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## CMS 2015 – Draft Paper

STREAM:

*Co-operative and community owned enterprises: resisting or reproducing the neoliberal consensus?*

### **“Exploring notions of community in the discursive identity construction practices of members of a consumer co-operative”**

Victoria Wells, Richard Slack, Nick Ellis & Mona Moufahim  
(all at Durham University Business School)

#### **Introduction**

This research, based on a case study of a community-co-operative public house (or pub), explores whether co-ops or community-owned enterprises (COEs), owned by consumers and managed democratically aimed at fulfilling the motivations of their members, can be understood as alternatives to dominant models of business ownership. It does so by analyzing the discursive identity construction practices of COE members, focusing on various notions of community drawn upon in members’ talk. Tensions are evident between the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal managerialism and that of democratic collective ownership. More widely, the research questions to what extent such COE’s resist or merely reproduce the neoliberal consensus; and how they might challenge existing organisation theory.

A co-operative (co-op) is defined as, “An autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (ICA 2014). If we accept that the co-operative enterprise is “a unique business model, a hybrid that lies somewhere between the economically focused investor owned firm and the socially focused not for profit business” (Mazzarol et al. 2014: 14), then some interesting questions arise about the extent to which peoples’ needs and aspirations can truly be met by such arrangements. This is especially the case here, where the co-operative model studied is that of a consumer co-operative, one owned by its consumers as members. This is in comparison to the more common work co-operatives seen more widely (a cooperative, that is owned and democratically controlled by its “worker-owners”). Consumer co-operative enterprises are owned by consumers and are managed democratically which aim at fulfilling the needs and aspirations of their members.

Although communities of place and of interest, controlling and benefitting from their own assets, can encourage the performance of alternative organizing and managing practices, the

COE model does not, by itself, guarantee that the co-op identity flourishes, nor does co-operation automatically create a new managerial functionality. Such forms of ownership can probably only ever hope to force a qualified change on the function of management. These potential tensions are reflected in the identity construction practices of co-op members as they struggle with the challenges of managing community ownership in a market economy dominated by investor-owned enterprises.

As a conceptual contribution, with empirical input, we show how our understanding of identity can be enhanced by analysing the discourse of members of COEs. We shall draw out theoretical implications for the study of social actors' identity work in the distinct, and arguably 'alternative', context of these organisations. Our study first explores various understandings of community, including that of communion – where members may have a sense of shared identity (Wilmott 1989). Second it examines liminality, a subjective state of being on the 'threshold' of, or betwixt and between, two different existential positions (Turner 1967). Third, it explores identity construction in these contexts as the dynamic, interpersonal means through which we actively (re)create, maintain, adapt, repair, revise and present a sense of distinctive selfhood (Somers 1994).

## **Background Theory**

Here we outline some of the theoretical literature that has sensitized our approach to the case analysis. Conceptually, our study engages with approaches to community and, relatedly, liminality and identity in the sociology, management and marketing literatures.

When social actors seek belonging and attachment in an unpredictable world where market ideologies have become dominant, it has been argued that they are likely to look fondly at the notion of community, viewing it as the "kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly love to inhabit and which we hope to repossess" (Bauman 2001: 3). However Gusfield (1975: 41) challenges the idea of communities as mere vestiges of the past. He advocates a conception of 'community' and 'society' as "points of reference brought into play in particular situations and areas". More recently, Delanty (2003:71) has questioned the ability of social institutions to serve as a counter for the effects of capitalism. He suggests instead the cultivation of what he calls 'communicative communities', discussing this as "community is communicative in the sense of being formed in collective action based on place... local communities can serve as important vehicles for the expression of moral recognition and the building of personal identities". In a similar vein but somewhat more individualistically, Lichterman (1996) argues that commitment and a shared respect for individual inspiration can be a uniting and

driving force for activists from diverse backgrounds working together to promote social change. He suggests personal fulfilment arises out of group communal activity, which produces a strong sense of identity.

We can thus begin to see how we might conceptualise 'community' and, further, what it may mean to COE members. As Smith (2001) points out, in addition to understandings of community that are underpinned by place (or locality), and those intentional communities that can arise when people share a common interest, a further understanding of community can be added – that of attachment, which in its strongest form might be thought of as 'communion' – where members may have a sense of shared identity (Wilmott 1989). If we conceive of such collectives as 'communities of meaning' then, after Cohen (1985: 118), we can argue that "people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity".

'Identity work' describes the processes by which people seek to exert agency, shaping a sense of who they are, reflecting on how they act whilst negotiating the affirmation and acceptance of their sense of identity by others (Alvesson et al. 2008). The notion of liminality (Turner 1967) has the potential to provide analytical purchase for understanding the more intricate dimensions of people's identity work in potentially unsettled or unconventional contexts such as those found in COEs. The concept was introduced by van Gennep (1960) from anthropological studies of rites of passage or transition. More recently, liminality has been adopted in organization studies as a useful lens through which to explore positions of change or ambiguity for both individuals and enterprises, typically being applied to non-traditional organizational contexts (Anderson 2005; Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Walsh et al. 2006). For instance, Powley (2009) explores the effects on individual actors of significant change, focussing on the transient, liminal state of an organization where pre-existing social structures are suspended. For Cunha et al. (2010), liminality can be made manifest in organizations as struggles occur between internal communities over ethical norms. Tensions, particularly in terms of structure and resistance to that structure, are also found by Meira (2014) in what is conceived as a liminal organization following its take-over by employees.

It is not difficult to see how these sorts of situations might be experienced by the individuals who are members of a newly-formed COE resulting from the co-operative buy-out of the hitherto privately owned lease of a local pub. Under liminal conditions, communities are referred to as 'communitas' (Turner 1969), a state which arises through the "experience of mutual emotional connection which can occur in the absence of social structure" (Hackley et al. 2012: 455). However, the connection apparently afforded by communitas may not persist over time. Despite the essentially utopian nature of this space where homogeneity and unity supposedly prevail (Turner and Turner 1978), communitas can allow social structure to

reassert itself, especially when people exhibit status-seeking behaviour (Tumbat and Belk 2011). Liminality, whether experienced by individuals or organizations, can thus present a particular challenge for the enactment of identity as actors may have to re-position their 'selves' across different, socially constructed divides in such a way that their identity is meaningful for themselves and for their community.

Such behaviour can reflect, and indeed impact upon, peoples' self-identity (their own idea of who they are) and their social identity (the idea of that individual in external discourses and cultures) (Watson 2009). Intensified identity work may arise from relations with others both 'inside' and 'outside' the enterprise that challenge self-understandings. A key theme when investigating individual identities is therefore the discursive separation of self from other, which illustrates how "the process by which we come to understand who we are is intimately connected to notions of who we are not and, by implication, who others are (and are not)" (Ybema et al. 2009: 306). Othering across notional divides can present challenges for identity workers, especially those actors ('liminars') experiencing processes of organizational change (Beech 2011). Often oscillating between an inclusive and an exclusive 'us', liminars can articulate embracing yet distinctive identities vis-à-vis other social actors, both within and without the organization's boundaries (Ellis and Ybema 2010). As we shall see, constructions of self and others are central to how COE members make sense of their community (or communities).

## **Methodology**

The consumer co-operative is owned by its members or shareholders (approx. 200), who elect a board (approx. 10 people) from the membership who in turn deal with strategic decisions about the pub, on behalf of the membership. In this case, the day to day running of the pub is managed by a live-in manager who manages a team of paid part time workers (some consumer co-operative pubs are run by volunteers from the membership but this is not the case here). Decisions regarding the pub are generally made at the board and manager level with input from the membership at three open membership meetings a year (and through ad hoc contact between these). Empirically, our study draws on data from a series of in-depth interviews with COE members, some of whom were also board members. In all, 37 people were interviewed, comprising 28 males and 9 female participants, and representing approximately 18% of the total membership. Face-to-face interviews took place mostly in the Northern UK city where the pub is located (but a few were done by phone with members who did not live locally) between April and July 2014. The shortest interview lasted 25 minutes, and the longest 1 hour 20 minutes. Questions asked in these interactions included: exploring peoples' general pub consumption behaviours; motivations for becoming involved in the COE; experiences of being a shareholder; and what people felt

they had in common with other members. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

Our analysis of the resulting transcripts is founded on the identification of 'interpretative repertoires' (Potter and Wetherell 1987) that provide people with discursive resources (clusters of terms, descriptions and figure of speech) that they can use to construct versions of reality. The above theoretical notions of community (i.e. place, interest and communion), liminality/boundaries and identity informed an etic side to our discursive approach where the coding of interview texts to repertoires was guided by a protocol based in part on the literature; but we were driven primarily by the emic responses of members. We thus used a combination of a priori codes from the literature and in vivo codes derived from the data to frame our analysis. In discourse analysis, it is not just the identification of particular terms and linguistic tools that is important; what speakers *do* with language is also crucial (Wood and Kroger 2000). Consequently, as we discuss each repertoire in turn, we shall highlight a variety of self-identity and community constructing practices within members' accounts of COE-related issues.

## Findings and Analysis

Here we present some brief stretches of talk that represent the various relevant repertoires used in members' talk. We also provide some detailed expansion analyses of exemplar segments that illustrate the key discursive practices found in participants' accounts of their COE membership experiences.

- (1) First we see accounts of peoples' motivations to join the COE that cover a range of notions of **community**, exemplified by repertoires of place, common interest, and communion, respectively:

*"...we liked the idea of being involved in a local pub, to keep the community spirit."* Female, Member

*"...we were worried that this might be bought up by someone who wanted to turn it into the sort of sporty pub."* Female, Member and Board Member

*"...it immediately creates a sense of fulfilment and connection that kind of you don't even know is missing in your general day to day engagement with the world around you."* Male, Member

An exemplar stanza, chosen through initial analysis, of such talk is analysed below in greater detail.

*"I just think it's a great thing, that the cooperative movement is really important, and generally speaking anything that, any small step that the community can take to sort of take back its own culture is a really important thing to, if you can possibly afford to be a part of it, and it's really important to encourage any effort on those lines. And I just, I love this place, and the idea of having a stake in it was such an exciting, it felt completely different, the first drink that I had in here after getting the shares, when it was all done, to feel like such a bit of it is sort of in your hands. You know, there really is, I suppose I was thinking about the actual word 'cooperative' in that sense of ownership in you're a co-operator, rather than just meaning you get along with the people. It's actually you're part of operating something, rather than just being a consumer of it, and I think that's really important."* Male, Member

The speaker, a 35 year old man, discursively positions himself by drawing on a variety of meanings of community. He begins by using a repertoire of communion built on a belief in the 'importance' of *the cooperative movement* and notions of *community culture* which he asserts one should be *a part of*. As he does so, he also draws on a repertoire of common interest represented by what seems to be anti-capitalist rhetoric about *the community* 'taking back' *its own culture*. The statement about 'loving' *this place* then arguably draws on a meaning of community as locality, as well as being a personal connection to the place. Finally, the speaker utilises a repertoire of communion once again as he talks of the 'excitement' and 'feelings' associated with being *a co-operator (...)* rather than just being a *consumer*. Interestingly, at this point in his account he also suggests a need for management (see subsection 3 below), however nebulous, via the words *operating something*.

In terms of identity construction, at the individual level this respondent works discursively to present himself as a passionate (for instance in the repetition of *really important*) yet reflective (*I think; I suppose I was thinking about*) advocate of community in all its meanings and, seemingly, of *communitas*. The lack of the pronoun 'we' in his narrative, however, may be telling: this account is much more about him (*I, you* – in this case the second person is almost certainly the speaker himself) and his partial *ownership* of an enterprise that *is sort of in your hands*, than it is about his 'co-operators' or *just meaning you get along with the people*. At the organizational level, the pub's identity is given a sense of place (literally *this place; in here*), but otherwise is rather vague (*something*). Nevertheless the phrases *take back its own culture* and *the first drink that I had in here after getting the shares, when it was all done* hint at the changes the enterprise must have gone (or be going) through, thus evoking a liminal state.

(2) Exploring further, we find **boundaries** being constructed in participants' accounts, shown here in terms of, respectively, repertoires that claim differences in values,

hierarchies (typically due to the perceived power of board members), and members versus consumers:

*"...15% of shareholders are similar sort of people to me, and the other 85% are the bleeding heart liberals, champagne socialists."* Male, Member

*"...she didn't hit it off with one member of the committee who is particularly powerful."* Female, Member

*"I suppose by having shareholders it's created more of a separation..."* Female, Member

Again, an exemplar stanza of such talk is analysed below in greater detail.

*"...[City district] as a whole I think is quite a sort of lefty, quite hippy-ish sort of community, and I don't necessarily put myself in that sort of category. I mean a lot of them, I mean I've got an allotment and a lot of them like looking after themselves and home grown stuff, and yes I like that as well. But a lot of them, this is a huge generalisation, a lot of them don't have cars, they have bicycles and things. And you see these terrifying baby bicycles with children in the back, and you think, 'Oh my god!' (...) No, I don't sort of, not a right wing person by any means politically, but I think I'm more centre than a lot of the people are who come here. I mean all that about the sign, they want to, 'Oh no, we don't want to have [Pub Name] on it with the cross on it because it has connotations for royalty and religion'. What? It's a traditional pub sign!"* Female, Member

In this case, the speaker is a 52 year old woman, living locally. We can see some quite distinct boundaries being discursively constructed around, and between, different members of the COE, in relation to which the speaker simultaneously attempts to position herself. Thus the use of language in the erection of notional boundaries and in the construction of a self-identity is necessarily considered together in the analysis that follows. P6 begins by 'categorising' the majority (*as a whole*) of local district as a *lefty, quite hippy-ish sort of community*, and one that she is not part of, even though she also feels she has to explain that she too has *got an allotment*, perhaps suggesting that this has some similarities, I only outwardly, with the 'hippy left'. This discursive move creates the impression that perhaps the difference between her and other members is not so great after all as well as, crucially, allowing her to offer a legitimate evaluation of *them*. She justifies her claims about a large section of the community (note the repetition of *a lot of them*) by evoking the vivid example of *these terrifying baby bicycles* and how scared 'seeing' these *things* (a word suggesting something alien) makes (normal?) people (*you*) feel. However, her acknowledgment that she is making *a huge generalisation* indicates that she is somewhat cautious in her othering of fellow members. Moreover, she often qualifies her statements with phrases like *sort of, I don't necessarily* and *I mean*, thereby suggesting she does not want appear too extreme in her



characterization of the neighbourhood. This hybrid self-positioning continues as she struggles to articulate her 'political' stance (*No, I don't sort of, not a right wing person by any means*) but still uses a metaphorical continuum (*lefty; centre; right*) to highlight the difference between her and *a lot of the people (...) who come here*. She then evokes a further example to support her claims: i.e. by describing what has apparently been a contentious and, in her view, foolish (*What?*) debate (*all that*) about the *pub sign*. Here, differences are plotted by contrasting the secular and republican views of some members (*they*) with her *traditional* perspective. P6's self identity is thereby constructed as part of a dissenting minority (perhaps an 'us' captured in the use of *you* by this speaker) that has different values (but, importantly, not too different thus legitimating her account) from the majority of community stakeholders (*them*). In addition, organizationally, the pub's identity is not resolved in this account, where it remains an enterprise suspended between a form of modernity and tradition, i.e. in a liminal state of transition.

(3) Moreover, **tensions** occur as members wrestle with repertoires that attempt to reconcile or balance objectives built on community alongside those founded on commercial 'reality', as well as asserting the need for 'management' as shown in these segments of talk:

*"We haven't joined a charity, we've joined a business."*Female, Member

*"Obviously the structure of the kind of way the place was run suddenly became very different"* Male, Member

We offer a final exemplar stanza of such talk to be analysed in more detail.

P10: *"And some things are difficult."*

I: *"Yeah, it's a difficult thing to know where that is. Were you in the board when the Living Wage came on or was that before?"*

P10: *"Yes, and I was very keen for that, I thought it was a good idea. But obviously then you have to make sure we're making enough money. So there's always kind of tradeoffs with those kind of decisions, it's not just as clear cut as, 'Yes, we should pay staff as much as we can', but we've got to balance that against other things. But then that's when having people like [the board member who looks after finances] to do the numbers come in handy."* Male, Board Member

Here, the speaker (P10), a 29 year old man who is also a board member, responds to a prompt from the interviewer (I). In an attempt to elicit more information from the participant following his acknowledgment that *some things are difficult*, the interviewer

draws on what has apparently been a contentious issue (a specific *difficult thing*) for the COE, i.e. that of a paying a *Living Wage* to pub staff, to frame her question. P10 confirms his board position and then utilises what we term a 'commerce vs. community' repertoire as he contrasts the *good idea* of the wage with the 'obvious' need to make *enough money*. He sets this up explicitly as a *tradeoff* (a classic business-based metaphor) and, later in the same sentence, as having to *balance* two seemingly equally legitimate objectives: the moral imperative to *pay staff as much as we can* and the expectation that the enterprise (*we've got to*) weighs this against *other things*. That these 'things' are commercial considerations is confirmed when P10 evokes a third party, *the board member who looks after the finances*, who can *do the numbers* that might support any such *decisions*. In doing so, the speaker draws upon a further repertoire that asserts the need for some sort of management structure or approach to run the COE. The board member who looks after the finances is necessary (*he comes in handy*); there are employment-based/work relationships within the enterprise (*we should pay staff*); and it seems as though the board has the authority and expertise to make appropriate *decisions*.

The interaction serves to position the speaker as an ethically aware individual (*I was very keen for that, I thought it was a good idea*) but also as a board member with *difficult* financial responsibilities (*you have to make sure*) and as an actor embedded within the COE (*we're making...*). This collective entity is then evoked in the rest of the respondent's account as the pronoun *we* appears repeatedly (although it is not certain whether it is we the board or we the cooperative). This discursive move constructs the organization (and its members), and not just the speaker, as a reflective enterprise, capable of voicing concerns over wages (note the reported speech with no clear origin) yet 'balancing' these ideals against commercial survival. That a potentially polarising debate appears to have taken place within the COE (both P10 and the interviewer are members) suggests that some individuals may find themselves in liminal states as they attempt to resolve such tensions.

## **Discussion**

At this point in this draft version of our paper, we are just suggesting possible ways that our study could make a substantive contribution to knowledge. We welcome feedback from our audiences.

Because this is very much a work in progress we only draw tentative conclusions which suggest that, even within supposed 'community' enterprises (i.e. enterprises that could be seen as liminal organizations), there are perceived to be notional boundaries resulting in degrees of individual liminality. Thus, varying (concentric and/or intersecting) circles of

identification (Ellis and Ybema 2010) exist which are manifested in the identity-constructing talk of members. So we might argue that we are effectively looking at two levels of discursive work in our data: the construction of individual self-identity and the construction of the identity of the pub as an organisation.

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