

**SELF-CAUGHT IN PARADOX: MIDDLE MANAGERS' AGENTIVE
CONSTRUCTION OF POWERLESSNESS.**

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Introduction and Aim of the Paper

When organizations transform in order to adapt to dynamic contexts, they often aim to increase employees' empowerment and collaboration (Ivanova and von Scheve, 2020). Such a change implies a shift of power relations reflected in re-constructed identity discourse (Brown et al., 2010), which can confront involved actors with identity struggles (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) or paradoxical demands (Beech et al., 2004). In this context, middle managers in particular are confronted with such changes from their central position as employees and managers in organizational hierarchies, affecting their identity discourse (Harding et al., 2014) in a way that can even put them in a situation of paralysis where they feel trapped 'between non-existent alternatives' (Putnam et al., 2016: 83).

The phenomenon of being paralyzed as a result of perceived tensions due to paradoxical demands is not new. Organizational paradox theory (cf. Schad et al., 2016) emphasizes the importance of accepting and strategically dealing with paradox in order to convert them into generative forces. While this literature is well meaning, it is criticized for paying insufficient 'attention to the circumstances of disempowered actors exposed to paradoxes' (Berti and Simpson, 2021: 267) and marginalizing the role of power relations, which can actually constrict coping with tensions and contradictions (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2016).

We aim at digging even deeper to understand the underlying micro-dynamics of contradictions, paradoxical tensions and the 'deep-seated effects of power' (Putnam et al., 2016: 68) by analyzing middle managers' identity discourse constructed within relations of power (Brown, 2022; Mumby and Stohl, 1991).

Power Relations, Discourse and Identity Construction

Critical scholars emphasize that integrating the issue of power relations is of utmost importance in order to understand agency, the capacity to formulate legitimate actions in response to tensions. In their work on pragmatic paradox Berti and Simpson (2021) examine the

relationship between agency and paradox experience by exploring how actors' response capabilities can be limited by different forms of power. Subjectification, as one of these forms, aims at determining 'an actor's very sense of self, including their emotions and identity' (Fleming and Spicer, 2014: 244). In this regard, subjectivation is 'the most pervasive and difficult form of power imbalance as it shapes the self-concept, ambitions, and will of the workforce, aligning them with particular discourses and goals.' (Berti and Simpson, 2021: 267) Consequently, discourse is central to research the role of power for understanding contradictions and paradox (Putnam et al., 2016).

The aim of our paper is to better understand how middle managers' identities are constituted in discourse against the backdrop of changing power relations, and the paradoxical tensions this creates for them. Our research questions therefore are: *How* middle managers co-construct tensions in identity discourse and *why* do these tensions emerge and develop against the backdrop of shifting power relations due to organizational change towards more empowerment and collaboration?

In order to answer these questions, we apply a longitudinal in-depth single-case study of a traditional Austrian company that aims at organizing its structures and processes in a 'more flexible and empowering way'. We use the integrative methodology to analyze the local little 'd' phenomena without ignoring their references to big 'D' discourses and, consequently, their relation to power (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2019). We assume alongside with Clegg (1975), Foucault (1980) and Fairclough (2005) that 'language is a primary medium through which power is expressed and shaped' (Brown et al., 2010: 532).

Through a fine-grained linguistic analysis called pronoun analysis (Harding, 2008; Harding et al., 2014), we were able to identify intra-individual differences in how aspects of agency in response to tensions are constructed. The middle managers respond simultaneously agentive, powerful and in control of discourses (Harding et al., 2014; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), but also paralyzed (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Berti and Simpson,

2021). Pronoun analysis help us to disentangle these contradictory findings by revealing two different discourses (Figure 1) that show how middle managers co-construct tensions in identity discourse and explain why these tensions emerge and develop.

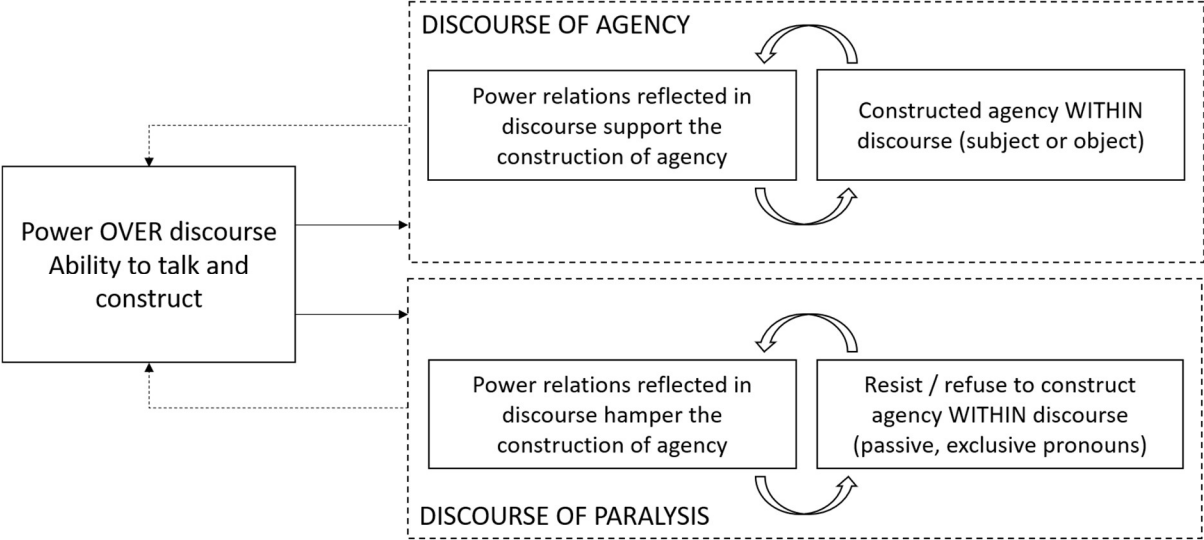


Figure 1: Power over discourse creating two different discourses

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