

***‘There is a Crack in Everything’: An Ethnographic Study of Pragmatic Resistance in a Manufacturing Organisation***

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***Abstract***

Why is resistance a pervasive feature of organisations? We seek to add to the established ways of understanding resistance by arguing that it may emerge due to the rationality and irrationality, order and disorder that imbues organisations. We explore how such conditions create ambivalent situations that can generate resistance which is ambivalent itself as it can both facilitate and hinder the operation of organisations. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in a manufacturing organisation, we introduce the concept of *pragmatic resistance* as a means to grasp the everyday resistance that emerges through and reflects cracks in the rational model of organisations. Rather than being anti-work, we demonstrate how pragmatic resistance is bound up with organisational disorder/irrationality, competing work demands and the prioritisation of what is interpreted as ‘real-work’. Overall, the concept of pragmatic resistance indicates that resistance may be far more pervasive and organisations more fragile and vulnerable to disruption than is often assumed to be the case.

**Key Words:** Ethnography, change, disorder, power, (ir)rationality, resistance, subjectivity.

**Introduction**

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in

(Anthem; Leonard Cohen, 1993)

Although resistance has been a core concept for organisational scholars for many decades (e.g. Burawoy, 1979; Gouldner, 1954; Hyman, 1975; Lane and Roberts, 1971; Mars, 1982; Roy, 1954), there has been a recent explosion of interest from scholars from different theoretical perspectives (Ashcraft, 2008; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Courpasson, 2016; 2017; Ezzamel et al, 2001; Knights and McCabe, 2003; Ybema and Horvers, 2017). These scholars have largely focused on less overt forms of resistance such as misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Knights and McCabe, 2000), distance and persistence (Collinson, 1994), cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), humour (Collinson, 1988; 1992; Taylor and Bain, 2003), sabotage (LaNuez and Jermier, 1994), whistleblowing (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016), memory (McCabe, 2004; 2010) and even consent (Ashcraft, 2005; McCabe, 2014; Ybema and Horvers, 2017). While the literature has provided valuable insights into the content and processes of resistance, it has largely conceptualised resistance as episodic and arising to counter the demands of corporate rationality when pursued to the detriment of employees. It thereby underplays resistance as a pervasive feature of organisational life reflecting the disorder and irrationality that is also a condition of organisations.

We seek to contribute to an understanding of resistance through introducing and conceptualising the term ‘pragmatic resistance’ as a means to highlight how employees engage and cope with corporate disorder and irrationality. Pragmatic resistance hampers and enables change, whilst fostering and hindering relationships among staff. Our insights derive from an ethnographic study of a manufacturing organisation (pseudonym Silo), which explored how organisational members made sense of and experienced a new management initiative that we call STriving for Standardization or STS (pseudonym). STS is an in-house continuous improvement philosophy which was imposed on Silo by its Parent Organisation (PO) as a means to control and regulate its working practices. Whilst conducting the research

it became apparent to us, through observations and the comments of Silo employees, that the way in which STS was implemented (hastily, without a clear objective, insufficient preparation, poor infrastructure or coordination) and operated (extensive jargon and bureaucracy) were experienced as irrational, disorganized and chaotic.

These findings resonate with long-standing observations in the literature regarding the pervasiveness of organisational irrationality (Alvesson,1984; Alvesson and Spicer,2012; Astley and Van de Ven, 1983; Brunsson, 2006; Burrell,1999; Cohen et al, 1972; Simon, 1957; Weick, 1976). To date, however, the resistance literature has paid insufficient attention to how resistance arises in relation to such conditions. We see this as problematic as we concur with Ashcraft and Tretheway (2004:178) that ‘our concepts ... must take irrationality seriously and render it visible ... if they are to truly reflect ... organisational practices’. While our interpretation of the events at Silo is grounded in the prolonged observations and first-hand experiences of the third author who worked at Silo both before and during the research, neither Silo’s nor the PO’s management, was fully aware of the dynamics we depict in our ethnographic representation (Agar, 1986; Clifford, 1986). Indeed, this is central to our concept of pragmatic resistance because we see it as reflecting under-the-radar conditions that are an everyday feature of corporate life. Although we discuss the implementation of STS as exacerbating organisational disorder and irrationality, we understand that ‘order and disorder tend to simultaneously arise in the course of organizing’ (Vásquez, Schoeneborn, and Sergi,2016:5). In short, order/disorder and rationality/irrationality coexist and pragmatic resistance arises as a condition of this usually hidden feature of organisational life.

In the course of conducting the ethnographic study, our attention was drawn to the multiple ways in which individuals sought to cope with and, in some cases, remedy the irrational/disordered dynamics that the implementation and operation of STS gave rise to. It struck us as unusual because many critical accounts represent managers as pursuing control

over employees in a logical, unified way whether through culture (Kunda,1992; Willmott,1993), teamwork (Barker,1993; Sewell,1998), Total Quality Management (Delbridge et al,1992) or more recently neo-normative forms of control (Fleming and Sturdy,2009). This article asks how we can make sense of resistance that resides in the subterranean and reflects organisational conditions that our respondents described as 'ridiculous', 'stupid' or 'a mess'. We introduce the term 'pragmatic resistance' as a means to encapsulate the everyday forms of resistance that emerge under such conditions which are under-reported and poorly understood for they reside in the shadowland of organisational life.

Pragmatic resistance is not simply a reflection of mismanagement but a condition of organisations that do not entirely conform to the rational model which conceptualises organisations 'as an instrument or tool designed to achieve a specific goal or cluster of related goals' (Bryman,1984: 391). It reflects the cracks within and limitations of 'managerialism' which Deetz (1992) refers to as 'an interest in efficiency, rationality and significantly no visible conflict' (op cit:22). It is not only the mainstream business and management literature that neglects such issues due to the assumption that 'instrumental rationality dominates thinking and practice and constitutes the guiding star for organisational activity' (Alvesson,1984:70) because there is a residue of this in many critical accounts including the control and resistance literature. As we aim to illustrate, this risks underestimating the resistance that infuses everyday life as a condition of the disorder and irrationality (e.g. means becoming ends, misunderstanding, confusion, unintended consequences, mistakes, fabrications, contradictions, errors, falsehoods, dishonesty, incompetence, conflicting goals) that is as much a part of everyday organisational life as order and rationality. In short, it cannot be dismissed as simply mismanagement nor managed away because it reflects cracks that permeate corporate rationality, which managerialism cannot eliminate.

The article is organised as follows. First, we review some of the most relevant and important theoretical approaches on resistance as a means to locate and define our concept of pragmatic resistance. Then, we outline our methodological approach before introducing our ethnographic study. Finally, we conclude by summarising our main contribution to the understanding of resistance.

### **Unpacking resistance and defining pragmatic resistance**

In order to explain the distinctiveness of pragmatic resistance, along with the contribution of this article, it is necessary to consider some of the central approaches that have contributed to our understanding of resistance.

Industrial relations provides an early, important and enduring body of literature on resistance. Scholars have explored collective, organised resistance in a variety of sectors including mining (Allen, 2009), docks (Turnbull and Sapsford, 2001), glass making (Lane and Roberts, 1971), the postal service (Beirne, 2013) and steel (Coupland et al, 2005). This extensive literature predominantly focuses on trade union struggles, which is not the focus of our article. Nevertheless, we believe that many industrial disputes can be traced to irrational actions on the part of management (e.g. McCabe, 1996) and so our research should be of interest to such scholars.

A second significant approach is labour-process theory (LPT) which locates resistance in relation to antagonistic, class-based positions. Here resistance is understood to stem from ‘the oppressive nature of capitalist modes of production’ (Putnam et al, 2005:7) and is most often linked to employees. Regardless of the actual form that it takes, resistance is seen as reflecting debilitating work practices, inequality, exploitation, work intensification or a loss of autonomy and control (e.g. Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). To the extent that it ameliorates such conditions, it is therefore seen as positive and productive.

Rather than revolutionary, key labour process theorists, such as Burawoy (1979), have linked resistance to consent, as it can at times ‘lubricate the enactment of the labour process’ (Korczyński, 2011:1421). Resistance is therefore ambiguous because it may reproduce aspects of the status quo whilst simultaneously challenging it. LPT assumes that organisations serve the interests of capital and focuses on how this is achieved through increasing control over ‘labour power’ (Thompson and Smith, 2010:14). This may occur through deskilling (Braverman, 1974), intensified work control (Delbridge et al, 1992) or pay restraint/cuts that serve to maximise profit. These dynamics operate in the interests of those who own or control the means of production, which works to the disadvantage of employees.

The conditions of our case study, where management acted in divided and irrational ways that undermined the controls they sought to propagate, sit uneasily with the core of LPT. Indeed, given the assumption of ‘structural antagonism’ (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:29) between labour and capital, where the possibility of ‘consent and common interests’ is seen as ‘unlikely’ (Thompson and Smith, 2010:17), one would not expect employees to resist in ways that enhanced their exploitation or that helps to make both the organisation and a new initiative work as was also evident in our study. Nevertheless, not all Labour Process theorists work from the premise of ‘fixed opposition between irreconcilable adversaries’ (Courpasson et al, 2012: 901), nor has organisational disorder entirely escaped their attention. As Delbridge (1995: 806) put it, ‘The interrelations of management and labour are dynamic, confused and confusing. To consider these relations as only conflictual is unrealistic’. Moreover, he points out that ‘workers have not only sought to resist managerial authority in the workplace and nor have their counter-control actions always been to the ultimate detriment of capital’ (Delbridge, 1995:807). Similarly, Bain and Taylor (2000) demonstrate that resistance can aim to compel management to address ‘managerial malpractice’ (Bain and Taylor, 2000:14).

Although not central to their analysis, these insights can be read as suggesting that resistance can be productive for capital and our concern is to make this explicit by illustrating how pragmatic resistance may arise due to the irrationality of how organisations operate. We highlight how pragmatic resistance attempts to address or cope with organisational disorder and so, from a LPT perspective, it could be seen as contributing to the exploitation and ultimate control of employees. We would not entirely disagree with such arguments but we are concerned to illuminate that the conditions and outcomes of organisational life and resistance are far more ambiguous, unpredictable, irrational and disorganised than such an interpretation suggests.

A third approach towards resistance is evident in post-structural theorising, which particularly focuses on struggles over subjectivity (see Jermier et al, 1994). Post-structural approaches towards resistance have largely concentrated on the ongoing processes of ‘adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses’ (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 687). Attention has been given to individuals who resist through distancing themselves from corporate discourses (Collinson, 1994). Resistance is understood to involve ‘deployments of alternative meanings’ (Mumby et al, 2017: 1166), constructing opposing and alternative identities (e.g. Clarke and Knights, 2015; Costas and Grey, 2014) or engaging in self-reflexive practices whereby employees exploit ‘tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions’ (Knights and McCabe, 2000: 431) in organisational discourses.

Although post-structural theorising is a broad church, scholars have focused on the way in which control is ‘accentuated and extended’ (Costas, 2012: 377) through corporate culture programmes and a variety of management discourses such as teamwork, enterprise, leadership, New Public Management and TQM (see Barker, 1993; Clarke and Knights, 2015; du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Gagnon and Collinson, 2017; Willmott, 1993). These programmes and discourses are argued to exercise an insidious form

of control through reconstituting employee subjectivity along corporate lines whilst simultaneously ‘reducing spaces for employees to voice their dissent’ (Costas, 2012: 392). In this sense, there is a danger of presenting management as acting in an ordered, rational way. Our concept of pragmatic resistance seeks to challenge these, often implicit, assumptions because we argue that managers and organisations operate in both ordered/disordered and rational/irrational ways. In view of this, managers and employees may deem it necessary to find ways of working around and with conditions that are far removed from the rational model.

Resistance, for example, in the form of dis-identification (Fleming, 2005) has been argued to reproduce the conditions it opposes. This is because such resistance does not typically pose a direct threat to the established order as ‘cultural power may [also] work through dis-identification’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 157). To illustrate this point, while resistance through constructing alternative selves (Costas and Grey, 2014) might enable staff to cope with the demands of a corporate discourse, this may not disrupt work processes. Similarly, resistant humour may undermine the ‘transformative capabilities’ of some change initiatives (Westwood and Johnston, 2012: 5) but it is generally not assumed to disrupt dominant power relations. Irrespective then of the degree to which normative or neo-normative control systems (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011) are successful or resisted, we can observe that there is an implicit assumption that organisations operate in ways that serve corporate interests. Indeed, contemporary management interventions are understood to ‘detract attention from the subjective dysfunctions’ of traditional forms of control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011: 193) such as Taylorism, thereby reinforcing managerial control. By contrast, our focus on pragmatic resistance aims to illustrate that the forces and consequences of management are often less rational, united and ordered in terms of an ‘irresistible march of managerialism’ (Mumby, 2005: 27) than such approaches suggest.



Fleming and Sturdy's (2009:571) observation that even 'cynicism and psychological distancing is appropriated as a corporate resource to enhance output' illustrates our concerns. It suggests that resistance is absorbed into and reproduces corporate rationality and order. Of course, the forms of resistance that Fleming and Sturdy (2009) identified threatened this through local disruptions but, we argue that the operation of organisations and corporate discourses, needs to be subjected to greater scrutiny. We need to be more sensitive to the likelihood that corporate discourses operate in disordered and irrational ways as well as ordered and rational ways. In doing so, the cracks in official accounts, along with the resistance that arises in relation to such conditions, can be more readily scrutinised. Pragmatic resistance is a product of, and an attempt to cope with such disorder/irrationality but it also reflects that subjects have been constituted as corporate beings preoccupied with functional concerns (see Jacques, 1996). In this sense, it also partly serves to reproduce the status quo and so it may be seen as 'decaf resistance' (Contu,2008). Nevertheless, pragmatic resistance illuminates limitations to the power that management is able to exercise and to cracks in the corporate edifice. This is what Contu's (2008) analysis underplays as resistance is presented in stark terms as either 'real' – consequential - or 'decaf' - inconsequential. The latter is regarded as the 'ultimate support of the official discourse' (op cit:368) but this neglects that decaf resistance is 'difficult to censure' (Mumby et al, 2017: 1166) and also underplays the unknown and unpredictable subterranean features of corporate life.

As we have seen, LPT understands resistance to be ambiguous and contradictory and this point has been made elsewhere (Ashcraft, 2005; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Mumby, 1997; 2005; Scott,1990), especially by post-structural scholars or those interested in identity/subjectivity/discourse (Jermier et al,1994; Knights and McCabe,2000; Sturdy,1992). Hence Sturdy (1992) found that 'consent, incorporates resistance or work avoidance' (op cit:142), whilst Collinson (1994) asserted that 'resistance frequently contains elements of

consent and consent often incorporates aspects of resistance' (op cit: 29). More recently, Mumby et al (2017: 1161) have observed that 'resistance and contradiction are frequent bedfellows' with actions being '*simultaneously* resistant and consensual' (Mumby, 1997: 368). Collinson's (1994) account of 'resistance through persistence' identified ambiguity where those resisting demanded greater involvement in the organization (op cit:25). He discussed employee resistance to gender discrimination as 'oppositional' (op cit:28) but also an ambiguous mix of 'consent, compliance and resistance' (op cit:51). Although not described as such, resistance to discrimination was 'productive' for both employees and employer because it was consistent with a new corporate culture that 'included a strong commitment to equal opportunities' (op cit: 41). We seek to provide additional insights into the ambiguous nature of resistance through spotlighting how it emerges through the disordered/irrational features of organisational life as well as the ordered/rational.

A fourth approach towards resistance is evident in the change management literature. Through exploring how pragmatic resistance is embedded in and, at times, seeks to remedy organisational disorder, we counter managerial accounts that 'demonize resistance' (Thomas and Hardy, 2011: 233) or that view it as an obstacle that needs to be 'overcome' (e.g. Battilana and Casciaro,2013; Bovey and Hede,2001; Caruth et al, 1985; Kan and Parry, 2004; Schneider and Goldwasser,1998; Self and Scheaeder, 2009). This negative view of resistance is problematic even in managerial terms, as has been noted elsewhere (Ford and Ford, 2009: 2010; Ford, Ford and D'Amelio, 2008; Piderit, 2000). Indeed, the recent change management literature has argued that resistance can be 'a powerful tool' for managers (Ford and Ford, 2009:100) and 'a valuable resource in the accomplishment of change' (Ford and Ford, 2010:24). This literature, which suggests that resistance can be *used* as a 'diagnostic concept' (Bauer, 1991: 184), a 'constructive tool for change management' (Waddell and Sohal, 1998: 543) or as 'something the organization uses to improve itself and its decisions' (Oreg, 2006:

97) is problematic. It all too readily assumes that resistance can be the handmaiden of management. Inequality, conflict, ambiguity and ambivalence are swept aside in the belief that management acts, and organisations operate, in largely rational, consensual, planned and ordered ways.

A final strand of work on resistance focuses on productive or facilitative resistance. Hence Thomas et al (2011) explored an organisation that introduced a culture change initiative, the success of which ‘hinged on the replacement of the existing engineering focus....with a culture that focused on the new customer’ (Thomas et al, 2011:24). The authors refer to middle manager resistance, which challenged the focus of the ‘new’ culture but did not challenge the need for a culture change. The resistance was presented as consistent with corporate aims for together they produced ‘innovative, synergistic’ (Thomas et al, 2011: 34) organisational change. The authors called this ‘facilitative’ resistance, which involved challenging senior managers’ meanings through *authorised* means that in turn created a ‘generative dialogue’ (Thomas et al, 2011: 35). Thomas et al (2011) focused on an individual, episodic, isolated act that sought to challenge and transform the meaning of a culture change programme through discursive practices. It can be argued then that, despite their differences, ‘facilitative’ resistance shares some assumptions in common with the change management literature insofar as it suggests that resistance can support corporate ends. This adopts a different concept of organisations to the one we follow where order/rationality coexist with disorder/irrationality. The resistance we refer to as pragmatic often operates under the radar and does not simply facilitate change. Moreover, it reflects that organisations are arenas of inequality, spiralling work demands and the constant drive for efficiency.

Thomas et al’s (2011) observations have some affinity with what has been termed ‘productive’ resistance that refers to ‘forms of protest that develop outside of institutional

channels....concerned with concrete activities that aim to voice claims and interests that are usually not taken into account by management decisions' (Courpasson et al, 2012: 801). While this resistance serves the interests of particular groups, it is also seen as beneficial for the organisation as a whole by promoting alternatives to existing managerial practices. Although productive resistance gathers momentum outside of official institutional channels, it utilises *authorised* means, such as formal communication. It is strategic, overt, periodic and refers to isolated, organized activities that depend on the political skills and collaborative work of organisational actors. These actors use their internal legitimacy to mobilise resources so as to oblige top managers to accommodate their suggestions. Productive resistance, as Courpasson et al (2012) argue, is typically directed at a particular managerial decision that is perceived as objectionable by those resisting. It is driven by a clearly articulated change agenda that cannot be dismissed.

In Courpasson et al's (2012) cases, the functional decision of one group of managers was challenged by another group of managers. Resistance was driven by political motives and struggles between competing groups. It was initiated to defend identities, interests, organisational values and ways of working. It therefore partly resonates with post-structural theorising. In both of Courpasson et al's (2012) cases, senior managers were represented as acting in rational ways - willing to accommodate resistance, albeit at times reluctantly, so that they and the organisation, could 'move forward' (op cit: 817). The organisation as a whole, its management and the resistance can therefore be seen as operating in a predominantly rational way for the 'good of the organisation' (Courpasson et al, 2012: 816). As with 'facilitative' resistance, this distinguishes productive from pragmatic resistance due to our emphasis on the disorder and irrationality that lives with rationality and order. Pragmatic resistance is more sporadic, pervasive, ambiguous, less focused or organised and enacted by a wider range of organisational actors than 'facilitative' or 'productive' resistance. It is a means

of working with and against irrational situations, which has not been stressed by previous studies on resistance. Pragmatic resistance dwells in the shadows of organisations and is a largely hidden, pervasive, unauthorised, everyday feature of them that is unlikely to be known, used or controlled by senior managers. It does not simply work for the ‘good of the organisation’ (ibid) or for those who resist because its outcomes are ambiguous, ambivalent and unpredictable.

### **Methodology**

This article emerged from a nine month ethnographic study (Kostera, 2007; Ybema et al, 2009) conducted between December 2011 and August 2012 at Silo - a manufacturing company that employs approximately 100 people in the UK and which was acquired by a global conglomerate, headquartered in the USA, at the beginning of the new millennium. The Parent Organisation (PO), which credits its Striving for Standardization (STS) initiative with considerable performance improvements, endeavours to standardise its operating systems across its subsidiaries through STS. It was the implementation and operation of STS at Silo that was the focus of the ethnographic research.

We understand ethnography as a particular ‘way of seeing’ (Wolcott, 1999) which entails prolonged immersion in the studied community. It requires ‘in-depth and up-close’ (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009: 103) fieldwork - as well as the translation of that experience to render it meaningful to the reader (Cunliffe, 2010). Ethnographic research is particularly suitable to the study of resistance as it ‘offers greater opportunities to capture the infrapolitical forms of resistance that fall under the radar’ (Mumby et al, 2017: 1175). The third author, a practitioner-researcher, was employed by Silo prior to the research, first on a temporary basis and then for nine months during the research on a permanent contract. She worked as a middle manager in marketing and data were collected under the academic supervision of the

second author. In this sense, the approach resembles what Alvesson (2009) describes as ‘at home ethnography’ where the researcher is familiar with the setting they are studying prior to the commencement of data collection, which enables unique and ‘excellent access to the object of study’ (Ybema and Horvers, 2017: 1238). The dual identity of the researcher was communicated to the staff who participated in the research and all were promised anonymity in any research materials.

### Data Collection

The research combined participant observation and informal ethnographic interviews with documentary analysis (Ybema et al, 2009). The bulk of the data was generated through participant observation and involved daily field note taking (Silverman, 2000), which is often seen as the hallmark of ethnographic studies (Czarniawska, 2007; Dewalt, Dewalt and Waylan, 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Van Maanen, 1988). Participant observation allows one to ‘grasp complex organisational processes’ (Ybema et al, 2009:6) and to understand ‘how things work’ in organisational settings (Watson, 2011). We see it as ‘both a data collection and an analytic tool’ (Dewalt et al, 2010: 264) as data were collected whilst simultaneously analysing how organisation members worked with a change initiative. In total, one hundred meetings were observed, which translated into over 237 entries in a research journal. They included many impromptu conversations pertaining to STS that were recorded as field notes.

The researcher was rarely directly involved in the meetings themselves, which afforded the opportunity to capture observations as they occurred and facilitated ‘reflexive distance’ (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009: 115). At times, however, the ethnographer was forced to take a more active part, in which case notes were made when the next opportunity arose. These shifting roles of the researcher who needs to constantly negotiate involvement with

organisation members while doing fieldwork are not atypical in ethnography. As Börjesson (2013: 406) notes, in participant observation the researcher often needs to move ‘from shadow to person’, as participant observation is an iterative process (Dewalt et al, 2010).

Impromptu conversations in and around the office provided another source of data and were enabled by the researcher’s established relationship with the team, which is often seen as a prerequisite for successful ethnography (e.g. Alvesson, 2009). The researcher often hung around after meetings or, at the end of the work day, to listen and contribute to conversations with employees and/or members of the management team. Relevant excerpts from this in the form of short verbatim dialogue transcripts (Emerson et al, 2011) together with notes from informal ethnographic interviews were also written in a research journal, which added to the richness of the observational data. Rather than following a formal interview schedule at a fixed point, the research involved informal discussions over a period of time which were closely embedded in the work situation (see Moore, 2011). This approach towards data collection allows one to obtain insights from participants in relation to events as they occur. In this sense our approach is in line with ethnographic principles, since, as Cunliffe (2010:229) reminds us, ‘ethnographies are about context and temporality’.

Organisational documents also provided insights into STS and included multiple internal sources, such as the company website, training materials, internal presentations and official communication. In total, 57 documents were gathered. They were all catalogued and logged into a master document, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The documents provided an understanding of STS, the ways in which it was presented to management and staff, as well as the work undertaken or planned in relation to its implementation.

## Data Analysis

The iterative process of data analysis was conducted in emergent stages and commenced in

tandem with data collection through a close reading of field notes and documents and writing in-process descriptive and reflective memos (Emerson et al, 2001). The first stage was accomplished through a combination of open coding with more theoretically informed codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We sought to understand how the research participants made sense of STS, how they went about using, opposing and engaging with it. This round of analysis resulted in a series of codes which identified different instances of resistance. An important theme that emerged was the persistent framing of STS as a ‘hassle’ which we began to investigate more closely. It was consistent with the view that STS-related activities were seen as separate from ‘real work’. In order to better understand this distinction, we carefully reviewed our field notes looking for the context in which STS was described by organisation members as ‘separate from real work’ or interfering with ‘real work’.

The analysis involved ‘collective sensemaking’ (Smets et al., 2014), which included critical, interactive, reflexive discussion and questioning of the data that the practitioner-researcher had collected by the other two authors. We chronologically traced the emergence of resistance to STS as something ‘separate from real work’, a process which drew our attention to its close correspondence with the trajectory of STS implementation and its troubles. It was then that our understanding of resistance as a means of working in relation to and against organisational rationality/disorder started to emerge.

We were struck by the extent of the problems, the degree of irrationality, the lack of planning and disorder that were observed first-hand and which featured in conversations with others. Our curiosity was stimulated by the pervasive, ambiguous and diverse forms of resistance that arose in relation to such conditions. This seemed unusual so we went back to the extant theorising of resistance. We sought to establish whether it could help us to make sense of the pragmatic nature of the resistance that arose in relation to it but, as our foregoing discussion of the literature reveals, we felt that it could only be partially accounted for



through the available literature.

The next stage of the analysis, therefore, focused on refining our emergent core concept by re-interrogating the data and looking for broader patterns and, simultaneously, exploring whether our observations could be explained by alternative interpretations, such as an uncommitted workforce. In doing so we asked two interrelated questions: who engages in pragmatic resistance and are there any wider patterns in which pragmatic resistance is enacted? The process enabled us to distinguish between (1) pragmatic resistance by managers and employees enacted in order to complete what they saw as ‘real work’ (2) pragmatic resistance exercised by ‘habitual’ or frequent volunteers and (3) pragmatic resistance as working around the problems that arose in relation to STS. Employees, managers and ‘habitual volunteers’ all engaged in multiple, overlapping, different and similar forms of pragmatic resistance, some of the complexity of which we attempt to represent below.

### **The Case study**

Silo employs a large proportion of long serving staff, with an average length of service of approximately fifteen years. A receptionist, for example, proudly displayed her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday photo taken at Silo over three decades earlier. At the time of data collection, 70% of the workforce was male, with an even greater gender imbalance further up the organisational hierarchy. The workforce is spread across two sites: a production line in the North of the UK and the main office located in the South. Shortly after its acquisition by the PO, new managers preoccupied with its financial performance were sent by the HQs to manage the subsidiary. During their incumbency STS implementation was not discussed. After their departure, Nigel - a local executive - was promoted as the General Manager (GM) of Silo.

The stated intention of STS is to meet customer demand and deliver world-class quality solutions and services. Similar to other continuous improvement philosophies, such as

Six Sigma (Linderman et al, 2003; Yu and Zaheer, 2010 ) or ACE (e.g. Bhuiyan, Bagel and Wilson, 2006), its implementation involves ‘differentiated achievement levels’ (Ansari et al, 2014: 26). Hence stage one denotes basic awareness whilst stage four reflects advanced performance and full employee engagement with the STS philosophy. Through the standardization and rationalization of processes, STS fosters the relentless pursuit of efficiency and waste reduction. It is seen as integral to improving corporate performance in relation to quality, customer service and costs. The PO set deadlines for attaining each level of STS and Silo was granted a five year period of grace to ‘*get its house in order*’ and attain the first level. It was towards the end of the five years that struggles over its implementation began because, as one middle manager explained, it ‘*hit staff like a tonne of bricks*’. Before we discuss the resistance to STS, it is important to consider the context of its implementation and operation.

## **Findings**

### **The implementation of STS**

The implementation of STS at Silo was often described in informal conversations as ‘*madness*’ and ‘*chaos*’. A middle manager summarised her experiences as ‘*jumping off a cliff edge*’, indicating a reckless, out of control process due to the speed at which it was initiated and the demand for swift results. As STS implementation was compulsory, it was coercive from the start and yet the PO did not prescribe *how* it should be adopted and its progressive competence stages allowed for a phased introduction. The Silo management contributed to the autocratic approach by insisting on rapid and full implementation. One can question whether imposing change without consultation or local level input is rational but Silo’s management added to the sense of irrationality by simultaneously distancing themselves from STS.

STS was launched at a general meeting which all Silo staff, including those on parental leave, were instructed to attend. It was presented as a non-negotiable corporate system but neither its potential benefits nor overall goals were explained. Nigel, the GM, depicted it as a task that needed to be accomplished by the workforce. Informal conversations among the staff after this first announcement, indicated that STS was not seen as a logical response to business demands but *'ridiculous ... just another management fad that will eventually fizzle out'* (Tom, middle manager) – an additional burden on top of the current workload. This interpretation of STS appeared to align with the views of those seeking to impose STS, hence Silo's GM conceded in private conversations that it *'just seems like hard work'*. Difficulties were compounded because, according to Nigel, Silo employees were not accustomed to *'processes or procedures like [STS]'*, which is indicative of a less bureaucratic work environment. The existing work practices were not seen as needing reform by Silo's managers, which is apparent in the GM's official communication where he asserted *'What we did worked for us'*. In private conversations with the third author, he very candidly observed *'Look!, I don't believe in this stuff because I think it doesn't work and I wouldn't be wasting everyone's time on it except that the [PO] want us to do it....so let's get as much information together so that they will leave us alone'*.

The perceived understanding among Silo employees was that STS was being implemented purely because Silo had been instructed to do so. Rather than a means to an end, implementation became an end in itself, which compounded the sense of irrationality. It was common to hear staff express their concerns about STS and its implementation after STS focused group meetings (e.g. *'This is ridiculous, [STS] is about manufacturing, what has that got to do with servicing system? It looks like no one has considered the guys out in the field, what's their involvement in all of this?'* Violet, employee). The staff were expected to *'get on with the work'* of STS even though a general understanding of STS, its processes and tools

was absent. This lack of understanding was evident during informal conversations and in the confusion over how to interpret STS tools expressed in team meetings. Even though the management of Silo had five years to familiarise themselves and employees with STS, implementation was left to the eleventh hour. One middle manager described the ensuing sense of chaos:

...it was so much information at the same time, it was so confusing. Because there were so many processes involved and so many things that come together. .. the entire process began without thinking about it and making sense of it. The top management threw it at the middle management team and they then just threw it at their employees. Like: “This needs to be done, there’s no point in moaning about it, just get it done”.

In private conversations with managers, Nigel himself would sometimes admit to his role in contributing to the problems with STS implementation. In one exchange, which suggests that he also engaged in pragmatic resistance in relation to STS, he observed:

It’s probably my fault, we could have been working on this a year ago, but I really didn’t think it was that important. Now we have to fit as much as we can into this short time to get it up and running. I don’t care if people think the process doesn’t fit the business, at this stage they just have to do it!

Adding to the sense of disorder, the time for completing compulsory online training, which contained twenty online training modules ranging from 30 minutes to three hours was halved. Training was problematic not because of its content but because the local infrastructure had not been upgraded and so many computers lacked the required audio facility. Only two organisation members received advanced training: the GM and a newly appointed project champion – a shipping clerk - who, from observations, struggled to share his STS knowledge. As a result, neither senior nor middle managers appeared to have an understanding of what STS involved. There were no meetings with the staff to consider how to integrate STS into

the existing processes. In private conversations, both managers and staff admitted that they were using their common sense and intuition, rather than knowledge to interpret and use STS. This lack of knowledge notwithstanding, the entire workforce, except for the GM, was organized into teams to work on relevant STS-related projects. As one member of staff commented, it was as if the *'blind were leading the blind'*, which neatly captures the sense of disorientation.

The creation of teams is a cornerstone of STS but it generated considerable tension. All STS tools were to be implemented simultaneously by teams focusing on specific tools. As a manager who took part in the process explained, the allocation of staff to teams was accomplished on a random basis – with staff names being *'drawn from a hat'* - in order to *'create cross pollination of ideas'* and improve cohesion between different groups of employees and the two UK sites. The outcome was that a large proportion of staff were allocated to projects that were disconnected from their daily work and outside their area of expertise. This became particularly pronounced when the 'Southerners', as the office workers were often referred to, were allocated to the 'Northerners' production/ engineering team. Staff who were responsible for the production line were asked to work on resolving customer-related issues. A marketer was assigned to a team focusing on improving the quality of the manufacturing process and resolving quality issues despite the fact that he had never seen the equipment in question. The teams were supposed to meet face to face on a weekly basis, which in many cases meant a 3-4 hour drive, often with an overnight stay. This was frequently described as *'farcical'* by the affected staff not only because of the time and financial costs associated with the new projects but also due to the random team composition which to many didn't *'make any sense whatsoever'*. The quote below captured in field notes after one of the STS group meetings is indicative of the general sentiment:

What a waste of our time – what do we know about placing machinery in a warehouse... who's bright idea was this? I can see where some processes could be useful but to throw it all at us like that is not fair. (Tim, middle manager)

The challenges with implementing STS were further exacerbated by a lack of coordination and information gathering. STS is premised on involving all staff to gather, analyse and exchange information which propels the continuous improvement cycle. However, at Silo there were no formal integration mechanisms and teams worked in isolation on their individual STS processes. It was evident that the information feedback/forward processes were not acted upon. For example, an internal employee engagement survey was conducted and identified the need to raise staff engagement levels. Even though there was engagement and a significant number of staff ideas had been generated by a dedicated STS team and presented to the management, the ideas were not communicated to the staff or passed to the other teams. Moreover, the ideas that were generated were never implemented.

As the coercive pressure to implement STS intensified, inconsistencies arose between senior managers' (in)actions and their instruction to implement STS. Some members of the executive team, for example, did not complete online STS training courses. Moreover, they often left STS-related discussions to the end of meetings. The official communication, both via email and during weekly meetings, nevertheless became quite forceful, if not at times aggressive, in response to the perceived poor level of staff engagement with STS. One middle manager described the weekly meetings as '*really [emphasis] difficult, like scratching nails down a chalkboard.*' Observations and informal conversations suggested that staff were afraid to ask questions even if they did not know what exactly they were supposed to do.

In this section we have provided an indication of the irrationality and disorder that accompanied the implementation of STS. This is not to suggest, however, that there was an

absence of corporate rationality/order. Silo continued to manufacture and supply highly specialised products in a timely manner. Moreover, some work was completed to promote STS, especially in terms of publicising the improvements delivered by the manufacturing team. In the next section, we consider more fully the experience of staff/managers in relation to the operation of STS.

### **The Operation of STS**

Although STS was represented on the corporate website and in internal presentations as a ‘philosophy’ that underpins the ‘way we do things’, at Silo it was experienced as an additional burden. It was associated with tasks and activities that were perceived as separate from ‘real work’. As others have observed (e.g. Ansari et al, 2014; Knights and McCabe,1997), the implementation of continuous improvement philosophies requires additional work. This observation also applies to Silo as the implementation of STS necessitated considerable effort and the staff were required to engage in STS processes and work with STS tools. The tension between efforts to improve work quality and to deliver quantity output have been noted elsewhere (e.g. Bain and Taylor,2000; Knights and McCabe,1997) so these dynamics are not unique to Silo. After creating STS teams, the number of team meetings doubled and, in some cases, tripled. This created problems for employees allocated to off-site teams as it added a day’s travel to their work schedule. This intrusion of teamwork into both the working day and life outside of work has also been found elsewhere (Knights and McCabe, 2003; Thomas and Davies,2005).

The basic principles of STS, as a number of employees noted, were not that remote from the established working practices, such as determining the cause of problems and implementing preventative action. Nevertheless, what was *different* was the additional bureaucratic work that STS created, which was experienced as a ‘*hassle*’ and an artificial

complication that, it was believed, delivered few results. Due to similarities with the established order, it might be thought that the problem was not the *content* of STS but the way that it was *implemented*, however, both were regarded as problematic. Hence STS included extensive bureaucratic documentation that some described as being '*quite complex for no reason at all*'. It added layers of control to work processes and introduced the drawing and labelling of process charts, along with an emphasis on reporting:

you [normally] check your work, you ask yourself why things might have gone wrong ...whereas when you take all those things and you write a little blurb about all of those things and make a little process how you should do those things and then put a label on the top of it, it becomes something other than it was in the beginning. It becomes an extra piece of work. (Sam, middle manager)

Nothing about the [STS] processes fit what we do. Why can't we just choose the parts that are relevant rather than try to fit a square peg into a round hole? This is what's going to take time...making things fit. (Judie, engineer)

Of course, from the PO's perspective, STS is a means to formalise and standardise work processes as a basis for their continuous improvement, as was made clear through its website but this is not how the managers or employees at Silo understood it. The flaws in both its content *and* implementation produced an intervention that was disordered and irrational from the perspective of those subject to its demands. As others (Alvesson,1984; Alvesson and Spicer,2012; 2016; Astley and Van de Ven, 1983; Brunsson, 2006; Bryman,1984; Burrell,1999; Cohen et al, 1972; McCabe,2016; Simon, 1957; Weick, 1976) have indicated, such conditions are not unique to Silo. In view of this, it is not simply a case of mismanagement, although clearly STS was mismanaged, but rather that organisations are



places where order/disorder and rationality/irrationality coexist. This generated the context in which Pragmatic resistance flourished, as we will now explore.

### **Resisting in order to work – pragmatic resistance as the prioritisation of ‘real work’**

In this section we will discuss how pragmatic resistance arose in relation to the need to prioritise what was seen as ‘real work’. The actions of a mistake proofing team serve as a useful illustration of this point. Mistake proofing is one of the key principles of STS and a mistake proofing team was created to gather performance information. The team designed an on-line form to complete if mistakes or issues got in the way of work, such as a problem with the server, website or production line. All incidents were to be logged by the staff that the mistake impacted on. The form was a large excel file that required each member of staff to input information including one’s initials, department, time, duration of the problem, its nature and impact on work.

The staff and managers resisted by gradually failing to complete the form because the reporting process was considered to be counter-productive. One might lose fifteen minutes of work due to a problem but another fifteen were lost reporting the issue. By its nature, failing to log problems is clearly a sporadic form of resistance. The corporate rationality behind such logging is to measure and remove problems but it was interpreted as disrupting ‘real work’. Clearly, this is different from other forms of resistance such as strikes, action short of a strike, work-to-rule or sabotage because the aim is not to disrupt work but to maintain it. It is ambiguous as it is productive of ‘real work’ – core daily tasks - but disruptive of STS. It can partly be explained by the extent to which employees subjectively identified with what they saw as their ‘real work’. It therefore sits uneasily with LPT theory, which views the possibility of ‘consent and common interests’ as ‘unlikely’ (Thompson and Smith, 2010:17)

but, it can also be explained, in part, by LPT because STS attempted to intensify control and so it was resisted.

Complaints about STS '*taking [people] away from actual work*' and rhetorical questions about how '*one could get anything done*' due to STS demands as well as open refusals to do STS work: '*I'm not doing this, it's stupid, I'm under constant pressure to make sales. Where will I find the time to do all these reports?*' were an everyday feature of corporate life. The STS training was seen as a distraction because it interrupted the working day and it had to be completed within a tight deadline, which contributed to a sense of work intensification. The staff were observed being interrupted from their daily tasks so that they could complete online training. Obviously, from a corporate perspective, training is a rational means to implement STS and improve work but it was not understood on the shop or office floor in this way.

Taken together, these observations indicate how STS was experienced as counterproductive as it disrupted 'real work'. Instead of facilitating daily work and having a positive impact on the business, it was seen as consuming a lot of resources without delivering much in return. The staff engaged in pragmatic resistance to deal with what they saw as '*the distraction of [STS]*' that they encountered on a daily basis. This was apparent in a wide range of decisions, actions and inactions which prioritised 'real work' at the expense of STS work. Pragmatic resistance was therefore not anti-work but was linked to what employees understood as their 'real work'. Every STS meeting that was observed suffered from absences because meetings were seen as interrupting the day's work. Resisting attendance was a pragmatic means of getting on with the daily demands of the job. It was normal for STS project leaders to chase others, both employees and managers, into attending meetings. The staff, even when attending STS meetings, frequently failed to participate, for example, by not speaking unless spoken to and staring out of the window. These acts seemed

intended to hasten the speed of meetings so that employees could get back to their 'real' work. The staff also refused to volunteer for STS activities because to do so detracted from 'real work'. Pragmatic resistance therefore hindered STS and although it may be seen as 'decaf' (Contu,2008) or 'innocuous' (Fleming and Spicer,2008) we can observe that it, at least partly, undermined STS. Moreover, it indicates that managers are not entirely in control despite surface impressions to the contrary.

### **Habitual Volunteers and Pragmatic Resistance**

A large proportion of STS work was completed by a small group of what we will describe as 'habitual volunteers' who were younger, ambitious staff who exhibited an ambiguous subjectivity that was engaged and, at times, also resistant towards STS. They consistently volunteered for STS-related projects and voiced enthusiasm about STS in formal and informal meetings. Their readiness to engage in STS work did not go unnoticed and habitual volunteers came under pressure to facilitate STS implementation both by team members and managers. Hence management meetings were observed where the names of habitual volunteers were put forward (which in itself could be seen as an act of pragmatic resistance designed to avoid responsibility for STS activities) when a new group or a project needed to be set up even though it was clear to those present that the volunteers were already stretched, or as some observed '*pushed to the maximum*'. In the words of one of the managers, habitual volunteers were a '*safe pair of hands*' that '*always come up with the goods*'. It was largely the work of these volunteers that enabled Silo to attain the first and second stages of STS implementation and so they contributed to the *appearance* of corporate order and conformity in relation to STS.

Despite being the guardians and engines of STS, the habitual volunteers also engaged in pragmatic resistance. Hence a number of habitual volunteers were observed to compete

with other colleagues to complete the STS training as quickly and, with as little impact as possible, on their 'real work', for example, by speedily scrolling down test pages. This was possible because of the irrational situation that irrespective of how poorly the training was completed, one was still registered as having completed it. The volunteers also competed over who could avoid the training for the longest. An analysis of internal reports revealed that some volunteers had completed nine months' of STS training in just four or five weeks, whereas others had not started any training eight months after the launch of STS. This display of pragmatic resistance served as an example to others and frustrated STS implementation. Curiously, this pragmatic resistance was productive of STS implementation in the sense that it was necessary for staff to complete their training in order to meet STS standards and yet it can also be seen as oppositional because of how the training was completed. Indeed, it meant that the staff were not trained correctly and so this both wasted time, resources and failed to equip the staff with STS skills. The volunteers, therefore, both reinforced corporate rationality and undermined it.

Pragmatic resistance by staff, managers and habitual volunteers that prioritised 'real work' had a range of consequences. It facilitated and hampered STS implementation and also helped to deliver 'real work'. We can therefore observe that corporate order and disorder march together hand-in-hand. The pragmatic resistance of not attending or participating fully in STS meetings generated complaints from team leaders thereby forcing management to reassess how staff were allocated to STS teams. This served both staff and corporate interests because the initial random team allocation, often described by staff as 'farcical', was replaced by one which better reflected staff specialisms and avoided geographically dispersed teams.

Pragmatic resistance also had quite contradictory effects on staff. On the one hand, STS and STS avoidance tactics brought some staff together, often through sharing stories of frustration with STS as well as resistant humour (Westwood and Johnston, 2012). STS

terminology was used for subversive ends to highlight perceived tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies in the corporate philosophy. On the other hand, STS also created tensions and frustration among others, especially those responsible for implementing STS training, tools and processes who found themselves *'chasing people into meetings'* and *'wasting time waiting for others to do their bit'*.

### **Resisting by implementing change: Pragmatic resistance as 'working around' the Problems of STS**

As has already been explained, STS required staff cooperation and a continuous exchange of information between teams to drive process improvements. However, since teams tended to work separately, problems arose carrying out their respective projects. These challenges combined with the demand for results, led some teams to pragmatically circumvent STS' rules in order to implement change. To illustrate this resistance, we will focus on the operations of two teams: the certification team and the mistake proofing team.

In order to achieve STS achievement categories, processes had to be certified by a STS certification team. When, however, the certification team requested information from the sales or engineering teams, they rarely received any data. Failing to send data is an act of pragmatic resistance that occurred sporadically depending on when requests were made. In order to cope with this pragmatic resistance and to implement STS, the certification team lead started to look for alternative ways to achieve the certification process. Instead of working on data supplied by others, he pragmatically resisted by providing it himself, drawing heavily on his own experiences. In team meetings he conceded that it was just too arduous, if not impossible, to *'massage the other teams into providing this [required] information'*. This pragmatic resistance enabled the certification team to be seen to be delivering STS-related

results and, more broadly, helped Silo satisfy the PO's performance expectations. It was therefore productive but it also violated STS principles and corrupted its intentions.

The same mechanism of pragmatically circumventing the requirements of STS in order to appear to meet STS demands was evident in relation to the mistake proofing team. This team was responsible for pooling and analysing data from the company mistake proofing database, where, for example, computer problems should be reported, as described above. As has already been explained, the reporting of mistakes/errors was pragmatically resisted, which meant that the data was very limited. The mistake proofing team, therefore, circumvented STS rules by substantially adding to the numbers of reported errors themselves. The pragmatic resistance of this group can be seen as productive because it potentially created a truer reflection of reality because had it not been for their resistant practices, errors would not have been reported. Nevertheless, it also masked the pragmatic resistance of others and created a distorted image of work. The staff who produced the reports were habitual volunteers who relied on other habitual volunteers to input data. The different stages of STS were therefore resisted but also gradually enacted both through and with the help of pragmatic resistance. The resistance was simultaneously productive of change, which it enabled, but also subversive as it obscured inaction, disguised non-conformity, corrupted outcomes and created the illusion or appearance of compliance.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This article has introduced the term *pragmatic resistance* which refers to multiple, informal, unorganised, non-confrontational, unauthorised, pervasive, on-going, sporadic subversions of official guidelines. Pragmatic resistance arose as a means of working with and against organisational demands in relation to a new intervention. Our ethnographic study has enabled us to make a fourfold contribution to the understanding of resistance.

First, we have demonstrated that pragmatic resistance may arise in response to the irrational and disordered implementation and operation of corporate initiatives. This link between organisational disorder/irrationality and the resistance that arises in relation to it is not central to previous approaches towards resistance. Pragmatic resistance enabled the very change it challenged through finding ways of working with and against STS. Pragmatic resistance did not simply support STS because it subtly undermined it - processes and procedures were ignored, figures fabricated and image took precedence over substance. Although ostensibly corporate rationality and order prevailed, as STS proceeded and products continued to be manufactured, all was not as it seemed. We have observed that pragmatic resistance is inseparable from everyday life and, in some ways, it helps to make it happen but not entirely in line with how those in positions of authority might believe or would like it to be. Beneath the surface calm of 'instrumental rationality' (Weber,1964), we can identify multiple rationalities at work as managers and staff attempt to work with and against corporate instructions. This more fluid representation of organisational life indicates how resistance operates in more subversive, unforeseen, silent, uncontrolled, uncontrollable and hidden ways than the apparent order of corporations suggest. This is what tends to be missed by Contu's (2008) distinction between 'decaf' and 'real' resistance and Fleming and Spicer's (2008) depiction of 'banal' or 'innocuous' resistance because these seemingly unimportant acts and subjectivities do at least indicate that management is not *in control* to the extent that many scholars fear.

The distinctiveness of pragmatic resistance is evident through comparisons with earlier approaches. Pragmatic resistance was not an attempt to gain higher wages; it was not simply a management versus workers struggle because managers also pragmatically resisted and, therefore, pragmatic resistance sits uneasily with the 'structural antagonism' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:29) between capital and labour highlighted by LPT scholars. Indeed, it

partly reflected a corporate struggle between Silo and its PO, which again does not fit well with LPT. Nevertheless, from a LPT perspective, it could be argued that avoiding STS work that is interpreted as a distraction or wasted effort is a form of ‘making out’ (Burawoy, 1979; McCabe, 2014) or a way to maintain control, earnings and avoid work intensification. Indeed, pragmatic resistance can be seen in classic LPT theory terms as opposition to control through STS and yet pragmatic resistance also reflected consent. Hence our case illustrates how resistance can reflect a commitment to what is seen as ‘real work’, which has been underplayed in previous conceptualisations of resistance. This is also difficult to reconcile with LPT where ‘consent and common interests’ are seen as ‘unlikely’ (Thompson and Smith, 2010:17) and so this is why it is necessary to turn to post-structural ways of theorising.

Our concept of pragmatic resistance relates to and can be contrasted with post-structural work which conceptualises resistance as struggles over meaning and subjectivity (Jermier et al, 1994; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Employees/managers identified with what they saw as ‘real work’ and resisted, in part, to allow the ‘real work’, for which they are accountable and are paid, to continue. Rather than focusing solely on subjectivity, following Kärreman and Alvesson (2009:1122), we have considered ‘action’ or *acts* of resistance such as missing meetings, refusing to volunteer, failing to report problems. Post-structural studies almost invariably link struggle with subjectivity - rejections, modifications or contestation of assigned identities by groups or individuals (Clarke et al, 2009; Jermier et al, 1994; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005) but, in our study, struggle was equally bound up with practice and economics. To surface and understand this, it would have been inadequate to place subjectivity centre-stage.

Secondly, our article adds to existing work which has identified the ambiguous nature of resistance (Ashcraft,2005; Burawoy,1979; Collinson,1994; Fleming and Spicer,2003;



Jermier et al,1994; Knights and McCabe,2000; McCabe,2014; Mumby,1997; 2005; Mumby et al, 2017; Sturdy,1992). It has highlighted the manifold ways in which pragmatic resistance can be simultaneously productive, consenting and oppositional through unpacking the complex subjectivities and practices it encompasses. Although pragmatic resistance could be construed as resistance against the PO's domination it also opposed Silo's managers who *both* advocated and undermined STS. Pragmatic resistance opposed what was seen as unnecessary bureaucracy but it was also productive for management because through it employees got on with what they saw as their 'real work'. It therefore escapes the polarity of productive versus oppositional resistance (Courpasson et al, 2012).

Pragmatic resistance points to a more complex and ambiguous subjectivity than has so far been suggested in relation to resistance. Through a post-structural lens, distancing (Collinson, 1994) and cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) are seen as a means to avoid assimilation into corporate culture initiatives and many Silo employees and managers were disengaged with STS. This alone, however, cannot account for the dynamics of the case because employees/managers were simultaneously engaged and identified with what they saw as their 'real work'. Moreover, the 'habitual volunteers' did not entirely distance themselves from STS. Instead, they sought to work with it and invented ways of coping with the pragmatic resistance of others whilst engaging in pragmatic resistance themselves. Habitual volunteers were usually young and ambitious and so an aspirational economic identity no doubt played a part in their consent and resistance. The pragmatic resistance of these individuals allowed the wider pragmatic resistance to continue because 'ostensibly' STS was moving forwards. This enabled Silo to progress through the STS achievement levels, and allowed others to limit or withdraw from STS practices so as to do 'real work'. Paradoxically then, change and compliance with the PO's requirements was achieved through

resistance even though there was considerable non-compliance that also thwarted how STS was supposed to work.

We link this ambiguity to the tension between rationality and order versus irrationality and disorder, which has been neglected in previous studies of resistance. As we have seen, employees and managers do not simply reside in a work world where instrumental rationality operates unhindered. The condition and experience of work is far more ambiguous than this and so pragmatic resistance emerges as a means for individuals to work with and against a situation that they may experience as irrational, disordered and chaotic. Not every individual will respond in the same way to such conditions and, as we saw, much will depend on where they stand in relation to a given issue or interventions (i.e. habitual volunteers versus non-volunteers). Identifying with and responding to the rationality and demands of what was seen as 'real work' led some to pragmatically resist what they saw as the irrationality of STS. Order/disorder and rationality/irrationality coexisted in a fluid way which we argue evades the managerial aspiration to control others. It reflects and opens up cracks in the corporate order/rationality and pragmatic resistance is a condition and outcome of such fissures.

Thirdly, our findings extend the previous conceptualisations of productive (Courpasson et al, 2012) and facilitative (Thomas et al,2011) resistance. Although the pragmatic resistance we observed hampered change, it was also productive as it produced change and sought to cope with organisational disorder. In contrast to the earlier conceptualisation of productive resistance (Courpasson et al, 2012), pragmatic resistance did not refer to a *single* act or subjectivity but rather to different ways in which corporate intentions were thwarted and enabled; the further diversity and impact of which could be the subject of future investigations. Pragmatic resistance did not offer a clear alternative to what was seen as a problematic intervention. Rather than being strategic, it arose in sporadic, pervasive, reactive *and* proactive ways and was guided by pragmatic concerns to find ways to

work with and against the demands that staff *and* managers confronted. For example, while avoiding meetings and failing to report errors was reactive, fabricating data and gaining certification was more proactive. In view of this, pragmatic resistance can also be contrasted with Prasad and Prasad's (2000) 'routine resistance', which was understood to be 'not a constant or pervasive feature' (op cit:393) of the organisation they observed. In contrast to *productive resistance* which emerges as a strategy of dissent (Courpasson et al, 2012), pragmatic resistance was not planned. It was not limited to the actions of middle managers, as was also the case with facilitative resistance (Thomas et al, 2011). Despite the oppositional forms it took, it did not entirely block organisational activities or lead to 'dysfunctional freezing' (Courpasson et al,2012: 802). Our study demonstrates that the notions of productive or facilitative resistance, as so far conceptualised, underplay how resistance can be double-edged whereby it can simultaneously aid and hinder change.

Our final contribution is to highlight that resistance that is seemingly innocuous (Fleming and Spicer,2008) may not be insignificant because pragmatic resistance undermined how STS was supposed to operate. Hence the 'habitual volunteers' engaged in pragmatic resistance that was productive in that it aided STS implementation but it was also oppositional because it only *appeared* to satisfy the PO's requirement to comply with STS. It broke STS rules in response to rule breaking elsewhere and disguised non-compliance. Pragmatic resistance therefore points towards a vast underbelly of corporate life, which is often beyond the control and knowledge of those in positions of authority. It is in this sense that seemingly 'banal ... everyday actions' (Fleming and Spicer, 2008:303) or what has been regarded as 'decaf' (Contu, 2008) resistance might be more consequential than is sometimes assumed to be the case. Pragmatic resistance indicates that the grounds of managerial authority may be less stable and more cracked than surface impressions suggest. It points towards the need to examine resistance and its effects in ways that are simultaneously

productive, oppositional but also linked to consent as the identification with ‘real’ work indicates. As we have seen, these may not be distinct positions nor does pragmatic resistance offer clear-cut outcomes either for organisations or those who resist.

The power exercised through ‘managerialism’ (Deetz,1992) attempts to cement over the cracks of disorder/irrationality whilst glorifying order/rationality. Sadly, for managerialism, not everyone or everything bends to its will and so cracks appear. This is a cause to rejoice for those who fear the ever tightening grip of the iron cage of bureaucracy. Pragmatic resistance partly exists because managerialism, ever the combatant, can never wear the laurels of victory. This is not because pragmatic resistance simply wars with managerialism because as we have seen, it is both its friend and foe. Pragmatic resistance cannot be vanquished because managerialism can never hold total dominion for there are always cracks behind the surface of conformity. In its tenacity, managerialism seeks to embrace everything in a stranglehold but disorder cuts its bonds and irrationality emerges in ways that thwarts its endeavours. Pragmatic resistance resides in the ensuing hinterland, it blooms in the cracks taking neither the side of order nor disorder but finds pathways through the maelstrom that often evades detection. It reflects limits to the power that can be exercised through managerialism but it is not separate from such power. Rather, it warps, twists, confounds, hides, supports and undermines it.

To conclude, the key contribution of this article has been to advance earlier accounts of resistance through introducing the term ‘pragmatic resistance’. It is an expression of organisation members’ struggles to *work with and against* organisational demands and tensions that reflect corporate order/disorder and rationality/irrationality. Accounts of organisational irrationality are not new and so we posit that such forms of resistance may be widespread. Pragmatic resistance may be part of the ebb and flow of everyday life, the condition, processes and outcomes of which will be difficult, if not impossible, to predict or

control. It suggests that managers have much to learn from trying to engage with and understand the experiences of those who work beneath and alongside them even if such lessons cannot eradicate the cracks in managerialism. We have also elucidated the ambiguity of pragmatic resistance, which can be seen as oppositional, consenting and productive in ways that are also bound up with order/disorder and rationality/irrationality as a feature of everyday life. Finally, we have revealed how forms of resistance that may be dismissed as ‘innocuous’ or ‘decaf’ nevertheless indicate that established corporate power relations are vulnerable to resistance and disruption even if the outcomes of resistance remain uncertain and ambiguous. Pragmatic resistance then is part of the subterranean shadowland of corporate life that escapes the control and often the knowledge of management.

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