as we hear to establish the object as the appropriate response to the problems of capitalist crises and instabilities. The formation thus collapses ‘creativity’ into a financial prerogative, and opens the way for an extended play of managerial prescriptions. Strenberg and O’Hara (1997) for example argue (in a special edition of the Californian Management Review on creativity) that new ideas are like investments. Creative individuals, and we can add firms and nation states to this, are regarded as rational and self-maximising subjects seeking to produce ideas cheaply and sell them for a high return (1997:9).

Creativity’s discursive formation – the play of prescriptions

These authoritative speaking positions provide a play of prescriptions that ‘spread out’ from this central delimited object, ‘creativity’, and form a set of mechanisms and practices. These could be said to attempt to re-route the ‘creativity’ of rebellion, unconventionality and the challenge to authority (and the inherent chaos it suggests), toward manageability and economic objectives. This reconfiguration requires various cues, techniques and mechanisms that allow the appropriate performance of creativity along with its prediction of success and calculation of risk. Here Strenberg and O’Hara and many others provide advice (Amabile et al., 1996; Amabile, 1997; Clapham, 2000; Filis & McAuley, 2000; Drazin & Glynn et al., 1999; Gryskiewicz, 2000; Kanter, 1983; Kao, 1997; Kuhn, 1988). Again it is worth mentioning that as with all forms of management discourse the formation also works to construct the ‘manager’ as the appropriate agent of this knowledge. The prescriptions suggest a battery of tools and techniques from tests, to games, to interpersonal communication practices, to reward structures which – it is suggested – link the object ‘creativity’ with financial objectives. For example psychometric ‘creativity’ tests such as Gough’s ‘Creative Personality Scale’ (Gough, 1979, quoted in Oldham & Cummings, 1996) are suggested as means of recruiting creative people. In terms of retention and stimulation, the texts outline how managers should attempt to develop a creativity-supportive climate (Amabile et al., 1996) and behave appropriately toward ‘creative’ staff. Linked to research which supports the claim that over-controlling supervision reduces intrinsic motivation – a key terminate of creativity – the texts suggest managers adopt the following practices: considerate and supportive supervision and the provision of complex challenging jobs that offer high levels of personal satisfaction. Supportive supervision here includes showing concern for feelings and needs, encouraging involvement and the voicing of concerns, giving positive informational feedback and facilitating skill development. Alongside this is advice that suggests employees be offered appropriate reward structures (Amabile, 1997; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Kao, 1989; 1997).

Creativity’s discursive formation – humanist underpinnings

The discursive formation around ‘creativity’ thus provides, to use Lawrence’s metaphor, a shelter or ‘parasol’ against ‘windy chaos’ and risk. In these next two sections I deal initially with the humanist underpinnings of this discursive formation around creativity, and then briefly with the ‘creative manager’ as subject position established by it.

Humanist psychology’s assumption that creativity is a universal attribute and part of the make up of psychologically healthy human beings is a key underpinning basis of the discursive formation around ‘creativity’. ‘Creativity’ is not attributed to a psychodynamic subject (Oremland, 1997) where creative impulses are an outpouring of unconscious processes. Neither is creativity strictly a behavioural response to rewards and conditioning. Nor is it an effect of broader power relations and structures (Gardner, 1993). Rather, under humanist psychology, creativity is a normal part of the life of the psychologically healthy individual. In the analysis presented here, such an individual is not ‘normal’ but constituted via this normalizing discourse. Like others in this field John Kao, a Harvard Business School academic who trained in medicine and psychiatry (1989; 1999), references Abraham Maslow’s work to support his prescriptions.
for a managerially supported ‘creativity’ in organizations. Following Maslow he distinguishes generalizable creativity from genius: 

While most would agree that the creativity of Mozart or Einstein operated at a high level sometimes described as ‘genius’, others would argue that creativity is at least latent in everyone. The psychologist Maslow writes that there is a type of creativity that ‘is the universal heritage of every human being’ and strongly associated with psychological health. He distinguishes between ‘special creativenesses’, such as the musical talent of a Mozart, and ‘self-actualising creativeness’ which he believed originated in the personality and was visible in the ordinary affairs of life. (1968:15)

The work of Maslow, and Carl Rogers, provides much of the base for humanist psychology. This ‘third force’ opposed the reductionism of both behaviourism and pathological psychoanalysis in favour of humanist and moralist/ethical ‘science’ of human potential and growth (1954; 1968). It posits a human being bestowed with an intrinsic hierarchy of human needs ‘topped off’ with a need for self-esteem and self-actualisation. These higher intrinsic needs urge individuals on to fulfilment of their full potential. Maslow suggests that this inevitably leads individuals into questioning and challenging social control, and their own internal self-knowledge. Maslow wrote:

Self-actualising people are not well adjusted (in the naive sense of approval and identification with the culture). They get along with the culture in various ways, but of all of them it may be said that in a certain profound and meaningful sense they resist enculturation and retain a certain detachment. (1954:224)

Creativity has a special place in Maslow’s schema. It is that which ‘comes spontaneously from the well integrated person’ (1968:137). It is both universal and humble: ‘It looked like a tendency to do anything creatively: e.g. housekeeping, teaching etc’ (1968:137). Being ‘well integrated’, for Maslow, who was deeply influenced by Gestalt psychology and the work of critical theorist Eric Fromm, involves the development of an intimate understanding of, rather than an estrangement from, one’s primary and unconscious processes. Maslow saw an important role for psychoanalytic therapy in performing such integration.

The civil war within the average person between the forces of the inner depths and the force of defences and control seems to have been resolved in my subjects and they are less split, as a consequence more of them is available for use, for enjoyment and for creative purposes. They waste less of their time and energy protecting themselves from themselves. (1968:141)

As a consequence of this openness, Maslow suggests, self-actualising creativity has a child-like character. His subjects, he suggests, were able to become deeply absorbed in a child-like way in the projects of the here and now; to experience the world more directly and to thus come to know and work with it in new and creative ways.

Such people can see the fresh, the raw, the concrete, the idiographic, as well as the generic and the abstracts … they live far more in the real world of nature than in the verbalized world of concepts, abstracts, expectations, beliefs and stereotypes that most people confuse for the real world. (1968:137)

However we also identify at the core of Maslow’s work a politics of self and identity. Creativity is one part of the process. It signals growth toward self-fulfilment. It signals also a way of being in the world that is confident, fearless, spontaneous and outwardly engaging. While Maslow is cautious in his pronouncements for this psychology of the ‘good’ person (he suggests that ‘good’ people are also prone to ‘lapses’), his conceptualisation nevertheless provides a foundation for a broader politics of the self-determination or, from a critical perspective, a politics of self-discipline. Critical social science has been roundly critical of Maslow’s discourse on needs (Knights & Willmott, 1974/5; Cullen, 1994; 1997; Townley, 1995). The key points here is that Maslow’s hierarchy lacks an appreciation of identity as a political ‘product’ (Cruikshank, 1993). While Maslow himself was circumspect on such issues, the implications and extension of his work seemingly supports a liberal political position and the reading of economic, social and political issues as problems of personal growth. For example ‘the problem’ with a particular group of workers – women for example (Wilson, 1995) – is not their common political history of domination or exploitation, but rather ‘low self esteem’. And in work organizations the problem of particular people (recalcitrant professionals for instance) is not intimidating and authoritarian management practice, the intensification of work or poor working conditions, but rather an assumed lack of drive to satisfy intrinsic needs for self-actualisation and esteem.
Maslow’s ‘common sense’ about the inherent nature of human being form, as Maslow hoped they would, a programme of reforms in both education and business fields. In the latter field Maslow’s practical psychology was popularised and dispersed via the human relations school of management as outlined in the 1960s by Douglas McGregor particular through his book ‘The Human Side of Enterprise’ (McGregor, 1960). McGregor’s famous ‘theory Y’ recommends that organizations create conditions where members ‘can achieve their own goals best by directing their efforts toward the success of the enterprise’ (1960:49). He grounded this on the assumption that the most significant of rewards for people are those associated with ‘the satisfaction of the ego and self-actualisation’. McGregor also assumed in concert with Maslow that

The capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity and creativity in the solution of organizational problems is widely, not narrowly, distributed in the population. (1960:47–48)

While a number of writers suggest that ‘inside’ work organizations such prescriptions continue to be broadly subordinate to the capitalist imperatives for economic growth, cost reduction and task achievement (Hollway, 1991; Watson, 1994), they nevertheless have become firmly established as part of the official doctrine of human resource management, and popular theorizing around the organization of work (Drucker, 1985; Peters, 1997; Senge, 1990). However, as suggested above, the Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis of creativity is not concerned directly with the way the social relations of capitalist production reconfigures ‘creativity’ based on human psychology’s ‘parable’ of universal human growth and potential. Rather than suggest some kind of play between the truth of capitalist appropriation and the un-truth about ‘creativity’ in work organizations, the emphasis here is on the politics of the discursive formation around ‘creativity’. ‘Creativity’ in this discursive formation is not simply the practices of organization, but rather a wider set of prescriptions operating in a number of fields that become an individualized set of practices by which managers and workers generally work on them/ourselves (Rose & Miller, 1990; Rose, 1996). Rather than regard creativity as spontaneous, collective, rebellious and chaotic, ‘creativity’ (note quote marks) is configured as sets of individualised performable dispositions by which we come to know and work-on ourselves (Townley, 1994; 1995) – in the pursuit of material and symbolic rewards.

There are numerous examples from the organizational change and development literature particularly that might be drawn upon to show how discursive formation around ‘creativity’ contributes to common-knowledge about the ‘creative manager’ and other employees. In broad terms these elaborate and prescribe how to perform ‘creativity’ in the workplace. I offer one example here from the prescriptive literature: Similar advice can be found in the prescriptive work by Kao (1996), Miller (1999) and West and Farr (1990) and much of the empirical literature, in the positivist tradition, includes similar advice as it takes up the objectives and subject positions from the discursive formation around ‘creativity’, and attempts to more precisely map the relations between these (see for example Therney & Farmer, 1999; Oldham & Cummings, 1996).

The key features of Karl Albrecht’s The Creative Corporation (1987:66–67) are neatly summarized in the following quote:

The way to join the ranks of the creative, innovative thinkers is to find out what they do and then imitate them. In other words, by adopting the behaviours of creativity, you become more creative. That’s all there is to it. … There are five basic characteristics that make the difference for innovative and creative thinking. We all have these characteristics to some extent, but the great thinkers of the world really have them. They have made these attitudes and habits of thought a basic part of their approach to living. I’ll explain each one in detail in the chapters that follow: they are: 1. Mental Flexibility. 2. Option thinking. 3. Big-picture thinking. 4. Skill in explaining and selling ideas. 5. Intellectual courage.

The book’s chapters go on to discuss each of these five characteristics in a familiar fashion. Each uses popularised stories of well know creative people to exemplify the characteristic, e.g. Edison’s light filament trial and error process is an example of intellectual courage and persistence. Each chapter then provides sets of helpful hints on how to produce the particular behaviour. For instance, chapters provide catalogues of normative mental and verbal exercises aimed at, among other things, broadening one’s conceptual universe and dealing with the idea crushing comments of the workplace bully. The book also provides at outline of various forms of creativity training, and finishes with a ‘who’s who’ of the creativity consulting business that includes, as we might expect, the firm ‘Karl Albrecht and Associates’. The book, in both form and prescription, is a useful example of
the discursive formation surrounding ‘creativity’ at work. Far from being ‘creative’ in Lawrence’s terms, the book offers readers the normative elaboration of ‘creativity’ as the performance of a ‘creative’ self or identity. This can be acquired through private study, through group intervention and mimesis (copying ‘creative’ behaviour), and through ‘creativity’ training and reward system changes.

Critically Reading ‘creativity’ as an economy of identity

Given the approach sketched out above, how can we make sense of the presentation and presence of Steve Jobs in the stories that began this paper? The approach leads to a critique of the devices (of visibility for instance) and the practices (for example forms of language and dress) that attempt to constitute particular forms of identity e.g. ‘creative selves’, and how these are dispersed, modelled and imitated. It leads, in the critical tradition, to a discussion of the interdependence of capitalism and processes of identity production; what might be termed the economy of identity (Laclau, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1989; Willmott, 1996). Before concluding with a short discussion of the implications of this approach I want to firstly summarize the discussion above and link it to Jobs example.

The methodological position briefly sketched above involves us in a reading of the world as constituted via discursive formations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Hall, 1997; Miller & Rose, 1990). It assumes reality is realized discursively in the first instance. We cannot know and enact or articulate the world without such formations. As a consequence traditional assumptions about the nature of power and the stability of such entities as individuals and the organizations are questioned. Through this methodological move we become concerned with the practices and prescriptions around creativity as they attempt to normalize features of the world in particular ways e.g. as attributes of ‘creativity’ or ‘creative people’. We become aware, for instance, of the normalizing power of naming and ascription as a material practice. Describing people as ‘creative’ rather than say ‘bizarre’ or ‘depraved’ or ‘rebellious’ or ‘chaotic’ is a function of discourse, and not, directly, of the features of the person themselves. From this we begin to explore multiple sites and processes which are ‘at work’ on us as situated users of discursive formations. For example we become aware of the intensive presentation and scrutiny of the performances of those presented as ‘creative’ (in academic texts, in advertising and the media generally) and the practices that they ascribe and embody for us for imitation and inclusion in organizational routines. For instance appraisal interviews, ‘team’ building events and problem solving meetings may require us to speak about ourselves as ‘creative managers’ and to draw appropriate discursive resources provided by the formation surrounding ‘creativity’.

The notion of an economy of identity involves us in this more intensive reading of relations between various forms of available knowledge, and capitalist processes. It helps us understand how communicative practices prepare the ground, so to speak, and are deeply involved in the formation of capitalist relations of production, distribution and exchange. We might argue that in the current era identification with, or fetishisation of, ‘creative selves’ – such as those attributed to Steve Jobs – are an aspect of the development of capitalist relations. The descriptions of Steve Jobs quoted above are not simply ideological practices demanded by his corporate backer. They are part of broader ‘ideological’ practices that surround the production and distribution of desired and ascribed forms of self and ways of being. Such identities also of course take on the form of commodities as they are enhanced and exchanged via the publishing, conference and consultancy industries (Quitner, 2001). And, of course, Apple Computers inevitably sees the importance to its interests via these processes. But what distributes Jobs’ performance across newspapers, magazines and television is not solely these collective interests. ‘Jobs’ and others that enact this ‘creative self’ are not simply fetishized commodities. They are positions established by and propelled by a broader discursive formation around ‘creativity’. This includes academic knowledge production and political action by states, corporations and other authorities involved in producing forms of what Foucault termed governmentality (Dean, 1999; Burchell et al., 1991; Rose, 1996) that accord with neo-liberal political agendas. ‘Governmentality’ refers to the complex form of modern political power that includes both forms of supervision and attempts to transmit forms of rationality (about health, wealth, education etc.) to the population as forms of self-hood that align with broader political economic processes. It is an appreciation of this broader economy of identity that helps us, I would argue, to better understand the place of ‘creativity’, and the production of the ‘creative manager’ for instance, in the changing character of work...
Concluding Points – the effects of ‘creativity’

It is perhaps unremarkable to argue that identity and self-hood are central processes in the reproduction of contemporary capitalism. This is not however a reductive argument that provides a means of forgetting that capitalist relations are engaged in the search for, realization and appropriation of exchange value. It is a means of drawing closer attention to the intermeshing of the regulatory production of ‘self-hood’, and the production and distribution and exchange of goods and services as a broader economy of identity. Yet it is worth noting, by way of a short conclusion here, some of the debilitating effects of this interdependence. If economic and political relations are played out in the current period through the requirement that workers perform themselves as particular identities, then the debilitating effects of this are likely to differ from those traditionally associated with workplace politics i.e. ‘exploitation’ and ‘oppression’. Again this is not to suggest that exploitation and domination are not features of contemporary workplaces. Rather it is to draw attention to the effects of subjection as a mode by which the intensification of exploitation and exploitation of available labour is attempted and variably achieved.

While the prescriptive literature provides resources on how to perform appropriate workplace identities, including advice on performing ‘creatively’, some of the critical empirical literature identifies the debilitating and destructive effects of these (Collinson & Collinson, 1997; Hochschild, 2001). There is little doubt that the thorough performance of ascribed workplace identities, as a ‘creative manager’ for instance, can lead to what is described in lay discourse as workaholism, or in sociological discourse as compulsive workaholism, and work organizations in contemporary capitalist economies.

The identities provided by the discursive formation around ‘creativity’ are part of a broader challenge to the bureaucratic positioning of the workplace within variably rigid time, space and conduct boundaries. What is clear is that the practices performed by this creative, flexible and entrepreneurial subject can have certainly antagonistic and potentially destructive effects on other identities including those located and performed outside of ‘work’. It is these, and how they are an effect of the elaboration of workplaces power relations in rejuvenated forms, that is the target of the critical social science tradition.

References


Craig Prichard is a senior lecturer in the Department of Management at Massey University, New Zealand.