

## **Original Research Article**

***“Identity-Work” and Workers’ Interests Articulation in an Oil Refinery, Nigeria: a Post-Structuralist evaluation.***

### **Abstract**

*Beyond mainstream “essentialist” discourse and analysis of management and leadership practices in work organizations, labor process theory has continued to interrogate normative assumptions behind management roles and practices, in shaping the “lived-work” experiences and “agentic” responses of workers, in contemporary workplace. Critical analysis of management roles in the context of contemporary workplace has been able to make insightful and critical connections between work processes, workers own–sense making, and articulation of their interests in the workplace. Using post-structuralist analysis in the evaluations of the concepts of “identity-work”, and “interest articulation”, the paper offers a somewhat different understanding of management and leadership discourses and their normative assumptions, in an Oil Refinery, Nigeria. Workers construct and enact their workplace identity, thereby giving a re-interpretation and re-appropriation of management discourse in the organization. While utilizing the analytical remits of labour process theory and critical perspectives, the paper re-conceptualizes how workers in the oil refinery, enact “repertoire” of “selves” in securing their identities in the workplace. In their “knowledgeability” and “agentic orientation”, workers in the refinery “collude” with the “hubris” of management in the organization, in order to invert and subvert managerial practices, and its normative intentions. Through theoretical conceptualizations, the paper demonstrates the specific dimensions of these inversion and subversion. The paper therefore seeks to insert “workers-agency” back into the analysis of power-relations in the workplace; agency that is not overtly under the absolute grip of management’s control, but with multiplicity of identities and multilevel manifestations.*

*Keywords: Identity-work, Labour Process. Interests-articulation, Oil Refinery, post-structuralist analysis*

### **1.1: Introduction**

Conceptual and empirical analyses within the context of employment relations continue to show dimensions of workers experience and sense-making of managerial practices in the workplace. This has been conceptualised and analysed through diverse strands of labour process theory. Understanding of workers experiences in the refinery and their responses to workplace managerial practices in the organisation, conceptualised through the diverse strands of labour process analysis, have also provided empirical evidence of workers sense-making of the management’s practices. Through the analysis, an attempt has been made to concretely locate the

diverse patterns of managerial discourse and practices within these conceptual approaches. More specifically, critical analysis within the labour process strand has been able to make insightful connections between labour process, workers' experiences and management's learning programmes. Post-structuralist evaluations have also provided the link between management's learning programme and "identity-work" in the workplaces, for instance, (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). In particular, the concept of "identity-work" and its regulation through managerial discourses and practices has offered a somewhat different understanding of managements' development programmes, and through which workers construct and enact their workplace identity; thereby giving (re)interpretations to the managerial and symbolic importance of managements' initiated training programmes (Gagnon, 2008).

The Sections of the Paper are organised along these lines. In what follows here as Section 2, background information on the research environment is provided. Following this, the Paper reviews literature on conceptual remits of "identity-work" and "self" to illustrate workers "interests-articulation" in the refinery. The Conclusion provides the implications of the study for further theorisation on "identity-work", in contemporary workplace.

## **1.2 Research Contexts**

The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), where this research was carried out was established on April 1977 by the Federal Government of Nigeria with the mandate to manage the operational aspects of the oil industry in Nigeria. NNPC is a successor organization to the Nigerian Oil Company (NNOC) which was established in 1971. In addition to its exploration activities, NNPC developed operational interest in refinery, petrochemicals and product transportation as well as marketing. Between 1978 and 1989, NNPC constructed petroleum and petrochemical refineries in Warri, Kaduna and Port-Harcourt.

However, in the last three decades, NNPC, as one of the largest federally owned corporations in Nigeria, has emerged from one of the far-reaching organizational restructuring in its four decades history. In 1978, the corporation was decentralised into twelve strategic business units (SBUs) and subsidiaries, covering the entire spectrum of the corporation's operation. As an autonomous federally owned corporation, NNPC is regulated by the Department of Petroleum Resources- a Department within the Ministry of Petroleum Resources. Over the years, the operations and activities of NNPC have centered on coping with challenges of both internal and external developments in the oil industry, in particular with regards to its products and technology of

production. The concern has been how to make its products compete favourably in the products market, both in terms pricing and quality. As a result, the business units and subsidiaries of the State Owned Oil firm have been reorganized (unbundled) into companies with NNPC as a holding company.

Port-Harcourt Refinery Company (PHRC), Eleme, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria, which provides the empirical context for this research work, is one of the twelve subsidiaries of NNPC. It provides petroleum refinery service to the nation. It is also charged with the responsibilities of development and production of specialized petroleum products. The operations and activities of the company are carried out by two Departments within the company: Production, Engineering, and Total Quality Control Dept; and Administrative, Personnel and Manpower Development Dept.

## **2 “Identity-Work” Construction: conceptual models for evaluation**

In the context of identity regulation and shaping, such as the learning situations and management development programmes in the workplace, the “micro-social” processes provide the context through which participants enact “identity-form co-created through the discursive practices and expectations of the training programmes” (Gagnon 2008:376).

Utilized as an analytical tool, Collinson (2003:14), had earlier developed the conceptual model of how employees enact their repertoire of selves, that is, “conformist, dramaturgical and resistance selves”, in securing their identities in the workplace. According to Gagnon (2008:376), workplace or “management’s discourse mechanisms produce identity work as responses to dynamics of power relations in the organisations, in shaping workers’ sense of self and in relation to management’s development programmes.” Drawing on Collinson’s (2003) analytical tools, Gagnon (2008:376) proposes a Webberian type of identity regulation through management’s development programme. According to him workers’ self-identity in the context of training environment grows from “constant testing and competition within conditions of relative insecurity in the organisation, where survival depends on the outcome of the identity testing.” There is also the “benevolent” context of training environment in shaping workers’ self-identity, “wherein monitoring and surveillance could remain important” (Gagnon 2008:376), but in which prevailing workplace conditions assure identity security for the workers.

Grounded in Collinson's model of "selves", Gagnon's (2008) theoretical and empirical analysis is based on categories of conforming practices that emerge in the shaping of workers' identity in the context of managerial discursive programmes and practices of training. According to Gagnon, workers "work on self" through "confessional and introspective" identity shaping, and also through engaging in enacting "required self", as a way of coping and conforming to the discursive expectations (Gagnon 2008).

The concern of post-structuralist labour process theorists, such as Collinson (2003), Fleming and Sewell (2002), Hogson (2005), Gagnon (2008), Alvesson and Willmott (2002) has been the process of identity-formation and its regulation within the discursive framework of management's training programme. Identified in their respective analyses they are concerned with the issues of how identities, subjectivities, or "selves" are co-constructed, monitored, regulated and resisted in the workplace, in the context of discursive practices such as culture change programmes, training and professionalism in "management projects" (Gagnon 2008:376).

As something different from mainstream managerial understanding of these practices and programmes, labour process analysts have therefore developed critical and alternative themes for the interpretations of what workers' identity and selves are under the training and change discourses. In their analysis, they emphasized "ambivalence" and "contradictions" located in the self-constructions and experiences of the participant-employees involved in the learning programmes. As workers are simultaneously being "pulled" and "pushed" by management's rhetoric and discourse, on offer, their "selves at work" are formed within the ambivalences and contradictions thrown at them by management's change programmes. In Alvesson and Dertez (2000 cited in Gagnon 2008:377) "selves at work or employee subjectivities are defined as feelings, values, self-perception and cognition" shaped by the social process in the workplace. In the situation, self-identity is constructed by the micro-social process of management's discursive practices in which the workers are situated.

Conceptualised as both objects and subjects in the workplace, workers' self-identity formation is not, therefore, something determined passively through "external forces or structures, nor fully a self-controlling type, shaping the world around him" (Collinson 2003, cited in Gagnon 2008:377). It is something shaped by the "interface" in which the worker finds himself. Self-identity formations, therefore, like other issues within labour process understanding, form part of "contested terrain" in contemporary workplaces. As a terrain for contest between the management and the worker himself, identity at workplace remains the "habitus" through which the management has been able to induce the processes (rhetoric) for the construction of "acceptable selves" as a form of regulation. Such identity-regulation and subjectivity is worked on by the management through "discourse mechanisms aimed at enjoining employees to construct certain self-images, aligned with management-defined objectives" (Gagnon 2008:377).

Also, as noted by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), management's regulation of identity is achieved through the "self-positioning of employees within the managerially inspired discourse about work and, to which they are expected to be more committed" (cited in Gagnon 2008:377). Explaining this further, Deetz adds "modern work organisation is increasingly being pre-occupied with managing the insides – the hopes, fears and aspirations of workers, rather than their behaviours directly" (cited in Gagnon 2008:377). Other contributors, following Foucault's work also within the post-structuralists' tradition stressed the power dimension of identity construction in the workplace. Prasad (2005), Kondo (1990), Lorbiecki (2007), and Gabriel (1999), have all put emphasis on the impact of power in shaping the multiple forms of workers' identity in the workplace, (cited by Gagnon 2008:377). For instance, Lorbiecki (2007) in his own rejection of Foucault's "deterministic" reading of resistance as "being co-produced and therefore contiguous with, and immanent within power-relations", aligns his arguments with Gabriel (1999), that in "the ambiguity and ambivalence inherent in the process of identity construction, there are still unmanaged spaces, in which subjects (workers) counteract and shape the managerial image of self" (cited in Gagnon 2008:377). Central to identity work and its dimension in the workplace, therefore, are its "multiple" and "shifting character" engaged by the workers and influenced by the management's regulations in "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that produce a sense of coherence and contradictions along line of continuous in the work organisation"(Alvesson and Willmott 2002 in Gagnon 2008:377). Thus, the process of identity-work, its regulation and manifestation are "mutually

reinforcing” and shaped by managerial discourses. Indeed as pointed out by Alvesson and Willmott (2002); through “self-positioning” of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organisation, managerial regulatory mechanisms are achieved. Such managerial regulatory devices as noted by Alvesson and Willmott are “less obtrusive” yet more potent and “effective” in constructing and reconstructing workers’ identities in the workplace. And they manifest in diverse “cultural media” put in place by the management.

However, while sounding a note of caution in assuming that such corporate cultural media designed to shape the orientation and identity of workers are “all-consuming” and “totally dominating”, Ezzamel and Willmott (1998 cited in Alvesson and Willmott 2002), urge analysts to be attentive to the consideration of expression of employee “resistance” and “subversive tendencies”. In other words, workers through their own agentic and active “identity–work” make the process of managerial regulation “precarious”, unpredictable and contested. Workers, therefore “are not passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:621). While this is so regarding employees’ agentic-role, analysts still maintain that management’s identity regulation is significant. Indeed it remains one of the most important “modalities of organisational control” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:621).

Conceptualised as a new cultural mechanism, managerial identity-regulation is to produce employees who find meaning in corporate values. While they are expected to exhibit and maintain their “autonomy”, they are equally expected to be “committed” to the process of continuous improvement in the organisation. For instance, in the NNPC, the professionals and “competent managers” trained and “inducted” in the management’s development programmes are expected to be “competent”, to take “responsibility” towards achieving the objectives of the corporation.

Within the mainstream managerial understanding, the concern for training and its normative objectives in the workplace, with strong emphasis on competence development for categories of workers reflects managerial regulatory mechanism as a legitimated form of management. In this normative understanding, it is assumed that “resistance” and agentic opposition is a manifestation of poorly designed training structure and processes that can be modified through refinement of the structure and processes. While rejecting this positivist line of understanding,

and the essentialist interpretations of these managerial practices, those analysts within interpretive and critical tradition of labour process analysis urge researchers to pay attention to the agentic dimensions that explain the “negotiated and often problematic status of the assumed shared meanings, values, beliefs, ideas and symbolic discourses” associated with management’s training programmes (Barley and Kunda 1992; Mumby 1988; Ray 1986; and Kunda 1992; cited in Alvesson and Willmott 2002:621). Their theoretical and empirical analysis demonstrate how management through discourses and practices of leadership development and training have succeeded in promoting, by design and norms, “organisational experience for consumption by employees” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:621).

Researchers are, therefore, urged to focus more on the “discursive and reflexive process of identity construction” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:621) and reconstruction through managerial training interventions, and on which the identity work of individual employees rests. This is because, as noted by Alvesson and Willmott (2002:622), the “mechanisms of control, and outcomes such as rewards, leadership, task specialization and competency do not work “outside” the individual’s quest for self-definition, coherence, and meaning as corporate citizen.” The mechanisms, “reflexively” and “processurally” interact in the interface to produce the identity-work of the worker (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). As they note, “identity-work” is the medium through which workers’ self-construction and management’s regulatory training programmes works through” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:622).

Strongly connected with the process of identity-work through processural and reflexive interpretative process is how “subjectivity is manufactured” (Deetz 1992; 1994; and Knights and Willmott 1989). However, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) caution, researchers should avoid the “heavy-hand” interpretations of influence of managerial discourse in shaping identity work project. “Identity construction should be understood as a process in which the role of discourse in moulding the human subject is “balanced” with other elements of life-history, forged by a capacity, reflexively, to accomplish life projects out of various sources of influence and inspiration (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:622). In other words, while identity formation or regulation has an outcome of “intentional modality” of managerial control, its total influence is not to be seen or interpreted as unproblematic since there are other mediating factors or elements that influence employees’ commitment or loyalty to the organisation (Alvesson and Willmott

2002). While there could be “instrumental valence” to compliance to managerial discourse, its “buy-in” is equally “conditional upon” other intervening variables in the organization. Thus, Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) contribution conceptualizes and analyses identity project in the context of modern workplace as a distinct influence of managerial regulation, transmitted in the discourse of training and development. It also provides illustrative empirical evidence to understanding how “greater flexibility” and “self-reflexivity are” brought into the interplay, in producing subjectivity and identity work.

Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) analysis provides the theoretical and analytical value on how the diverse forms of managerial discourses in the NNPC, concerning training, leadership management, team-working and quality improvement are promoted, in working on employees’ “insides” – their self-image, feelings and identifications” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 622). Their contributions further provide the conceptual understanding of how the “employee as identity worker” is enjoined to “incorporate the new managerial discourses, introduced through the process of induction, training, and corporate education into his narratives of self-identity” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:622). Indeed, in the context of job and employment insecurity, and career protection, in NNPC, in the wake of changes in work process and managerial practices, “management of identity work becomes salient and critical”(Alvesson and Willmott 2002:623) to the sustainability of employment relationship. Thus, in NNPC, where the corporation is compelled to sustain itself in the context of the goals of its regulatory framework, and need of the workers to protect what “remains of employment,” self-identification with the organisation – manifest in “employee loyalty, cannot be interpreted as given, it is actively engendered, cultivated and manufactured” (Alvesson and Willmott 2008:623).

Thus, contemporary workplaces remain arenas of intense contestation of diverse issues and interests including issues of self-identities within the complex social processes of ambiguities around which contradictory dimensions of workplace struggles are manifested (Alvesson and Willmott 2008). It is equally in this complex manifold dimension of workplace struggle that “struggle for securing a self, remains a continuous and more problematic for self-conscious identity construction for employees” (Casey 1995; Knights and Murray 1994 cited in Alvesson and Willmott 2002:623). Identity “construction” as achieved through managerial discourses has become locus of understanding and reference points for employees to be more “creative”,

“innovative” and decisive in the context of organisational repositioning. However, additional “flexibility” and “fluidity” are presented as forms of opportunities and “empowerment” in this social process, in which “employees can re-arrange their work schedules and work practices” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:624) in form of team-work, for instance.

Indeed as Axford (1995 cited in Alvesson and Willmott 2003:624) observes, “identity is capable of being relevant in several ways, because it is grounded in nothing more compelling than the legitimisation of differences, rather than in institutional scripts”, which, therefore, produces shifts in meaning, interpretation and constructions for the workers. For instance, in the context of work process in NNPC, the discourse of flexibility, self-autonomy, and skill-mix in team-work practices, identified as “legitimation of plurality” of purpose are “promoted as seductive means of engineering consent and commitment to corporate goals, such that the sense of participation and empowerment disguises the insidious dimensions of producing subjective employees” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:624). In the emerging context of workplace managerial practices in NNPC, “flexible construction” and re-construction of identity as supposedly given to the workers remain on the agenda of managerial control strategies. Such identity re-construction may, therefore, involve a “processing and re-processing of subjectivity”(Alvesson and Willmott 2003:624) aimed at developing a corporate employee that is not only more “malleable” but also more flexible for activities and work process with fluid “subjective orientations” within self-managing, multi-functional work groups or teams of the corporation.

Though occasionally, the assumed discourse of “increased flexibility” and “multi-skilling” and other forms of managerial practices may pre-dispose workers to want to challenge certain “established hierarchies and practices”, thereby fostering some elements of “micro-emancipation”, however the very project of identity formation anchored in the managerial practice “may render employees more vulnerable to the appeal of corporate identifications and less inclined to engage in resistance” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:624). While indeed the managerial control strategies for shaping and constructing identities for workers are far-reaching, analysts have made instructive observations that explain limit of universal applications of self-identity construction through managerial regulations (Gray 1999, Warhurst and Thompson 1998). In other words, just like a need for contextualising the analysis of other labour process issues, “self-identity” of workers and its “vulnerability” to managerial regulatory mechanisms

are also to be context-based, influenced by the prevailing discourse of the organisation. This observation is noted by Alvesson and Willmott (2002:624) that “contemporary developments within the workplace make processes of constructing and securing identity an increasingly relevant focus for conceptual and empirical analysis.” Identity construction and its regulation are “shaped” and embedded within particular institutional and micro-social process of the workplace relations. And in the context of work activities for improved performance, “training and induction programmes tied with promotion procedures are designed and regulated in such a manner that they have implications for constructing and reconstructing identity”(Alvesson and Willmott 2002:625).

In particular, in workplaces with overwhelming orientation of “family ideology” like the NNPC, they become “significant sources of identification for individuals” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:625) with workers imbibing and demonstrating the core values and normative characteristics of the corporation.

### **3 “Identity-Work” in Context: Learning and Workers Interests-Articulation in the NNPC.**

As noted earlier, managerial discourses and practices surrounding managerial innovative in the work process and managerial practices, promote in workers the expected passion, soul and charismas (Alvesson and Willmott 2002) needed by the corporation to achieve these objectives. The “ferment” on the part of the management to continue to enlist the commitment and interest of the workers are often exemplified through the process of training and corporate educational programmes to shape the identity orientation of the workers.

In this section of the Paper, the study takes a critical empirical evaluation of NNPCs Leadership and Management Development Programmes. Drawing on the conceptual approaches described above, the Paper evaluates the connection between the management’s development programmes and “identity construction” of “high-potential” employees in the corporation. It takes a critical evaluation of what the managerial regulatory discourses and practices surrounding the training programme have made of the “participants” who are categorised, from management perspectives as “would-be-managers”, in terms of identity formation, and experiences.

As part of its corporate development and re-positioning processes, NNPC introduced the Chief Officers' and Management Development Programme (COMDP), designed for the Senior Officers of the corporation. It was designed and introduced to serve as catalyst for capacities building to enable the corporation actualize its corporate objectives of improved performance in the oil industry. As contained in the corporate training and development document; the objectives of the (COMDP) were to “develop leaders towards becoming excellent and professional versatile leaders; to adequately prepare trainees (participants) for management positions and responsibilities, and therefore provide a pool of virile leaders and managers sound in the knowledge of the oil and gas industry from which the corporation can draw in pursuit of its business goals” (NNPC, Group Learning Dept.2018). For NNPC to become competitive in the oil industry, it was implied, based on the content of these objectives, which it would have to keep renewing its strategy as well as its workforce learning and training in form of COMDP. This is, therefore, seen and conceptualised as mechanisms and strategy for the deployment of skills and competence for improved organisational performance.

Since its introduction, “the corporation has trained over of 3,000 Chief Officers (Snr Officers) in several batches of the programme” (Group Learning Department). At NNPC, staff promoted to the Snr Officers Cadre, are enlisted to attend the Chief Officers' and Management Development Course (COMDP), within two to three years of promotion. In the statement of the Group General Manager, (HR) of the corporation, he declared “this programme has become a key success factor in our quest for human capital development in NNPC” (Group Learning Department).

The Leadership Development framework which had also been designed as significant component of Chief Officers' training was also conceptualized and defined as “systematic process of building leadership and management capabilities, required of a successful leader within the corporation, at all levels” (GM, Group Learning Department). The GM remarked further on the importance of the training programmes “as we transit as a corporation into a true world class oil and gas company, we reflect on the strategic aspirations of the corporation, and we are committed to growing competent leaders at all levels who are able to harness the energies and talents available within the corporation for breakthrough performance, COMDP therefore would continue to play a major role in the achievement of our aspirations and mandate in the oil and gas

industry.” COMDP has become an in-house training programme that develops and trains Chief Officers transiting to the management Cadre.

NNPCs corporate values and normative expectations encapsulated in COMD were therefore contained in the various statements of the Group General Manager (HR) and the GM (GLD), which included developing appropriate leadership and managerial orientation/identity needed to transform the corporation. Consequently, the programme had been broadened to achieve the goal of building cross-functional knowledge for the participants. At NNPC, programme participants cut across the five functional areas of the corporation; Operations, Maintenance, Quality Control, Administration and Safety and Security. COMDP was among the training programmes run by NNPC, and was designed to “sharpen the leadership, managerial and communicative skills of Chief Officers transiting to managerial cadre (Group Learning Department). As noted by the GM (Group Learning Department), “this is very timely now, that the corporation is transforming and re-strategizing towards becoming a profit-making company.” Already, over 3000 officers, some of whom were among the present top managers of the corporation had undergone the training programme. Thus, in the GM’s assessment of the programme so far “these officers who have benefited from the programme have become well-equipped to handle managerial responsibilities in the new NNPC”.

Chief Officers’ Management Development (COMPD) at NNPC is run in batches (classes), and up to date, 35 classes comprising a total of 3000 participants. For each of the classes, the programme was run for eight weeks, through which “participants are exposed to different leadership and management behaviours and concepts” (GM, Group Learning Department). Apart from writing a standard dissertation on a self-identified problem that relates to their job schedule, the participants are also expected to make flexible recommendations on management policies to management for subsequent implementation. Also, as part of the training exercise, a six-day field trip is incorporated; designed for the course participants to visit various NNPC installations and subsidiaries, “this is to expose them to NNPC operational facilities and activities, especially for those who have not had the opportunity of visiting other NNPC facilities and operations”(GM, Group Learning Department). At the end of the training programme, the participants are then appraised generally on the programme and on “effective presentation”.

The imperative of transformation tied with the training programmes was to be demonstrated through the retention, motivation and development of high-performing leaders that would facilitate “succession planning” and challenge current management’s business and production processes. The Senior Officers (participants) were therefore expected to imbibe leadership potential – defined as ideals, values and normative roles that are in congruence with the vision statement of the corporation. Through this, they demonstrated the right identity for promotion to senior management positions. Through professional challenges, visibility, opportunities and right identity-construct, participants were to contribute to improved performance of the corporation.

Various forms of program-contents and presentations reinforce the processes of the programme in identity-construction for the participants. Participants who have climbed up their work career to the senior positions cadre have the potential of being selected for the programme. From various contents delivery programs in the corporation, identity-constructs emerged on which the normative expectations and effective performance also rested. The identity-regulation and formation that emerged from this thus became the central tendency in shaping the participants’ desired behaviours and experiences in the context of the work process, and leadership roles expected of them in the corporation.

At NNPC, programme participants’ account of their experiences and orientation, taken all together, depict an identity of a dedicated and committed crop of would-be managers with promising careers in the corporation, with level of loyalty, and with an orientation to progress in their career within the corporation. Through their narratives, a sense of deep identification emerges with a considerable evidence of commitment to the goals of the corporation, conceptualised, as a “paternalistic benevolent” provider of opportunities for growth and development. Emerging from the management’s learning and development programmes are two types of identity construction, one; “identity-work” constructed through anxiety and competition, but in which excellent performance is recognised and honoured. The outcome of such competition and excellent performance are managerial competences that promote alignment with goals of the corporation.

It is to be noted that the Management Learning and Development programme at NNPC entails excellent performance as outcomes of the series of tests and examinations the participants have

to go through. The structured content of the programme involving thesis writing (projects), leadership tests, and evaluations, entail that the participants must excel with good grades. In addition, awards and prizes that are attached with excellent performance of participants' indicate the seriousness and commitment attached to the programme and its outcome on them. Thus, like a training programme with its own stress and pressures, the participants go through all in order to produce the appropriate attributes needed for appropriate performance on the job.

However, in their various narratives and sense-making of managerial learning programs, there was a "Webberian interpretation" of an organisation that provides security, based on paternalistic attachment between the organisation and the employees. "The training is enough to build and prepare one within and outside the corporation" that is, providing life-long learning that could still be useful for life after retirement, "so we are grateful to the management of NNPC...it is one of the best things that every staff should be looking forward to," (batch (class) 047, of NNPC's Leadership and COMDP. This participant said further, "I will start by thanking God for the opportunity, and the management of NNPC, especially our GM who has encouraged me in all ramifications, I am also proud to say that I'm dedicating the prize to my division, because the division made me what I am today."

In their narratives of their experiences of the programme, it is evident and shown that the learning and development programmes of COMDP at NNPC aim to shape identity, and influence the participants not only normatively towards the corporation, but also in what the corporation expects of them with such degree of purposefulness and commitment.

This evaluation has focused on the meanings which the participants gave of their learning experiences as shown in their own narratives and "stories", using Collinson's (2003) two types of selves; "conformist" and "dramaturgical". The narratives of the participants revealed the "micro-social process" encapsulated in normative expectation that shaped their identity and experiences. The micro-social processes involved in the discourse of the learning context, that is, the expectations and the desires of the participants; constructed the desired identity in terms of themselves and the management. They therefore enacted and reproduced this identity in fulfilment of their own normative expectations and that of the corporation. With their own agentic responses embedded and shaped by the training discourse practices, their identity

enactment was “interactively related” and “co-constructed” in the management discursive practices of the training programme.

Thus, clearly demonstrated were the agentic attitudes and identity work of the “would-be managers” and “leaders of tomorrow” at NNPC”. Revealing attitudes of conformity were found in their own accounts and narratives. The identity formations of the learning participants were clearly consistent with the managerial assumptions of them as “would-be managers” of the corporation. Therefore, it became clear that their career progress as managers in the corporation became “closer to be loyal and committed corporate citizen” (Gagnon 2008:384). This type of identity-construction conforms to what Gagnon (2008:384) referred to as “work-on-self”, consisting of practices implying a transformation in “self” to one that complies with the required identity” by the corporation. However, in this very process of identity enactment, the transformed personality still enacted “required self”, which is an “outward expression of conformity” (Gagnon 2008:384) to that required by the corporation for its members.

As shown in the narratives of the participants, they actually demonstrated a “conforming self”; remarks and narratives of the participants demonstrating their experiences of the training programmes, and acceptance of the discourses and the practices in order to become accepted member of the Senior Officers and Management team of the corporation. It is a demonstration of identity constructs both in terms of orientation, demeanour and daily practices at the workplace in order to “prove” self as committed member of the management team. In such identity enactment and self-construct, use of “program discourse” reflecting the very culture of the corporation was daily used to describe themselves in the eyes of other colleagues, one’s own behaviour and carriage, in satisfying the preferences of the Management. Shown in the narratives and accounts of the participants had been the keen desire to improve self not only for the purpose of career progress in the corporation, but indeed one’s life after the working careers. Such “paternal orientation” of the participants further reinforced the hold of the corporation’s identity management discourses on the workforce, especially those of the managerial cadre.

In NNPC, evidence of “conformity” has shown the outcome of the training programme in constructing the identity of the participant. Evidence of praises and exhortation of personal and career growth came out of their narratives. The identity construct is that of “self” as corporate

citizen which is largely shaped by their perception of the training programme as benefiting and “careerism fitting” into the needs of the ‘would be’ managers to function effectively as “new” leaders of the corporation. Behavioural traits of “managers of tomorrow” for the corporation showed clear evidence of “dramaturgy” in identity, demonstration of managerial traits and sound corporate attitudes and actions.

Building on Collinson’s (2003) framework of conformist as analytical tool, the evaluation of participants experience and narrative of NNPC’s Management Development Programme influenced by the discourse practices and contexts of the training resulted in high level of conforming attitude and orientations in the Senior Officers who had been participating in the programme. Identification with the corporation of this cohort of employees was constructed on those bases. The micro-social process of conforming attitude induced by management “intellectual technology” of the training package led to the construction and reconstruction of “corporate citizen’s” orientation.

As noted by Gagnon (2008:388), in the attempt of management’s learning programmes to “homogenize” identity, its regulations are operated at two levels; its “discursive, and inter-subjective dimensions”. The two operate in interpenetration with the “discursive” dimension being more “subtle and covert” in shaping the identity of the participants. Also, the workings of the two dimensions show the valence of “symbolic and material context and processes of workplace identity production,” (Gagnon 2008:389). Indeed, the manifestation of managerial identity construction mechanisms could be overt and covert with degree of “intensity” determined by the potency of the discursive practices behind the management learning programmes. For instance, conforming identity could be “confessional and introspective desire” (Gagnon 2008:389) on the part of the participants to demonstrate attitudes that are, in line with the management’s normative expectation. It also involves expressing opinions that “justify aims and principles behind management’s training programme” (Gagnon 2008:389). However, as argued by Gagnon (2008), discursive practices of management’s training programme and intents on the subjects should not be construed as “strait-jacket trajectory” in the process of identity construction. Like any other issue within the understanding of labour process analysis, and managerial control strategies, resistance is immanent and ingrained. More so, in a context of relative presence of material insecurity within the corporation, a more covert ability to “resist the

symbolic and inter-subjective pressures of discursive practices and expectation of the training programme may be observed” (Gagnon 2008:389).

#### **4. Discussion**

In evaluating the “micro-social process” of management learning (regulating) programme through which identity is constructed by the Senior Staff at NNPC who had participated in the programme, evidence and findings gave strong weight to Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) model, and Collinson’s (2003) “conformity selves.” Participant’s responses and experiences of training programme demonstrated clearly how conforming identity was enacted in justifying the objectives and goals of the training programmes. However, and in contrast to other studies on identity-construction; for example, Ibara’s (1999) “socialization thesis” of career transition “that tend to limit consideration of insecurity” (cited in Gagnon 2008:389). Identity work is indeed constrained by “structural and material insecurity as well as symbolic insecurity embedded in the particular context of the workplace” (Gagnon 2008:390). There is, therefore, evidence of not only a broader asymmetrical power relation in the corporation, but also the covert resistance to the “totalising assumptions” of management’s training programmes on the participants. In other words, construction of identity and possibility of resistance which material or symbolic insecurity may engender are “fused in different and multiple ways” (Gagnon 2008:390) thereby bringing different forms of conforming practices and resistance, located in the particular context of the workplace. Workers’ identity construction shaped by the “subjectivity” and “insecurity” in the context of a workplace will reveal multiple forms and dimensions of workers’ experiences and orientation to management identity construction devices,

The learning contents are designed in such a way for the participants to develop a “self” that makes them develop a sense of autonomy, self-direction and alignment in skills for their own career progression and as “disciplined workers” in the corporation. Demonstrating this type of disciplined worker orientation, a participant in Class 047 of Chief Officers’ Management Development programme at NNPC remarked, “we can only show appreciation to management for the huge resources sunk into the programme by ensuring that we maintain a common line of alignment with the strategic business objectives of the corporation” (Participant, Class 047 COMDP).

In the enactment of self within the “intellectual technology” of self-development, the “socialisation process” is expected to align the individual participant in an “action-network” process with the goals and objectives of the corporation. In this way, participants and the corporation in the specific locale social-process of the NNPC are “brought together in approximate symbiotic relations” (Edwards, 2003:2).

However, such actor-network relations are not unmediated. They are invested with multiple and shifting meanings, tensions and ambiguities. Within the “disciplinary-identity” construction process of the learning programme, expected attributes such as flexibility, autonomy and self-direction “become ontological conditions for successful participation”(Edwards 2003:5) as corporate citizen of the corporation. There is, therefore, a “re-ordering” of agentic role through which participants work on themselves in “conducting their conduct” in the corporation. In this regard, participants are expected to cultivate and mobilize “ethos” of the corporation in shaping their worth and values to the corporation. These expectant values and orientations are aptly demonstrated by the participants of the Chief Officer Training programme at NNPC. Their experiences and responses to the learning programme were shown in that direction. In their “conduct of conduct” shaped through the gaze of intellectual technology of management’s learning programme, the middle-level managers and senior officers were exposed to ethos, and norms in which taking responsibility and challenges for the success of the corporation became part of the individual “biographical formation” in the corporation. Here, as observed by du Gay (1996; Rose 1998 in Edwards 2003:6) “the entire discourse on jobs and careers are shaped and conducted round, not only of economy man; an enterprising individual but also work process self-identity with subjective attachment.”

In its prescriptive constructs, the discourse of management learning programme at NNPC is deepening and multi-dimensional, serving as reference point for the would-be-manager to build himself up as a “new” corporate man who has to “be ceaseless” in his instrumental calculations in being relevant to the corporation, and also investing in himself through “training, retraining, skilling and re-skilling, enhancement of credentials and preparation for a life of continuous socio-economic capitalisation of the self”, (Rose, 1999 in Edwards 2003:7). Through this identity construct, central values and norms of the success of the corporation are imbibed and rehashed, and around which “coalitions” for the sustenance of the corporation are mobilized

(Edwards 2003). Participants and would-be managers' identity are mobilized around these central themes, "intermeshed" in producing the corporate identity of the learners.

In teasing Edward (2003) line of argument further, and drawing on Foulcault's (1985), and Rose's (1996) conceptual approach to learning and action-network (ANT), a qualifying note is made for researchers not to assume a "generalising and totalising" tendency of this model. Sounding this note of warning, Edwards, (2003:7) notes "participant's desire to mobilize self, and in acting on management's scripts does not necessarily manifest its straightforward in social practices, which tend to be messier than what the discourse may prescribe." Our evaluation of participants' narratives and responses to discourse attached to management training programme at NNPC have shown multi-dimensional levels; indicating at one level the need on the part of the participant to adopt to managerial learning expectations and requirements in order to "fit" into the corporation, and at another level have shown insecurity and anxiety embedded in the material existence of the corporation. This is more immanent in the context of uncertainties and competitive environment in which the corporation has had to operate in recent years. The uncertainty and expectations which this has indicated for the issues of employability and job security at one level also show their identity-construct and their agentic response to managerial learning programme. This, therefore, indicates that identity enactment of training programme is not a "taken for granted" outcome. It is shifting and multi-dimensional and ambiguous in response to the "micro-social health" of the corporation. How the fluidity of the patterns, in certain circumstances, act in coherence or contradiction, of managerial discourse and practices are context-determined.

In other words, participant's responses and experiences become nuanced within the social process and dense-networks that patterned his needs and expectations both inside the workplace and outside. In other words, in the realities of social process of workplace relations, there is a "double-position" in which the participant is positioned; both a "subjectivized individual" and on the other hand in his own agentic power and ability. Participation of the would-be-managers in work related activities after learning programme is influenced by his agentic power to "constitute and reconstitute" his identity reflexively, thereby transforming the patterns of his network relations in the performance of his work roles. These network-relations in the performance of jobs, based on "newly" acquired skill and knowledge are not "for given". They are "negotiated"

and “contested” network social relations between workplace expectations and the individual “subjective orientation”. This “inter-subjectivity” with the workplace roles and performance, and non-workplace roles are mutually embedded by overlapping and of continuous process.

Indeed, as observed by Billett et al (2005), it is in this overlapping and continuous process that the learner’s participants are caught up in the contradictory concern of what value is in their newly acquired competency and to what extent can it support them for the rest of their working life. For instance, as “maturation processes” of working life catch up with them, they are concerned with how relevant they could still be in the corporation. And in order to maintain a balance of their “sense and worth” in the corporation, they need to “engage agentially with their working life” (Billet et al 2005:1), and the challenges it brings to them. Part of the challenges the participants may face is how to maintain a healthy balance between a perceived and likely “redundancy of their existing expertise” (Billet 2005:1), as this may have become obsolete in their performance of work. The concern may also be on; how to bring in new “competency and capabilities” as emerging challenges of work processes demand. Their “agentic balance” and “subjectivity” have to maintain in congruence with their “mobilization, engagement and intentionality” (Billet et al 2005:1), otherwise there could be a threat to their perception of self-worth and identity in the workplace. As noted further by Billett et al (2005), what drives the motivation and intention to learn within the organisation are also mediated by the social processes of the organisation itself. Located within this mediation processes, in shaping the self and self-identity, are the measures of personal agency brought in by participants. The agentic involvement of the participant helps to evaluate not only his competence, but also his continuous relevance and worth within the corporation.

Indeed, while the emerging challenges of demands in the work process may involve making decisions on need to “up-grade competence” on the part of the participants in the face of “erosions of existing knowledge and need to re-establish their competences” (Billet 2005:3), such decisions are reflectively made in the circumstances of their career position in the corporation.

From empirical evaluations, selection and participation in NNPC’s Chief Officers’ Management Development Programme and the Leadership Development are primarily meant for the Officers

promoted to the Seniors Officers Cadre. Many of the nominated Officers that participated in the various editions of the programme, and who were grouped into Classes 045, 046 and 047 of the programme have, on average, come close to age 45-55. For many of the Officers who are in the last decade of their career in the corporation, the implications are multi-dimensional requiring “critical” and “reflexive thinking” on their future relevance and career growth in the NNPC. Indeed, some of these reflections would have to do with concern on their “career plateauing” in the corporation. Promotion prospects, competency relevance and, even greater concern would have to do with the implications or relevance of their “skills” in retirement. Thus, apart from being able to reflect on their worth to the corporation in terms of competence and contribution, as they are reaching their “career plateaus”, the Senior Officers who constituted the cohort of the learning group were also concerned with what became of them after retirement. Also the agentic exercise and application in their reflective thinking and perception, was equally influenced by the corporation being “invitational”, or being seen as “contested environment” where they see support or lack of it, in their maturation process in the corporation (Billet 2005).

Further, in moment of imminent unemployment such as situations of job insecurity and redundancy, it is their ability to mobilize personal agency, (Festener et al 2004), and personal epistemology Smith (2004 cited in Billet 2005:6), that “provide the ability to maintain positive self-identification with self and the organisation.” As noted by Billett (2005:6) when workers are faced with “complex and contradictory” mix that facilitate or inhibit their self-identity in the workplace, it is their ability to positively engage agentic resources in positioning themselves against all odds.

For participants of the COMDP, therefore, as maturation processes both in terms of career and age catch up with them in the corporation, it is their agentic resource both in terms of social processes of relations and practices they need to mobilize in order to maintain the delicate balance which otherwise might threaten their “self” and “self-perception” of the corporation. It is their “critical reflection in biography and self-epistemic” that determine how they situate themselves in the corporation as they get more matured,” (Van Woerkom, 2003, cited in Billett 2005:6). Thus in the prevailing circumstances of the corporation, and in which they found themselves they could be more concerned with the relevance of the corporation in shaping their

identity through learning and skill\knowledge building, or on the other hand could be more concerned with their “selves-worth” to themselves after retirement.

While engaging with the shifting and ambivalence circumstances of themselves and the corporation, the would-be-managers will ,therefore, from their agentic point of view have to be “purposeful and critical” for them to maintain the needed balance and self-identity. As remarked by Patrickson and Ranzjin (2004 in Billett 2005:6), it is the “individual’s gaze and subjectivities”, shaped by the social processes of work and non-workplace elements that construct and remake them in their maturation process.” To Billett (2005:7), therefore, “older workers’ agency and intentionality stands as key elements” in moderating positively or negatively the ageing and career maturation process in the “contested” and “differentiated levels” of the corporation. Also, it is this agentic response that sustains, in particular their “competency through processes of negotiating self, purposes and self-worth in their working life” (Billett et al 2005:7). However, and no matter how this self-worth and purposes are shaped by agentic responses, they are still “vulnerable” to the multiple and shifting circumstances of workplace and non-workplace social processes. In other words, the “messiness of everyday” work life of the workers, and indeed the emerging dimensions of modern workplaces have made the “rationalistic” conceptualisation of agentic responses of workers in their epistemic calculations unrealistic, (Billett: 2005). Apprehensions do indeed exist among the older workers who were participants of the “Workplace Learning” at NNPC. If it is appreciated that the very process of agentic responses are “embedded in the frame of reference of individual’s internalisation”(Billett 2005:7) or being “socialised” in the social process and relations of workplace, such agentic formation and socialisation are still shaped by the power dynamics of the labour process. The agentic responses and subjectivity are “both socially and contextually embedded, and the process is ever political and ideologically shaped” (Kemmis 1985 in Billett 2005:7).

## **5. Conclusion**

Attempts have been made in this Paper to show that in a context of organisational transformation and learning programs, there would exist a process of “negotiation” and “renegotiation” of individual’ workers’ orientation as a way of coping with the challenges, and “balancing organisational and individual needs” (Newell and Dopson 1996:9). Diverse analytical models

have been deployed to evaluate the on-going perceptions and concerns of middle-level managers in the Corporation in articulating their interests and identity constructions in relation to learning programmes put in place by the managements. Of particular relevance here, therefore, are the experiences and orientation of middle-level managers to career management, skills development strategies and how they are able to construct their identity and agentic response around all these managerial initiatives. Constituting part of this feeling and in response to their situation is an experience of dissonance, and being “muddled” in the “middle” of their career in the corporation.

At NNPC, the consequence of managerial practices has been an emergence of a new type of subjectivity; one that has closely identified with the corporate values and is not overtly disposed towards resistance or dissent. While workers consent at NNPC continues to be an outcome of managerial practices, the paper examined its implications. The paper seeks to explain the effects of managerial control mechanisms in shaping workers’ experience and identity. However, the paper shows that while workers remain susceptible to these forms of managerial influence, an erasure or closure of oppositions or recalcitrance will not adequately account for workers’ identity-formation.

While managerial practices remain significant, workers inhabit domains that are ‘unmanaged’ and ‘unmanageable’ where ‘resistance’ and ‘misbehaviour’ reside. Without a conceptual and empirical interrogation, evidence of normative and mutual benefits of managerial practices or a submissive image of workers will produce images of workers that obscure their covert opposition and resistance. Workers ‘collude’ with the ‘hubris’ of management in order to invert and subvert managerial practices and intentions. Through theoretical reconceptualization, the paper demonstrates the specific dimensions of these inversions and subversions. The paper therefore seeks to re-insert “worker-agency” back into the analysis of power-relations in the workplace; agency that is not overtly under the absolute grip of managerial control, but with a multiplicity of identities and multilevel manifestations.

#### **COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist. The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly use products in our area of research and country. There is absolutely no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

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