

Double agents: Gendered Organizational Culture, Control and Resistance.

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Published 2009 in *Sociology* 42(3): 4418 – 435.

Abstract

This article presents ethnographic data showing how recruitment consultants negotiate managerial attempts to control workforce culture. I suggest the values which senior managers encourage consultants to embody prioritise so-called ‘masculine’ attributes over ‘feminine’ ones. I attempt to demonstrate the limits of cultural control by outlining three ways in which the consultants engage with this imposed culture: defiance, parody and ritual. These activities contain gendered assumptions similar to those embedded in corporate culture. I discuss the potential such practices have for resisting corporate culture and the gender within it, suggesting that one source of ambiguity within workplace ‘control’ and ‘resistance’ practices is that they employ overlapping cultural resources and assumptions.

Introduction

In this article I explore the work experiences of employees working in a UK branch of ‘Spotlight Recruitment,’ an international recruitment agency, to argue that employees can (mis)use corporate culture artefacts (symbols, rituals, myths, and so on) as resources in their own cultural production. Individuals do not passively absorb managerial cultural control techniques; they actively interpret, reproduce and alter the meanings of such practices in ways that might not necessarily be in line with managerial goals, but which may be based upon the same, in this case gendered, cultural frame of reference as those goals. I present evidence to suggest that the corporate culture imposed by Spotlight’s management contains implicit and explicit gendered assumptions, but argue that consultants enact similar assumptions about men and women during resistant practices. I draw attention to the ambiguities and ambivalent outcomes that might result from the idea that corporate culture and resistance practices employ overlapping cultural resources.

The article draws on literature within the sociology of work, organization theory and gender studies to explore gendered organizational cultures and the possibility for resisting corporate culture techniques. I then explore the research techniques used in the study and follow this with the ethnographic findings and analysis. This section examines the gendered corporate culture at Spotlight, and outlines three key ways in which the consultants engage

with this culture: defiance, parody and ritual. In the conclusion I make tentative suggestions about the implications of these practices for men and women, and draw briefly upon De Certeau (1984) to suggest how resistance to corporate culture might be theorised.

The Corporate Culture Critique: Effectiveness, Morality and Anthropology

The use of symbols, rituals, language and myth (see Pettigrew 1979) in so-called corporate culture initiatives was brought to mainstream attention by certain management 'gurus' in the 1980s, two of the most notable perhaps being Peters and Waterman (1982) and Deal and Kennedy (1982). Critical organization theorists have countered these efforts on moral grounds, regarding them as an attempt to remove alternative norms or 'guiding values' from organizational culture (Strangleman and Roberts 1999, Willmott 1993). Some have suggested that corporate culture serves to regulate workers' sense of self, trapping them in a normative framework for thinking and feeling about work that borders on 'nascent totalitarianism' (ibid p523, Ray 1986, Alvesson and Willmott 2002).

In response, anthropologists have suggested that exponents and critics of corporate culture initiatives make false assumptions in implying that 'culture' can be successfully imposed upon members of a group. Instead, culture 'emerges from the collective social interaction of groups and communities' (Lynn Meek 1988 p459) and does not necessarily focus on a shared value system (Smircich 1983). In contrast, 'corporate culture' theories employ a narrow definition of culture which assumes that members of a culture share norms and beliefs that shape their behaviour, thereby placing individuals with conflicting value systems 'outside culture' (Lynn Meek 1988 p458). An anthropologically sensitive perspective on culture allows for values and beliefs to be 'incompletely shared' (Martin 2002 p58) by different sub-cultures within a 'common frame of reference' (ibid).

Whilst management has more control over cultural artefacts such as organizational symbols, logos and official mission statements, than employees do themselves (Lynn Meek 1988), culture is not static: it relies on the 'sense-making' activity of its members and is reproduced and re-negotiated during their social interactions. This opens up the possibility that cultural resources and assumptions, traditions, stories and myths can be 'tools' used by management *and* by workers, who might resist managers by subverting the values contained within their imposed corporate culture. Cultural artefacts can therefore be used by workers to express their affinity with an organization, but also to differentiate themselves as individuals (Munro 1999).

On Gendering Organizational Culture

Emerging from the interactions and power relationships performed by its members, then, a culture reflects, transforms and reproduces the symbolic orders and ways of thinking and doing invested in by these individuals. Such a perspective reflects theorizations of the ‘masculinities’ inscribed in organizational cultures, where masculinity or masculine discourse, as argued by Kerfoot and Knights (1993), consists of a web of socially constructed assumptions and associations about the relative characteristics and practices of men and women. These organizational cultures may reflect a hierarchical gender binary where organizational processes and managerial styles often prioritise masculine discourses over feminine ones (Knights and McCabe 2001, Kerfoot and Knights 1998).¹

Academic research has identified formalised attempts to impose a masculinist corporate culture on employees. For example, Hochschild’s (1983) work is an implicit consideration of the masculine discourses embedded in Delta Airline’s imposed corporate culture, as reflected in the uniforms worn by pilots and flight attendants, and in her concept of the emotional labour performed by female flight attendants. Also within the airline industry, Mills (1998) explores how British Airways developed a corporate culture infused with notions of masculinity through corporate branding, recruitment practices and internal memoranda, which reinforced heterosexist notions of men and women.

However, research has identified only very limited opportunities to resist hetero-normative corporate culture: Adkins (1992) and Casey (1995) for example, found that in their respective case study organizations, women who refused to accept the culture either chose to leave, or were removed from the organization. Yet an anthropological view of culture, explored above, suggests that culture can never be maintained in the way management intends.

The possibility for and ambiguity within resistance of corporate culture

Strangleman and Roberts (1999) express concerns that the more polemical arguments made by authors such as Willmott (1993) and Ray (1986), emphasising the ‘totalising’ nature of cultural control, have contributed to notions of workers as responding passively to organizational control processes, reflecting arguments (Ackroyd and Thompson 1995) that recent organizational theorising neglects the potential for workplace resistance.

Yet this seeming absence of resistance to corporate culture might simply be a reflection of the ambiguities found within those more covert, vague practices which may not be experienced as a conscious attempt to overthrow capitalism (Kondo 1990, Strangleman and Roberts 1999), but through which workers exercise an ambivalent (Casey 1995), cynical

(Fleming and Sewell 2002,) or parodic (Hopfl 2002, Hodgson 2005) relationship with the organization and its values, or through which they vent their frustration and overcome the monotony of work (Burawoy 1982). Tensions exist within sociology and cultural studies as to whether such vague practices constitute resistance: given that they appear not to be overtly or intentionally transformational, authors wonder whether these practices are better conceptualised as a '*survival strategy*' (Ortner 1995 p175) than resistance, and question the theoretical value of '*the discovery of resistance everywhere*' (Brown 1996 p733).

In response to this critique, I draw upon recent efforts to reconceptualise the notion of workplace resistance by poststructuralist feminists, who use Foucauldian theory to explore the possibility that resistance might encompass not only visible challenges and changes to an established social order, but also the efforts of individuals as they struggle to cope *within* an existing narrative (Thomas and Davies 2005, see also Knights and McCabe 2000). Indeed, this perspective puts forward a view shared by De Certeau (1984) that there is no 'pure' place where resistance can occur outside such narratives. The disciplinary mechanism through which corporate culture operates *must* invoke the same fractured framework of assumptions which informs the ways in which individuals negotiate the possibilities for challenging this mechanism.

Following Ortner (1995) then, a sanitised site for resistance remains elusive, but I retain the concept of resistance here because it highlights '*the presence and play of power*' in social activities and relationships (ibid p175). This understanding of resistance problematises the long accepted control-resistance dualism by suggesting that what orthodox labour process analysts term control and resistance are both the effects of 'power in action' (Thomas and Davies 2005 p733). In this sense, control and resistance are not necessarily fundamentally opposed, but both conditioned by the existing discourses forming the 'truth regimes' which frame individuals' lives and delimit the possible ways of thinking and doing (Foucault 1990).

The practices of individuals are shot through with these discourses so that they act as a mechanism for regulating conduct, but also contain the potential for resignifying meanings associated with performances (Butler 1999). The potential for resignification, Thomas and Davies argue (2005), occurs as individuals negotiate the fractures and tensions which occur at the intersections of discourses such as those relating to organizations and gender. In this way, the practice of control and resistance occurs not just through the contextualised acts and behaviours of individuals as they engage with each other socially, but also, relatedly, within the conceptualizations of, and meanings given to, 'work' and 'gender', in which this conduct is steeped (ibid).

Empirical research reveals that the social interactions that constitute resistance practices are as equally informed by discourses about men and women, as are certain corporate cultures imposed on workers by management. For example Pollert (1981) shows how women factory workers engaged in feminine ‘rituals,’ such as discussions about their love lives, and fantasies about up-coming weddings, which helped them to cope with their boring work. However, they were equally capable of indulging in sexualised, ‘masculine’ banter, employed subversively to ridicule their managers in a way similar to the resistance/coping strategies Collinson (1992) found amongst male shopfloor workers.

To conclude this section, I should make clear that by exploring the gender in resistance practices I do not suggest that men always enact a ‘male’ form of resistance, and that women perform a separate ‘female’ form. When referring to the gender in resistance, I simply intend to point out how certain behaviours are more often associated in our society with one gender or another. The interactions I explore in my analysis therefore contain comments made by men and women consultants, and my aim is simply to point out how these practices are associated more often in our society with one gender or another, rather than to reify common-sense assumptions about how men and women ‘do gender’.

Methodology

I draw my argument from an ethnographic investigation into the lived experiences of recruitment consultants working in a branch of ‘Spotlight Recruitment’, an international recruitment agency. Two teams of consultants, DriveTeam and AdminTeam, recruited permanent and temporary staff for the transport (haulage) and commercial (office-based) industries respectively. In 2004 I was employed as a member of DriveTeam on a full-time, temporary basis. Since all the consultants were often seen writing at their desks, I was able to write brief fieldnotes in the office without attracting undue attention. These I extended at lunch breaks and then fully wrote up at home in the evenings, organising them into emergent themes (Eisenhardt 1989), including *inter alia* acts of resistant or ‘committed’ behaviour, instances which drew upon notions of gender or sexuality, examples of workplace humour and gossip, and references to Spotlight’s ‘imposed’ corporate culture. I also noted in detail the consultant’s work processes, drawing data from my involvement in team meetings, informal ‘team talk’ and discussions with organizational clients or candidates looking for work. Consent for the research was granted by all participants and out of respect for the identity of all these individuals, their names have been substituted by pseudonyms and all efforts made to prevent the identification of the organization, its location and its employees, in line with British Sociological Association (2002) guidelines.

Although I was officially employed at Spotlight for several weeks, my contact with the branch for research purposes continued until 2007, during which time I conducted in-depth, semi-structured recorded interviews on site with both team leaders and with almost all the employees working at the branch. Additional informal meetings with the participants continued throughout the analysis and writing process and offered opportunities for countless informal discussions, ranging from the passing-on of office gossip to discussion over themes covered in taped interviews, such as sales targets. My intention has been to attempt an on-going dialogue concerning the participants' consent (see Sin 2005) and the fieldwork analysis (Bartunek 1994).

In this paper I aim to build on existing theory (Eisenhardt 1989) on cultural control and resistance. I make no claims about the objectivity, reliability or validity of ethnography or of case study research following Van Maanen's (1979) suggestion that fiction is a vital part of ethnographic texts, and that this story-telling is crucial to the ability of ethnographic texts to convince (Gibb Dyer Jr and Wilkins 1991).

The data I present here are drawn from my perspective as a female 'temp' in a team dominated by male consultants amongst whom I often felt uncomfortable, and where I was acutely aware of the pressures to conform to certain gendered organizational values. Indeed, perhaps writing fieldnotes was my own attempt to resist, as well as cope within, a corporate culture that challenged my sense of self. I have tried to reflect on this in the field and during the interwoven processes of analysing data and writing this paper, in line with notions of ethnography as a 'quest' to understand my own experiences as well as those of others in the field (Humphreys *et al* 2003), and following widespread, repeated calls for more profound reflexivity in ethnographic research (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Indeed it would perhaps be appropriate here to point out that the writing of this paper was interspersed (and perhaps supported) by actions on my part that in the field I would recognise as drawing upon assumptions about gender and femininity (time-wasting by shopping online for a pretty dress or pair of shoes, for example).

Spotlight Recruitment: The Context of Cultural Control

In this section I provide some contextual details about Spotlight. I then continue by exploring the values which the organization wished its employees to embody, and demonstrate how they contain implicit discourses which relate to how individuals think about men and masculinity in everyday life (see Kerfoot and Knights 1993, Collinson and Hearn 1994).

The gendered division of labour between recruitment teams was marked. AdminTeam, who recruited administrative staff for the commercial

industries, was an all-female team consisting of five consultants and a team leader. DriveTeam outsourced drivers to transport industry clients and distribution organizations, and in common with transport industry norms, the majority of consultants were male. The only female members were the team leader and me, a temp. In interviews the consultants impressed on me that they also perceived a vertical gendered segregation of the workforce in that the majority of Spotlight's consultants and most team leaders were women, yet senior positions such as area/division manager were overwhelmingly occupied by men.

Working at Spotlight was considered by all to be frenetic and stressful. As well as tending to the ever-changing staffing requirements of their existing clients, all Spotlight consultants were expected to actively seek out 'new business' by hunting for new clients. These demands were objectified in the form of a multitude of monthly and weekly sales targets, including the number of new clients on the branch's books and crucially new 'numbers out' – the numbers of new staff which Spotlight had sent out to work for their clients. Individual performance targets were linked to team-based bonuses, so that we experienced significant moral pressure to live up to the organization's sales-making goals, in order to avoid letting down our colleagues.

Spotlight's Corporate Culture Statements

The sales-related aspect of the consultants' work, which was the focus of the battery of targets mentioned above, was emphasised in the company's vision statement, which senior management forced all branches to display on prominent notice boards throughout the offices:

Our SALES culture: When everyone in Spotlight has a passion for growth through understanding and engaging in actions and behaviours that continuously generate profitable growth for our business.

This vision statement was accompanied by a list of eight questions designed to remind consultants exactly which 'actions and behaviours' were required. The questions included 'have you made Spotlight money today?' and 'have you made all your sales calls today?' and were printed onto a small laminated card, and pinned to each consultant's computer monitor. The questions prioritise 'actions and behaviours' which are related to meeting targets, hunting down and generating new business. None of the reminders considers the team-based, participative *process* by which the consultants go about their work.

Spotlight's corporate culture is a results-oriented '*sales culture*', demanding '*actions*' which focus on the bottom line. Other aspects of the consultants' work, which might be related to common-sense descriptions of femininity, and which might represent an alternative way of interpreting the '*sales culture*' statement, are marginalised by the reminder questions. The processes of nurturing existing client relationships and providing good customer service to both those looking for work and those looking for staff appear to be less relevant to Spotlight's corporate culture. Such an attempt to determine which values belong to Spotlight's work culture, and which do not, recalls Willmott's (1993) argument that corporate culture aims to provide employees with a single acceptable normative framework around which they can construct their identity in line with the goals of the organization.

I suggest here that the focus on sales, profits and results is steeped in the masculine discourses that typify the sales industry (Leidner 1991, Hodgson 2003), characterised by a 'heroic', pro-active desire to hunt down new leads. This discourse has much in common with the discourse of entrepreneurialism (Collinson and Hearn 1994, Gherardi 1995) which is argued to be masculinist because it relates to common-sense ways of thinking about men and men's practices as being pro-active, results-focused and individualistic. Although women can and do invest in such discourses, they are often not *perceived* to do so because these behaviours do not 'fit' with everyday perceptions of femininity (see Kerfoot and Knights 1993).

The competition for 'results' between sales teams, specifically linked to discourses of masculinity by others (Leidner 1991, Hodgson 2003), was harnessed by Spotlight in one of their most forceful corporate culture initiatives, an event known as the Sales Day, which forms the focus of the coming section.

Organizational Bond-age? James Bond/Miss Moneypenny templates designed by management, embodied by workers

On the Sales Day, co-ordinated four times a year (now more often) in every Spotlight branch worldwide, teams compete to make as many sales (fill as many vacancies and attract as many new clients) as possible. The sales figures for each team are relayed to branches globally via Spotlight's Intranet. The Sales Days have acquired a legendary status, and in the case study branch, are the subject of much competitive planning and discussion amongst and between AdminTeam and DriveTeam, in which I was often involved.

For the Sales Day occurring during my third week at Spotlight, a fancy-dress theme was chosen by senior management, which, Nicki suggests, is intended to reflect the purpose of the Sales Day:

Nicki: [the theme is intended] *to make people think a little bit more about what they have to achieve... the costumes, what they're wearing, how they act, the day itself, just to give it a bit more of an edge....*

[Team leader, AdminTeam, in interview]

Senior managers chose the theme of 'James Bond and Miss Money Penny', thereby forcing limited, stereotypical gender identities on Spotlight's employees. These characters are taken from Ian Fleming's series of novels about fictional spy James Bond, and became iconic figures through the 21 internationally screened films in the James Bond film franchise. All the male consultants at Spotlight were expected to adopt the role of secret agent James Bond: active, autonomous, ruthlessly masculine and irresistible hero, always present at the centre of the action, and '*representative of the virtues of Western Capitalism triumphing over... Eastern Communism*' (Bennett and Woollacott 2003 p16). By living out this template during the Sales Day, male teamworkers could demonstrate core team values of autonomy, pro-active behaviour and heroism. However, Spotlight's management expected female teamworkers, including Nicki and Anna, the team leaders, to dress and act in the character of Miss Money Penny, whose more ambiguous, marginal role in the Bond narrative (Brabazon 2003), performing low status back-office work to facilitate Bond's heroic actions, hardly reflects the values prioritised by Spotlight in their 'sales culture'.

These mythical templates impact on the gendered power relations in three ways. Firstly, they reify the intended team values as masculine attributes, with which women might find it hard to comply, should they adopt the espoused feminine role. Miss Money Penny's marginal role contradicts the heroic, sales-focused organizational values which all consultants are expected to embody. Secondly, the hierarchical gender binary is reified (see Kerfoot and Knights 2004) through the conferment of one primary (male) and one secondary (female) gender stereotype onto Spotlight employees. Miss Money Penny's static, desk-bound character emphasises the masculine-ness of Bond: her supportive capacity reinforces his role as 'agent'; her marginal presence highlights his centrality. The contrast between Money Penny and Bond is significant because it accentuates the supposed ability of men - and inability of women - to uphold core values. Finally, the Bond/Money Penny theme re-divided the workforce along gender, rather than team lines, and legitimised and rationalised a hierarchical gendered division of labour. The social norm of male-dominated organization was reasserted in that the female team leaders also had to enact the subordinate Money Penny role.

Teams were inspired to translate the theme into objectified dress and behaviour codes and the fortnight preceding the Sales Day was taken up

with discussions about what each employee should wear. Many male and female consultants trawled the town centre enthusiastically together during their lunch hours, hunting for accessories, which they paid for out of their own pockets. They bought male consultants replica guns and knives to match their 'Bond' dinner suits, and female consultants (including myself) were adorned with tortoiseshell sunglasses and a pink scarf tied in a 'pussycat' bow. Presenting our new uniform in the form of a gift made it very difficult for us to decline to wear it, and again called upon a sense of duty to enact imported identities for the sake of the team.

The Bond/Moneypenny theme was not common to every Sales Day. My emphasis on the theme in this section does not imply that it was an overwhelming feature of Spotlight's imposed corporate culture (although significantly it does reflect masculinist values within that culture), but is justified by the emphasis given to the Bond/Moneypenny roles by the consultants themselves, on the Sales Day and for many weeks afterwards. In what follows I highlight two ways in which this theme was harnessed, negotiated and perpetuated by consultants in their attempts to position themselves in relation to the gender in corporate culture.

Outright defiance: 'wimping out' on the team

The Bond/Moneypenny theme tries to locate men's and women's bodies as resources for demonstrating commitment to corporate values. Certainly, not all Spotlight consultants were willing to enact these stereotypical identities. Yet individual attempts to counter the gender stereotypes in the corporate culture were often opposed by other consultants. The following extract reveals how one consultant's attempt to resist gendered corporate culture was thwarted by a team member. The interaction starts with Louise quietly voicing her reluctance to wear the fishnet tights which her team-mates deem suitable Moneypenny attire:

Louise [whispering]: *oh God, you'd never catch me in fishnet tights...it's just not me...*

Kate: *you aren't going to wimp out on us are you? Come on, do it for us...everyone else is going to [wear them]!*

[AdminTeam consultants, recorded in fieldnotes]

The extract demonstrates that social interactions were crucial to ensuring that all workers conformed to the designated gender roles. Kate calls on Louise's sense of moral responsibility to her team ('do it for us'), to comply with the rules about embodying the Spotlight sales culture. By refusing to wear fishnet tights, Louise is perceived as letting the team down. Ironically, she is accused of 'wimping out', of not being 'man' enough to perform the required feminine stereotype. In the face of this opposition, Louise agreed to wear the tights, but travelled to work on a much earlier bus to avoid

meeting anyone she knew. As well as revealing Louise's negotiations with team members over how to embody corporate culture, Louise's confrontation with, and attempt to resist, the corporate culture might also demonstrate an internalised negotiation in which she reaches a compromise by altering her bus route, to avoid presenting to others a self-image with which she is uncomfortable. The ambiguity in Louise's subtle resistance reveals itself in that her early arrival at work ironically chimes with the masculinist need to '*put in the hours*' (the words used by several consultants during interviews) to show commitment to Spotlight.

While Nicki's quote above suggests she considers that the Bond/Moneypenny theme reflects Spotlight's organizational values and goals, consultants also used it to inform instances where they deviated from Spotlight's insistence on '*generating profitable growth for our business*'. For example, some employees left the office during work time to hunt down appropriate costume accessories. Yet these instances of resistance were not countered by other team members: they were seen as legitimate because they 'helped' the consultants portray the roles set out for them by senior management, and served to heighten the parodic intensity of their performances. This means of negotiating gender identities and corporate culture was embraced by all the consultants.

Embracing Bond-age? The pleasure of parody

While Louise's outright rejection of her Moneypenny role was unacceptable to the team, negotiation of these templates through parody and exaggerated shock at the enactment of Bond/Moneypenny by others was enthusiastically adopted. On the morning of the Sales Day, I watched the following exchange:

Jackie [watches Mike enter the office]: *Aaaghh! Ha ha ha, look it's Mike! Everyone look! Mike, you look ridiculous!*

Mike [walks sheepishly to his desk, sits down on his swivel chair, and then swivels around, pulling a fake gun out of the waistband of his trousers, and says drily]: *Bang.*

[Interaction between consultants, recorded in fieldnotes]

The Bond films have sparked 'spoof' or comedy versions of the spy/agent narrative, notably the 'Austin Powers' films. Butler (1999) points out that parodic versions of masculinity and femininity have the potential to reveal the groundlessness of socially constructed gender 'norms', placing the '*reality*' of gender '*into crisis*' (ibid pxxiii). In the above interaction, Jackie's hoots of laughter at Mike's entrance, and Mike's ironic re-enactment of the iconic starting sequence to the Bond movies are expressions of disbelief at the '*ridiculous*'-ness of the very idea of being told to wear fancy dress by senior management.

Whilst there is not space here for a fuller discussion of the resignifying potential of parody, Hodgson (2005) and Hopfl (2002) have explored the possibility for parody to subvert other normative processes (project management and emotional labour respectively) within organizations. Suffice to say here that the camp, outrageous performances of Bond and Moneypenny may have allowed consultants to articulate a (not necessarily conscious) rejection of the more subtle heteronormative processes which made this choice of theme, both with its depiction of Bond as an ‘agent’ of capitalism, and its explicitly stereotypical gendered characters, acceptable in Spotlight’s corporate culture.

The consultants’ continuing use of the theme to punctuate office life, long after the Sales Day was over, often harnessed the potential they saw for parody and subversion within the narrative. Several weeks after the event, the consultants continued to use the Bond narrative as a means of ‘acting out’ at work. They wasted time by poring over the photos of Spotlight’s Bonds and Moneypennys posted on the Intranet: cue laughter and innumerable references to ‘*is that a gun in your pocket?*’ and ‘*Pussy Galore*’ (one of the female characters in the Bond book and film ‘*Goldfinger*’). The consultants stashed their plastic guns and knives in desk drawers, and several times a week these were whipped out and brandished in front of team mates (and the occasional unsuspecting candidate who arrived looking for work), to appreciative whistles of the ‘Bond’ theme tune.

The above vignettes highlight the ways in which negotiating culture is a collaborative process in which group loyalty plays a part. Overt attempts to defy gender stereotypes failed because they were rejected by team-mates, but ironic parodies of the gender templates were embraced and perpetuated long after the Sales Day was over. In the following section I highlight two examples of collaborative ‘rituals’, also imbued with gendered assumptions, which helped consultants escape the monotony of work. These instances serve to highlight further ambiguities within the efforts of consultants to embody *and* resist corporate culture messages, which arise from the gendered assumptions common to corporate culture and ‘time-wasting’ at work.

Gendered Rituals: a resource for resistance and ambiguity

The consultants intersperse periods of frantic work with rituals or ‘games’ (Burawoy 1982) which alleviate the pressure of work, and through which workplace friendships and bonds are articulated. Many such rituals focus around fashion and clothes. New dresses, shoes, shirts and so on are brought into the office for colleagues’ appraisal, and the consultants gather in clusters around these items, touching them, rating them on their quality

or value for money, and pondering the likelihood of their appealing to potential admirers. In the following conversation which took place in work time, Anna and Nicki, the two team leaders, and Kate, Phil and I, three consultants, are discussing Anna's proposed outfit for an up-coming Spotlight dinner dance which senior managers are also attending:

Anna: *Do you like my shoes [author's name]? [Extends her feet one by one] Do you think they'll match my dress? Hey everyone, look at my dress, do you think it'll be ok for the do on Thursday?* [Holds an ankle-length, black, strapless dress against herself and twirls around, walking up and down the office]

Nicki: *Ohh, yeah, it looks lovely...*

Phil: [wolf whistles at Anna] *Wow!*

Anna: *How smart do you think we have to be?*

Nicki: *Well, it's black tie for the men. Ben [Area Manager] says be as smart as you can be, we've got to make an impression!*

Louise: *That's a proper 'show your boobs off' dress!*

Anna: *No, they'll be covered; look...[she re-adjusts the dress and lifts up her chin to show off her neck] I've got a diamante choker to match.*

[Interaction between consultants, recorded in fieldnotes]

Rituals like this remind me of similar work avoidance tactics noted by Pollert (1981) and Kondo (1990) in that they harness what are considered to be 'feminine rituals' to interrupt the monotony of the consultants' working day. They may actually improve performance by acting as team-building exercises which help the consultants to bond and form more effective working groups. Yet consultants also see interactions like this as part of their job because they are aligned with the masculinism within Spotlight's corporate culture. The extract reveals how the consultants invest in discourses which objectify women's appearance. Anna is concerned to 'make an impression' by appearing 'smart' but regulates her performance of femininity by not revealing too much of her body. The consultants are 'resisting' in that they are not chasing sales targets or enacting any of the other behaviours specified by Spotlight's senior managers as being part of the sales culture. Nonetheless this ritual demonstrates how the consultants are keen to impress managers in other ways; specifically, by embodying the gendered assumptions in which the corporate culture is steeped.

In comparison, the following extract shows how female consultants can participate in collaborative 'resistance' whilst holding stereotypical gendered assumptions at a distance. Many consultants pass the time at work by looking out of the first floor office windows onto the High Street below, and commenting on the relative attractiveness of passing shoppers.

In the following extract, consultants are discussing the physical merits of a female police officer they have seen outside:

Phil [looking out of the window]: *Oi Rob, have you seen that policewoman down there? She's tasty!*

Rob: [looks out of his window] *Phwoarr....cor, look at that....very tidy...*[stands up and walks over to the window where Phil is standing]

Kate: [joins Rob and Phil at the window] *ooh and look she's pushing out her boobs for you!*

Rob: *Mmmmm! That's part of the recruitment game! You've gotta be a lech...*

[Interaction between consultants, recorded in fieldnotes]

This interaction continues for some twenty minutes before the consultants return to their desks. Clearly, they are not engaging in '*actions and behaviours that continuously generate profitable growth for our business*' as the defined by the reminder questions accompanying the Sales Culture statement. They are, however, investing once again in the same assumptions about men being conquering and aggressive which equally apply to the image of the pro-active, breadwinning *salesman*. This, to the extent that Rob articulates how objectifying women in this way is, for him, '*part of the recruitment game*'. Rob's comments demonstrate how the consultants are able to negotiate space for resistance within their imposed corporate culture by applying its values to their own ends.

For the women consultants, however, the *implications* of the gendered rituals described above are of course not without their own ambiguities. Such practices may mean that corporate culture is not a totalitarian regime, but one that employees can negotiate and in which the possibility for resistance remains. However, these interactions may also have the effect of reinforcing women's subordinate position at Spotlight (at least in the informal social hierarchy) and perhaps in a wider societal context, because they prioritise values which are considered to be 'masculine'.

Interestingly though, Kate's remark ('*ooh and look, she's pushing out her boobs for you!*') suggest a knowing irony and awareness of the male gaze. By participating in this discussion about another woman, Kate engages in a collaborative process of 'resisting' the tedium of work, but distances *herself* (for this moment) from the gaze of her fellow consultants. By using the words 'pushing out her boobs *for you*', Kate actively disassociates herself from the position of gazing participant, leaving her momentarily in an ambiguous alternative space, in which she acts as *observer* of the male gaze, rather than object.

Subtle acts of resistance like Kate's are not separate from Spotlight's corporate culture messages – indeed perhaps the seeds of such resistant practices may also be found within the 'Bond theme' chosen by Spotlight's senior management. Certainly, a similar sense of irony and knowing is manifest in Miss Money Penny's later guises (Brabazon 2003). While Miss Money Penny contradicts the values espoused in Spotlight's corporate culture messages, her role in later films as unattainable female 'other', and as wry commentator on Bond's sexual shenanigans with interchangeable Bond 'girls', might characterise the opportunities which women like Kate take up to distance themselves from the subject/object dyad. Such possibilities for 'distance' (Collinson 1992) offered by the Bond/Money Penny templates offer a further reason why the consultants took up this narrative so enthusiastically and repeatedly.

Concluding Discussion: Playing the Recruitment Game

This article has sought to articulate how Spotlight consultants negotiate their management-imposed corporate culture through outright defiance, parody and ritual, to varying effect. I highlight some of the nuances and subtleties within these practices which are hidden by the term 'resistance'. In particular, workplace relationships and loyalties can affect the tactics chosen by individuals and groups at work. The resistant activities of groups and individuals can stand in opposition to each other, as well as to the aims of management.

The most overt and individual form of resistance shown here, defiance, is demonstrated by Louise's attempt to avoid wearing fishnet tights as 'Miss Money Penny'. Her intention is thwarted, not by senior managers, but by her team-mates because it runs counter to their efforts to pursue an alternative tactic: collaboratively enacting parodic versions of Bond/Money Penny. These gender templates, intended for a one-day sales event, are harnessed repeatedly by consultants as a means of ridiculing both gender stereotyping and the absurdity of management attempts at identity regulation.

While Spotlight's corporate culture is steeped in gendered assumptions, I also argue that the consultants often draw on everyday ways of thinking about masculinity and femininity during collective rituals which could be classed as resistance, given that they contravene the focus on '*actions and behaviours which continuously generate growth for our business*' intended by Spotlight's sales culture statement and specified by the accompanying reminder questions. Consistently used to enliven the working day, the rituals invoke the gendered assumptions so entrenched in the corporate culture that Rob, a consultant, suggests that they are intrinsic to '*the recruitment game*'. I argue that one further source of ambiguity within

resistance and control stems from the common assumptions about ‘ways of being’ upon which both these practices draw.

The masculinist assumptions within Spotlight’s corporate culture may act as a resource for the consultants to draw upon during their ‘*recruitment games*’, but, for women at least, gendered rituals offer at best limited possibilities for countering an organizational culture that is itself sexist. However, within these rituals women *can* distance themselves from the gendered assumptions common to corporate culture and resistance: Kate’s remarks during the people-watching ritual place her briefly in an alternative role of ‘knowing observer’ and reflect Miss Money Penny’s ironic remarks in later Bond films. This position offers Kate a reprieve from the passive feminine stereotype implicated by the time-wasting ritual about objectifying women, in which she participates.

Rob’s comment about ‘*the recruitment game*’ recalls Burawoy’s (1982) exploration of how factory workers’ ambiguous ‘games’ enabled the continuation of exploitative capitalist employment relations. Similarly, the Spotlight consultants’ activities are not organised, conscious efforts to overthrow an oppressive management regime or gendered power relations, and may simply serve to make life more bearable in a hectic, customer-facing sales role. They also re-establish team building processes which ultimately support the ‘sales culture’ but which are neglected by Spotlights’ senior management in the corporate culture reminder questions, which focus on the *outcomes* (making sales, achieving targets), rather than the *process* of doing recruitment consultancy. The rituals and games reveal that the consultants can find ways to subvert the pressure to continuously perform Spotlight’s core values, by re-appropriating these values and incorporating them into a frame of reference for their own ends.

As De Certeau (1984) suggests, games, and accounts and stories about particular games, have the effect of outlining the possible alternative moves and tactics within an imposed set of circumstances. Through these games, perhaps, the consultants mobilise their responses to a corporate brand which they are expected to ‘live’, in a way which does not necessarily reflect the response which Spotlight management expects or intends. This game-playing does not have to involve overturning ‘the rules of the game’, the web of normative assumptions around which perceptions of masculinity and femininity, or capitalist work organization, are embodied and enacted. However, the notion of game-playing demonstrates the availability of different creative ‘moves’ which do not deliberately contravene this framework, but which offer the potential for resistance *within* it.

It follows that the use in corporate culturism of assumptions, symbols, images and narratives from everyday life and popular culture to evoke sentiments in employees might also be its downfall. As Knights and

McCabe (2001) have argued, masculine discourses are not fully controllable at work because they also exist outside the organization. At Spotlight, narratives used for cultural control are not fully the property of the organization and therefore can never be entirely controlled within it, because they also have meanings outside of it. When the consultants negotiate corporate culture initiatives, they do so in a context which expands beyond the confines of organizational walls.

The spaces exist, I suggest in conclusion, for both men and women to negotiate corporate culture by drawing on its cultural (in this case, gendered) resources in alternative ways. The danger remains, though, that when they continue to reproduce existing gender hierarchies, such resources used in resistant practices may equally reinforce existing power relations between men and women at work and beyond.

Endnotes

¹ Recently the value of ‘masculinity’ conceptualizations been problematised by claims (see Fournier and Smith 2006) that the separation of beliefs, values and behaviours into ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ reverts to essentialist notions of doing gender. This critique deserves more attention than can be given space here, but whilst I acknowledge these tensions, I suggest that there might be political grounds within feminist research for retaining a concept which allows us to discuss actions and behaviours from which women have historically been marginalised, whilst keeping these actions separate from the category of ‘men’. This is important because not all men, and many women, also participate in such practices.

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