

Riese, J. (2005): Salutogenesis in Social Systems: Self, Identity, and Robustness of the Organization. In: Proceedings of the European Academy of Management Conference, EURAM 2005, Munich.

***Title: Salutogenesis in Social Systems: Self, Identity, and Robustness of the Organization***

***Short running title: Salutogenesis in Social Systems***

***Name of track: Responsible Management as Identity in Practice***

***To be reviewed as 'work-in-progress paper'***

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**Keywords: Salutogenesis, Self, Adaptation, Robustness**

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to Davide Ravasi and two anonymous reviewers who provided thoughtful comments that greatly assisted in the development of this paper and its preparation for the EURAM conference 2005. Thank you!

This research is being funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as part of the Collaborative Research Centre 637 “Autonomous Cooperating Logistic Processes – A Paradigm Shift and its Limitations” ([www.sfb637.uni-bremen.de](http://www.sfb637.uni-bremen.de)).

## Context

This research assumes that management science can learn valuable lessons from a perspective that treats organizations as social, complex, open, adaptive and autopoietic<sup>1</sup> systems<sup>2</sup>. These

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<sup>1</sup>Autopoiesis refers to the characteristic feature that a system's unity and organizational structure is maintained and constantly reproduced through its own operations. The generation of its own organization is thus a characteristic task of the system that requires constant activity. This is for example true for the human organism. [Simon, 2004; Müller-Christ, 2001; Bossel, 1998]

<sup>2</sup>A system is an entity consisting of parts connected with each other through relations; the system is the interdependency of the parts. The system's structure is the order in which the parts form the entity. [Liening,

systems are embedded in suprasystems like societies and contain subsystems like individuals. From these supra- and subsystems, organizations are continuously 'bombed' with information. [Antonovsky, 1997]

Taking this systemic perspective, one has to accept that there will rarely be such a state as 'equilibrium'. Rather, one has to assume a dynamic view, in which complex relations between entities under continuous change and facing uncertainty from suites of synergistic stresses and shocks are emphasized. In the world of self-organizing systems, there are multiple ways of dealing with the complexity a system is confronted with, and multiple possible outcomes of management. [ICSU, 2002]

Meanwhile, in disciplines dealing with human health, a similar view has been found to have its attractions. Hence the model of salutogenesis suggested by Aaron Antonovsky, a medical sociologist who, fascinated by the fact that survivors of Nazi concentration camps had managed to build their lives from scratch, wanted to find out how people manage stress and stay well despite harmful experiences [Franke, 1997a].

Antonovsky essentially viewed humans as open and autopoietic systems. He pointed out that stressor life events are omnipresent for most of us, yet many people manage to cope with the resulting tension and stay quite healthy. He thus rejected the idea that the ultimate medical goal should be 'equilibrium' or homeostasis, and identified the question of the origin of health (salutogenesis) rather than the question of the origin of disease (pathogenesis) as the most significant one. [Antonovsky, 1997]

Moreover, Antonovsky thought himself to be looking for an answer to a question that is, in fact, one of the main questions of all science: the issue of order emerging out of chaos. In the face of the diverse powers working towards increased entropy, how to explain the emergence of order in systems, or orderly systems? [Antonovsky, 1997]

It seems that answers to that question can be found in mechanisms and factors that help systems to 'make sense of their world', that is, to filter the stimuli from their environment, process information contained in them, and communicate both internally and externally. Antonovsky's theory is a partial explanation of the circumstances under which individuals may successfully make sense of their world. The author of this paper hopes that his ideas will be fruitful for social systems as well.

## **Motivation**

The motivation of this research is to come closer to an answer to the question: What makes social systems like organizations more robust and responsible? Robustness, in this paper, refers to the ability of the system to regulate, organize, and replicate itself in such a way that its vital functions (one might say, its orderly processes) are maintained even under the pressure of internal or external disturbances, changes in internal structure or external environment, or conflicting demands [Santa Fe Institute, 2001; ICSU, 2002]. Robustness also refers to the strengths or weaknesses of the system's strategic options; the options available to the system serve as a strategy for how to respond to insults [Jen, 2001].

The organization and the systems it is connected to are interdependent. An organization that cannot deal with other systems' demands, cannot take into account their entelechy and their reactions to its own actions, or destroys other systems' motivation or capability to cooperate, simply will not survive. [Müller-Christ & Hülsmann, 2003] This is a somewhat reformulated variant of the idea expressed by Albert and Whetten:

“...[T]he greater the discrepancy between the way the organization views itself and the way outsiders view it [...], the more the 'health' of the organization will be impaired (i.e., lowered effectiveness[...]). When organizational members possess a view of the organization's goals, mission, and values, that differs radically from views held by outsiders [...], the organization will have difficulty generating the political and resource support necessary to guarantee its survival [...].“ [Albert & Whetten, 2004:94]

In other words, if communication between system and environment is dysfunctional, the system will not be able to function properly in its environment. One step further leads to the hypothesis (to be further discussed below) that in the long run, responsible action of the system is action for robustness, effectiveness and functionality of the system. Socially irresponsible practices will reduce the number of a system's strategic options. They destroy the environment's motivation and capability to cooperate.

## **Objective of the Paper and Potential Usefulness of the Proposed Theoretical Framework**

The objective of the paper is to outline a theory of the salutogenesis of social systems. It will be shown that Self and Identity underlie the study of robustness in social systems [Jen, 2001], and thus are among the vital elements of such a theory.

The potential usefulness of the aspired theory lies in the fact that it can be considered as a true 'framework', rather than just another 'managerial approach'. [Faltermaier, 2002] Within its frame, answers to questions like those asked in the call for papers to this track may be found. How do collective self-perceptions in systems shape their responses to issues – and how can those responses be made more intelligent, empathic, effective and understanding? What are the relationships between 'what we do' and 'who we think we are' (this, according to the conceptualization that will be laid out in this paper, being the distinction between Identity and Self – read on to be enlightened)? How can organizations increase their capacity to manage alignment between external beliefs and internal aspirations? What if environmental changes question the very being of the organization? Finally, as a culmination point of these questions: How does a socially responsible, robust organization come about?

## **Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence**

Antonovsky suggested to think of health and disease as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Any person will be in a certain state between health and disease at any given time, i.e. she will be healthy up to a certain degree. Confrontation with a stressor life event will result in tension the person has to cope with. Whether the result of the process of coping will have pathological, neutral or even strengthening consequences for the person's state of health depends on the quality of the coping. That said, the question must be: What are the requirements that allow someone to deal with stressor life events in such a way that the person moves towards the positive end of the health ease/ dis-ease continuum? [Antonovsky, 1997; Müller-Christ, 2004]

Antonovsky defined the so-called Sense of Coherence as main determinant for the position a person will have on the health ease/ dis-ease continuum and for her ability to move towards the health-ease end of the continuum. The Sense of Coherence is a personal dispositional orientation which consists of the three components comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness.

Comprehensibility refers to the extent to which one perceives internal and external stimuli to be understandable, i.e. clear and structured information that can be put into a useful context, and not chaotic, unexplainable random noise. Manageability refers to the extent to which one perceives oneself to have at one's disposal adequate resources to meet the demands posed by the stimuli. Finally, meaningfulness represents the motivational element, the extent to which one perceives life to be meaningful not just in a cognitive, but also in an emotional sense. A person with a high degree of meaningfulness will invest energy into processes of coping or, more generally speaking, her activities because she feels it is worthwhile. The Sense of Coherence is thus

*a global orientation which expresses the extent to which one has a certain, lasting and dynamic feeling of trust that 1. the stimuli one perceives will be structured, predictable, and explicable; 2. one will have the resources to meet these stimuli's demands; 3. these demands will be challenges worth the effort.*<sup>3</sup> [Author's translation, drawing on Antonovsky, 1997; Abel & Kolip & Wydler, 2002; Franke, 1997b]

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<sup>3</sup>Original quote: '... a global orientation, that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic, feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonable be expected'. Antonovsky, 1987, as



A person with a strong Sense of Coherence will be able to cope with stressor life events and the resulting tension better than a person with a rather weaker Sense of Coherence. She will, among other things, identify a lesser number of stimuli as stressor events, and regard with greater clarity those stimuli she has identified to be stressor events with potentially negative consequences. Her strong Sense of Coherence creates a favourable initial position from which she can flexibly choose appropriate coping strategies. (Note that the Sense of Coherence is not itself a specific coping strategy.) She will also be better able to provoke and use feedback and to correct strategies that have turned out to be suboptimal. [Antonovsky, 1997]

The Sense of Coherence is thus an important determinant of health. If it is weak, and coping with tension inadequate, the organism exposed to ongoing tension will enter a state of stress and be damaged. [Antonovsky, 1997]

The Sense of Coherence today is regarded by many to be one of the most interesting and valid constructs in its field. It is consistent, and as it does not reflect a particular coping style, it is also a superordinate construct.<sup>4</sup> [Franke, 1997b] It does overlap, or relate, with other constructs. Antonovsky regarded approaches like Bandura's *self-efficacy*, Rotter's *locus of*

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quoted in Sack & Lamprecht, 1998. Meaningfulness plays a particularly important role within the concept. Without it, high values for comprehensibility and manageability will probably not bring about strong health-protective effects. Also, meaningfulness seems to be the factor that can most effectively be measured on its own, while different studies point to the probability that what underlies the Sense of Coherence is really a general factor, not three independent ones; a result that did not surprise Antonovsky. [Sack & Lamprecht 1998; Franke, 1997b]

<sup>4</sup>Criticism points to the fact that the Sense of Coherence exhibits a very strong negative correlation with fear and depression, so that the construct or the means of testing it might need to be revised in such a way as to make sure it is not really an instrument to test the absence of these. [Geyer, 2002; Sack & Lamprecht 1998] Open questions regarding its differential validity, for example with respect to the development of the Sense of Coherence in early life and possibilities of strengthening it e.g through psychotherapy, or gender differences in Sense of Coherence values, do exist. To me as a non-psychologist it seems that salutogenic theory is not yet fully developed, and the function of the Sense of Coherence within it not yet completely clear either. For critical analysis of the construct see Geyer, 1997 and 2002; Franke, 1997b; Sack & Lamprecht 1998; Rimann & Udris 1998; Abel & Kolip & Wydler 2002.

*control*, or Kobasa's *hardiness* as complementary, salutogenic constructs that would help to come closer to the same goal (which he thought to be inherently unachievable). They try to explain how people manage stress and stay well by identifying general factors that are more than situation-specific ways of reacting and coping. [Antonovsky, 1991; Franke, 1997b] Also, they all lend themselves to collectives. Antonovsky suggested to integrate these constructs in a scaffold built in terms of systems theory with information processing as its core idea, a point at which I would like to refer back to the introduction to this paper. [Antonovsky, 1991]

However, there are important differences. Concepts like self-efficacy or hardiness build on the conviction that one can manage demands through one's own action and competencies. Antonovsky placed emphasis on that a Sense of Coherence can also build on the conviction that resources necessary to cope with stressors will be attainable somewhere outside the domain of control of the person in question. He thought the emphasis on internal control to be a characteristic of Western civilization, and wanted to include salutogenic effects of belief in God, sense of belonging in a group or similar in his theory. [Antonovsky, 1991 and 1993; Schüffel et al, 1998; Sack & Lamprecht, 1998] Moreover, Antonovsky strived to make his concept culturally independent (however, it is not yet certain whether this was really achieved). [Antonovsky, 1991 and 1993 ; Franke, 1997b; Sack & Lamprecht, 1998] The Sense of Coherence, despite its imperfections, is a self-contained construct with a higher degree of abstraction than others. [Franke, 1997b; Sack & Lamprecht, 1998; Rimann & Udris, 1998]

The hypothesis of this paper is that it is possible to conceptualize a Sense of Coherence not only for individuals, but also for social systems. Antonovsky himself was convinced of this

possibility. [Antonovsky, 1991] He thought research about a 'collective Sense of Coherence' to be useful not only because a strong Sense of Coherence of the group might be independent of, and influence positively, the individual Sense of Coherence, but also because some stressor life events cannot be tackled by the individual. They only respond to coping by groups. [Antonovsky, 1997] For researchers in the field of economics and management, this touches upon the very reason why people form organizations in the first place: to be able to solve problems or achieve goals they could not achieve on their own.

A group might be said to possess a strong collective Sense of Coherence if the members of the group tend to see the group as one that consider the world or their own life to be comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, and if there is a high degree of agreement *regarding this point* among the group members. [Antonovsky, 1997] This is not to say that there must be consensus among group members regarding all, or even the majority of, issues that might arise. What is meant here is that each group member is convinced that the group as a whole will be able to tackle internal and external demands, even if she, at a particular point in time, does not possess a strong individual Sense of Coherence.<sup>5</sup> We might thus say that if an organization displays these characteristics, it will be more robust to disturbances and environmental change, other things being equal, as it will be better able to cope with the resulting tension.

To my mind, salutogenic theory, and the concept of a Sense of Coherence might appeal to scholars of management and organizational theory for the following reasons (among others).

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<sup>5</sup>Antonovsky wrote that he had had the opportunity to study this phenomenon in real life every time he faced a new group of first-year students. [Antonovsky, 1997]

The Sense of Coherence is a rather cognitive construct (however, it does not disregard the importance of emotions). [For a critical view of this see Geyer, 1997.] It tries to explain how human beings process and interpret information they receive in a constructive way. This is also an important, if not the main task of organizations (see the introduction to this paper). [See, for example: Golden-Biddle & Rao, 2004] We can hope to integrate our knowledge about information processing through schemes etc. into a wider salutogenic theory.<sup>6</sup> [Maoz, 1998; Franke, 1997b]

The Sense of Coherence is an open concept with regard to the dimensions in which subjects make sense of their environments. It tries to include individual and societal, material and immaterial, internal and external resources, which can function for the individual in different ways. [Sack & Lamprecht, 1998; Rimann & Udris, 1998] We can hope to use this broad framework to integrate more detailed analyses of how organizations use what kind of resources.

Finally, 'health' or robustness is not seen as a norm, or a commodity that might be consumed [again, see Geyer, 1997 for a critical standpoint]; rather, it is a dynamic process of protective and problem-solving actions, an ongoing interplay of salutogenic and pathogenic forces. [Schüffel et al, 1998; Sack & Lamprecht, 1998; Rimann & Udris, 1998] Salutogenic theory takes into account the individual and its actions, as well as social-structural factors, and it is process-oriented. [Antonovsky, 1991; Faltermaier, 2002] This helps to understand how organizations survive and prosper in a world where there is no such thing as optimal management. It also points to the importance of the question of identity.

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<sup>6</sup>Note that the Sense of Coherence is more closely correlated with indicators of mental than with indicators of physical well-being [Franke 1997b].

## **Self and Identity as Requirements for the Sense of Coherence**

How does an organization develop a strong Sense of Coherence? This question cannot be answered without some idea of the organization's identity. For the purpose of this paper, and in the spirit of Antonovsky, Identity is taken to refer to the complex of social roles of the organization [Antonovsky, 1997]. Identity is the reflexive frame of reference within which the organization interpret their experiences [Höfer, 2002]. That means that Identity is both a comprehensive and a double-sided concept. It is connected to what is inside the system as well as to its interactions with the outside world.

What is inside the system is here conceptualized as the Self. The Self is the answer to the question of 'who we are' independent of 'what we do'. For the individual, the Self describes the fundamental layers of personality that provide a sense of continuity, the psychic processes of the human being [Antonovsky, 1997; Wörterbuch Psychologie, 2004]. Drawing on the ideas of Freud, Badcock presents the model of the human psyche as follows (see Figure 1).

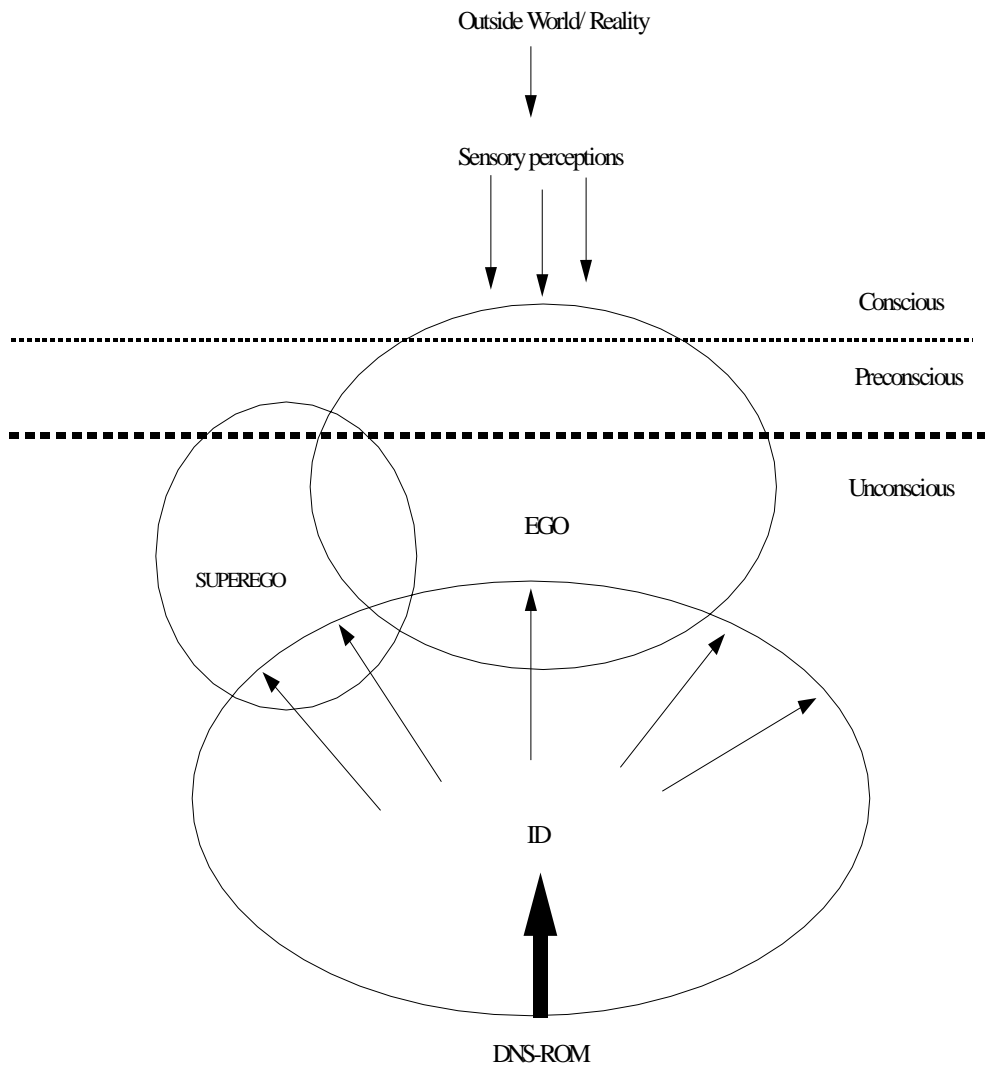


Figure 1. The Psychodarwinist Model of the Psyche. Source: Badcock, 1999.

There are conscious, preconscious and unconscious psychic contents. The conscious is whatever attracts the attention of the individual at a given time; it is the psychological interface with the psychology of other individuals. The preconscious is what is not right now

attracting attention, but could be remembered deliberately, for example one's telephone number. The unconscious however cannot be remembered deliberately. [Badcock, 1999]

Freud described the human psyche to be partitioned into different instances. One of these is the Id, whose processes are completely unconscious. The Id contains drives (that Freud took to be rooted in the organization of the organism itself), but also repressed contents. It follows the pleasure principle. It is an active, dynamic instance that is constantly trying to influence behaviour. [Badcock, 1999; Freud, 1972]

The second instance is the Ego, which contains conscious, preconscious and unconscious processes. It is the instance to which the Id directs its demands, and which reacts to stimuli from the outside world. The Ego is the mediator between different demands. Ideally, it follows the reality principle. The feeling of unity as a person is a characteristic of the Ego. [Badcock, 1999; Freud, 1972]

The third instance is called the Superego, which mainly keeps tab on the Ego, judging and appraising its actions. This is a factor independent of the education someone has enjoyed early in life or the learned 'good manners'. It is possible that this part of the psyche emerged because it was vital for the individual to know in advance how others would react to her own actions. [Badcock, 1999; Freud, 1972]

As an element of a salutogenic theory of social systems, we might conceptualize a Self for the organization along these lines. Stating this, one is inevitably confronted with the 'perennial question' [Hatch & Schultz, 2004] of whether individual-level theory can be generalized to

organizational phenomena. Of course, this question is valid for the Sense of Coherence and Identity as well. However, the Self seems to be the concept hardest to imagine at the organizational level.

I would like to argue with Cooley here that groups are more than the sum of individuals. There is “an organization, a lifeprocess, in any social whole that you cannot see in the individuals separately“; groups are 'living wholes'. [Cooley, 2004:19] I therefore regard research on how one might conceptualize an organizational Self (just like research on organizational Identity) not only as justified, but as mandatory.

Furthermore, what we take the Self and Identity of the individual, or Organizational Identity to be are not 'things' that can be made visible. [Gioia & Schultz & Corley, 2004] Cooley says that the „*feeling* aspect of the self is [...] the immediate and decisive sign and proof of what 'I' is“ [Cooley, 2004:21; emphasis not in original]. Hatch and Schultz use the term 'distributed consciousness' to describe a possible way of thinking about Organizational Identity [Hatch & Schultz, 2004a:4]. It is thus not surprising that the Self of the organization is a living whole that lends itself better to emotional than to technical description: “The group self or 'we' is simply an 'I' which includes other persons“ [Cooley, 2004:29].

Quite obviously there are contents that can be classified as conscious, preconscious or unconscious within the organization. But the partition into instances is useful as well. The System-Id represents signals of what the organization needs. These signals might be ambivalent or even contradictory. There is reason to believe that a social system is influenced by 'drives' that are more than just the conscious interests of the individuals within the system,



and more than the purpose for which the system was originally designed.<sup>7</sup> The System-Id also contains repressed information, which cannot be made conscious at will within the organization.

The organizational Superego is its 'conscience', the instance judging in advance how the environment will respond to its actions. It is obviously problematic if the system lacks an instance like this, because it will not be able to anticipate external reactions to its activities, and might thus, for example, carry out illegal acts. However the reverse case is also problematic. If the system's Superego is too strong, the system's Id and Ego may not be able to exert their proper influence.

The organizational Ego represents its ability to respond to and mediate different internal and external demands, reflect upon conflicting inputs and choose a path of action. This is not to say that only the manager or leader represents this psychological function within the system. The mediation of different demands and the choice of strategy will always be results of a communication process. [Simon, 2004] The importance of this function becomes obvious when one takes into account that robustness of a system also refers to the number and strength of its strategic options, the available responses to insults.

What is the relation between Self and Identity? Antonovsky said that a strong Self will make possible a stable Identity, but it is not dependent on the explicit Identity in which it becomes manifest at a given time. It might be that the specific complex of social roles turns out not to

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<sup>7</sup>Mintzberg, for example, defines 'systems goals' which include survival. Drawing on the ideas of Herbert Simon, Mintzberg also offers the concept that organizations treat their many different goals as constraints. This concept is useful in this context: No system can ignore the demands of its different psychic instances in the long run without inflicting damage on itself. [Mintzberg, 1983]

adequately reflect the Self at a certain point in time, or not to be viable anymore because of changes in the external environment. A person with a strong Self will then be able to give up on that complex of social roles and adopt an alternative Identity. [Antonovsky, 1997] (I will make a tentative statement on how to picture a 'strong organizational Self' towards the end of the paper.)

How does Identity emerge? Höfer suggests a model of Identity development for the individual that is suitable for modelling the process of Identity development of the organization as well. Höfer does not see Identity as capital to be built or accumulated, but rather as a continuous process, a collection of 'project identities' that may even be contradictory. Within these project identities, internal and external demands have to be satisfied and societal capacity to act has to be developed and maintained (see Figure 2). [Höfer, 2002]

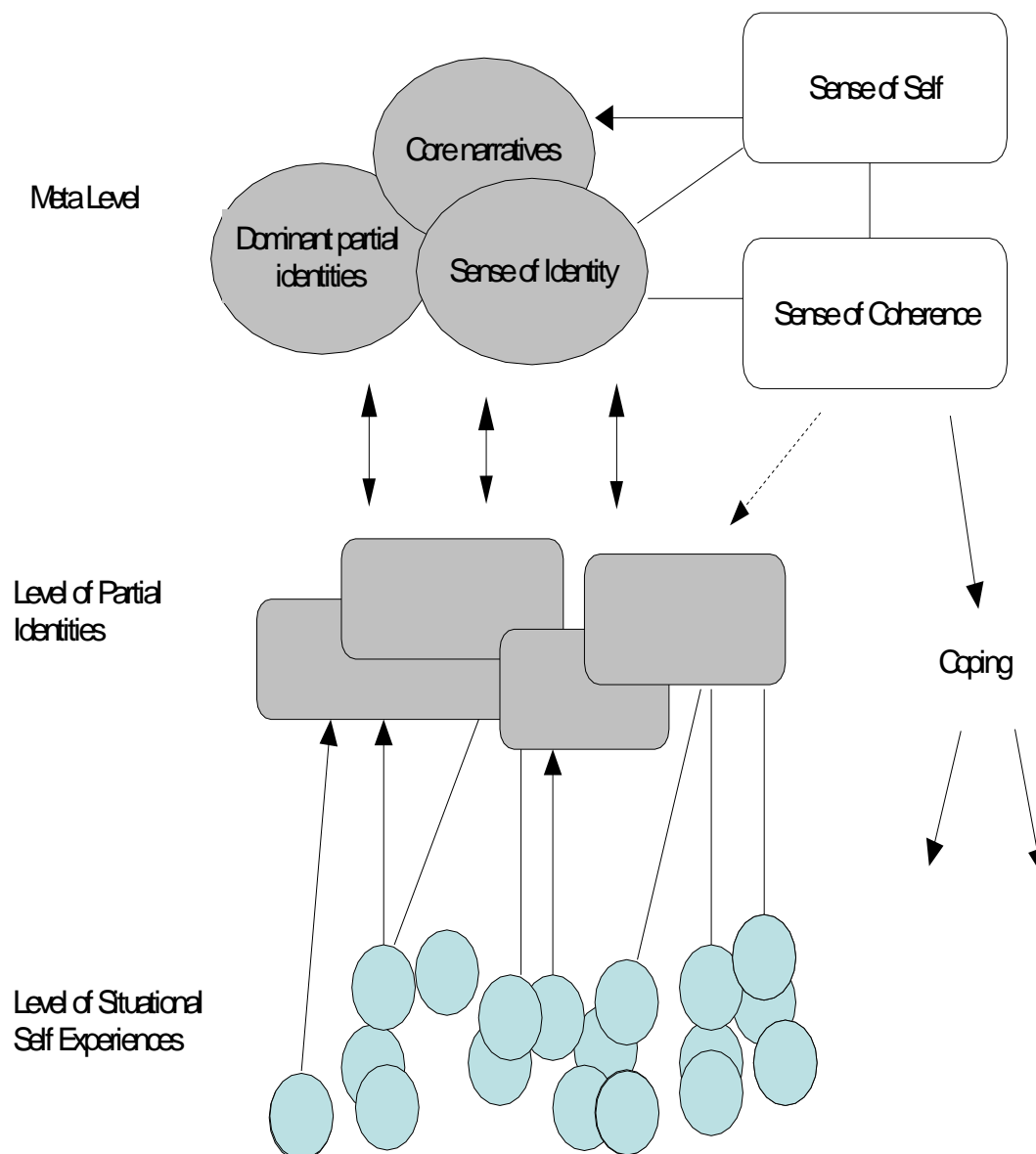


Figure 2. Model of Identity Development. Source: Höfer, 2002.

On the lowest, least abstract level of the model of Identity development the system will reflect upon situational experiences of the Self, the ideas of who or how the Self is, i.e. 'who we are'.<sup>8</sup> These numerous small experiences, thoughts and ideas will be integrated on the next level to form partial or project identities. These might be different projects an organization pursues at a time. They answer the question of 'what we do', but do not necessarily have to be consistent

<sup>8</sup>Note the connection to the different levels of Self Representations as systemized by Brewer & Gardner, 2004.

or complementary. [Höfer, 2002] With reference to Golden-Biddle and Rao, one might say that they are frames invoked by members of the organization to both interpret and take action [Golden-Biddle & Rao, 2004; compare also Hatch & Schultz, 2004; Albert & Whetten, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 2004]. These partial identities are not constantly discussed consciously. Rather, under ordinary circumstances, one can expect the organization to take them for granted. [Albert & Whetten, 2004]

On a meta level the situational Self-experiences as well as the project identities will be reflected. Certain core aspects will be 'saved' to form what Höfer calls the Sense of Identity. This is the subject of the next section. [Höfer, 2002]

The Sense of Coherence is regarded as part of the Sense of Identity. While the system is trying to satisfy internal and external demands within its complex of social roles, i.e. within its Identity, it will become involved in feedback processes informing on the quality of the system actions. Is the interaction with the outside world successful? Can external demands be understood and met, and internal demands be voiced and fulfilled? If these evaluation processes shape a sense within the system that received stimuli are comprehensible, that demands and tasks are manageable and that the system's actions are meaningful, this will make for a strong Sense of Coherence within the system. [Antonovsky, 1997; Höfer, 2002]

The quality of Identity, its 'fit' with the organizational Self is an important determinant of the organizational Sense of Coherence. Only if it is possible to satisfy internal needs and external expectations in the social roles that form an organization's Identity will a sense of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness develop. In particular, the part of

Identity which represents the functions of the Ego (the Ego Identity) will be decisive for the quality of the Sense of Coherence. [Antonovsky, 1997; Höfer, 2002] This is plausible under the assumption that the Ego is the psychic instance responsible for mediating and meeting the different demands one might be confronted with. However, to 'fit' the organizational Self, and respond to external demands, Identity can be altered, or changed. At the same time, Identity has to provide a sense of stability both to insiders and outsiders of the organization [compare the concept of 'adaptive instability': Gioia et al., 2004].

So far, the lesson learned might be put as follows. For the organization to exhibit behaviour that is acceptable with the surrounding systems as well as adequate for fulfilling their own needs, the co-operation of the three instances of the Self and, especially, the proper functioning of the Ego processes are vital. Furthermore, it is vital that the organization assume an Identity that allows for representation of their needs as well as acceptable communication and interaction with the external environment. A strong Self and stable Identity are determinants for a strong Sense of Coherence, which will enable the organization to cope successfully with tension resulting from stressor events, and thus make for organizational robustness.

## **The Sense of Self and the Sense of Coherence As Determinants for the Sense of Identity**

What we were looking for, however, was more than just the ability to cope with tension. We were looking for a theory in which to frame the relation between organizational Identity and organizational practices, particularly socially responsible practices. How does an organization, as a social system embedded in systems, bring to fit its own actions with the

actions around it? How does an organization maintain its societal capacity to act, which depends on the adequacy of its actions? How does an organization keep up the fragile order of interaction with external systems under the pressure of constant change?

To arrive at such a comprehensive theory, I conceptualize the Sense of Self and the Sense of Identity. These are suggested by Höfer for the individual, but may well be applied to social systems as well. The Sense of Self expresses the distance of one's self-judgment from one's own points of reference. Points of reference, in turn, represent desirable experiences and needs (like those of love and acceptance). If experiences are positive and needs are met more often than not, the Sense of Self will be positive and act in a way so as to protect and strengthen the Self. [Höfer, 2002] Again, this underlines the importance of the Ego processes within the Self. If the Ego is able to meet internal demands and provide for desirable experiences, this will have positive consequences for the Sense of Self (see Figure 3).

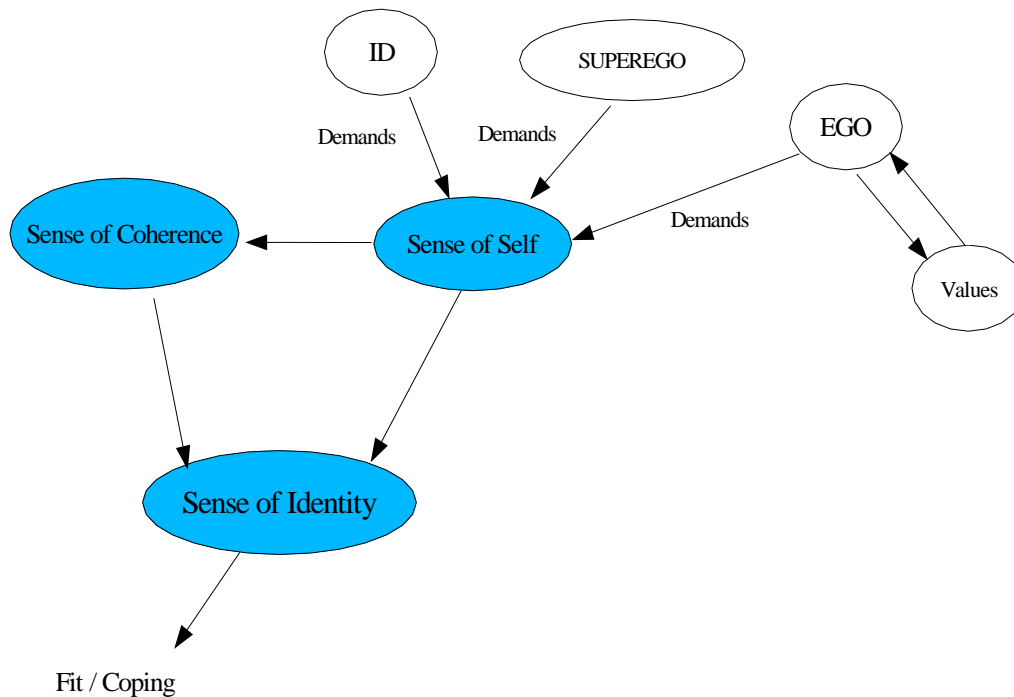


Figure 3. Fulfilment of the demands of the Self determines the Sense of Self.  
The Sense of Self and the Sense of Coherence form the Sense of Identity.

Sense of Self and Sense of Coherence together form the Sense of Identity. [Höfer, 2002] The Sense of Identity thus describes the abstract and lasting, though dynamic, sense the system (or individual) develops of its own being as well as its functioning within the world. It is positioned on the highest level (meta level) of the model of Identity development. According to this line of reasoning, an organization will be better able to keep up orderly interactions with others despite conflicting inputs or change if their Sense of Identity is strong. That means that there is an internal feeling of trust that one's own Self will be provided for, and that external challenges can be faced, and are worth facing (see Figure 3).

## Adaptation and Responsible Organizational Behaviour

If this is the case, the organization will be able not only to cope with tension resulting from stressor events, but to adapt in a more general way, i.e. bring to fit external expectations and internal aspirations. This is behaviour for robustness, because the organization will thus maintain its societal capacity to act, meaning they will be able to access resources needed to keep up their own vital functions.

What about *responsible* behaviour? After all, there are different ways of responding to the actions of the surrounding systems. The organization might respect their entelechy or brutally force their own wishes on them.

Within a theory of salutogenesis of social systems, it becomes clear that *only* an organization with a strong Self, a stable Identity, and a clear and positive Sense of Self and Sense of Coherence will be able to behave responsibly. This is because, if a system lacks the processes described for the Self, it will not be able to anticipate other's reactions and to mediate demands. It will, therefore, not create an Identity that allows for these functions in the interactive social context. Also, if the system's Sense of Coherence is weak, it might not even make an effort to understand external stimuli correctly. All this is to say, an organization with a weak Sense of Self and Sense of Coherence can *act*, much as an individual with a weak Sense of Self and Sense of Coherence, even disturbed Self processes can act. However, the actions of a person with a weak Sense of Self, and Sense of Coherence, or neurotic or psychotic behaviour will not always be much in accordance with her environment. Neither will those of an organization with similar problems.



This is not to say that the organization with a strong Self will inevitably assume an Identity within which they take *responsible* action. They might anticipate and understand what is going on around them and still choose a path of action that maximizes their own short-run benefit, no matter what the externalities are. [Scherhorn, 1991] The decision whether the organization strive for environmentally sustainable or socially responsible behaviour hinges on the organization's *values*. These are abstract standards which help to guide and judge the organizational actions.

Antonovsky expressly stated that to him, the question of health (in this context, robustness, or adaptive capacity) was on a level very different from the question of 'morally acceptable behaviour'. He thought it to be perfectly possible that someone whose values most of us would not regard as socially responsible, or morally acceptable (a Nazi, say), enjoys great health, and a strong Sense of Coherence. [Antonovsky, 1991 and 1995]

I would thus like to classify a strong Sense of Self and Sense of Coherence as necessary, but not sufficient requirements for responsible behaviour of the organization. There has to be a conviction that the Self is valuable in itself, and can and should be provided for to survive, in order for the organization to develop positive values. Only under that condition can the organization give useful answers to the questions: What is important in our interactions with others? How can we put it into practice?

At the beginning of the paper, I referred to the hypothesis that in the long run, responsible action of the system is action for robustness, effectiveness and functionality of the system. Socially irresponsible practices will reduce the number of a system's strategic options. They

destroy the environment's motivation and capability to cooperate. If this was true then one could state that a system with a strong Sense of Self and Sense of Coherence, but irresponsible values (say, for example, values we would describe as Nazi) will only enjoy good health in the short run, while a similar system with responsible values (that cares about the survival of its surrounding systems, etc) will survive well also in the long run. I would much like to prove a hypothesis like that. Maybe I will be able to when I have researched more.

## **But Then, What If The Sense of Self Is Weak?**

My argument is that many organizations, today, do not possess a strong Sense of Self. Rather, they are viewed – and view themselves – as a mere collection of individuals, a machine to generate profits. [De Geus, 1998] This view hardly allows for concepts like an organizational Id, Ego, and Superego, or Sense of Coherence. The question of 'rational behaviour' is, then, answered only through considering financial consequences of any step of action. To capture the entelechy of supra- or subsystems is only possible insofar as it can be indicated in financial measures. Where this is not enough to determine what responsible behaviour would look like, the organization will exhibit irresponsible behaviour without even knowing it.

This is not to say that an organization that is basically taken to be a 'profit-machine' does not possess a Self. I argue that such an organization commit to an *image* of themselves. Often this image is really the painstakingly designed Corporate Identity [see Birkigt et al, 2002, to get the idea]. Following this corporate image, which often includes characteristics like efficiency, rational decision-making processes, competitiveness, and so on, becomes corporate ideology.

This ideology shapes the way in which external stimuli are realized and processed, and the attitude towards the organizational environment. It can, in Antonovsky's terminology, be interpreted as the 'rigid Sense of Coherence' substituting for the 'strong and flexible Sense of Coherence'.

Antonovsky opined that a person with a weak Self might rigidly cling to a given Identity, trying to dissolve the fears that arise precisely because of the Self's weakness. Such a person might exhibit a rigid Sense of Coherence, which provides for comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, but does not allow for any change or flexibility. [Antonovsky, 1997]

To my mind, this is exactly what many of today's organizations exhibit.<sup>9</sup> One might also interpret this in such a way that the system's Superego has become so strong that it forces the Self to live up to a given image (the efficient 'profit-machine') at all times. All demands or stimuli that cannot be captured within this image have to be suppressed or declared irrelevant. The Ego is no longer in a position to take on its responsibility. This is not the Self creating social roles that fit; it is an unhealthy Superego creating a role in which the Self has to fit no matter what the cost. [Badcock, 1999; Freud, 1972; Wilson Schaefer & Fassel, 1988]

Schwartz (2004) seems to refer to a similar idea when he describes the 'organization ideal' as a projected possibility for organizational members to return to a state of narcissism, without rejection and guilt. Hatch and Schultz (2004), with reference to Albert & Whetten (2004), also describe ways in which organizational identity dynamics might become dysfunctional in a

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<sup>9</sup>It might be that phenomena like 'groupthink' [Aldag & Fuller, 1993] are a consequence of this.

sense that seems to come close to what has been discussed above. Schwartz' observation that “ultimately, [...] the world is not a loving place“ [Schwartz, 2004:123] leads me to a tentative conclusion on what might be a 'strong organizational Self'. Maybe, in a world that is not (always) a loving place, real strength of Self lies in the ability to maintain the Self processes while at the same time accepting that the Self is vulnerable. A strong positive Sense of Self, then, would be the feeling that the Self is valuable despite the fact that the environment often signals the opposite.

At this point, however, difficult questions enter the picture. How to determine whether an organization has (in a pathogenous, dysfunctional way) committed to an image or organization ideal, or whether it simply adheres very strongly to an organizational value? How to determine whether an organization is (in a positive sense) strong in the face of opposition, or has (in a pathogenous way) cut off necessary links of communication with the environment? As a criterion to distinguish these cases, I would suggest the question whether the organization adheres to the ideal, or its way of communication, in order not to have to become aware of the fact that they are, ultimately, vulnerable and imperfect. I would regard it as functional if an organization accepts their vulnerability but still tries to follow the ideal, or 'their own way'. I know full well though that this is not a waterproof criterion.

## **Conclusion**

It will be fascinating to research on how organizations can develop a strong Sense of Self and a Sense of Coherence, either spontaneously or deliberately. [De Geus, 1998] It is clear that to grasp this, one will have to understand precisely how processes of generalization (from the

individuals to the system, and from one level of the systemic model of Identity Development to the next) function. Overall, it is obvious that our idea of the processes of organizational coping and of bringing about fit between external and internal demands is as yet rather vague. The theory of salutogenesis in social systems will have to be developed further, and operationalized so as to be of practical use for managers.

However, judging from the outline given in this paper, I am convinced that a theory of salutogenesis in social systems does have the potential to help answer the fundamental question of order from chaos. Its systemic view makes salutogenic theory applicable to greater objects of investigation than the human individual alone.

To create order in the chaotic world of organizations is to develop robust organizations that interact orderly with one another. Maybe one could even take this one step further: To create order in the world of organizations, we need an understanding of what responsible organizational behaviour is, and how to bring it about. Within a theory of salutogenesis in social systems, this can be further researched. In particular, a theory of salutogenesis in social systems allows us to deepen our understanding of why Self and Identity are important for responsible organizational behaviour. Furthermore, it allows for the integration of the possibility that organizational robustness is, ultimately, an unachievable goal, because nothing that is human, or social, will ever be perfectly robust. Its value as a framework theory should therefore not be underestimated.

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