



Preaching and practising ‘flexibility’: Implications for theories of subjectivity at work

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between discourse and subjectivity in organizations with reference to an ethnographic study of UK management consultants. The article reveals the contradiction, criticism, cynicism and ambivalence involved in their role as preachers and practitioners of flexible work. These findings question the assumption that management consultants are evangelists that are identified with the discourses they sell. However, I also argue that the dis-identification and contradiction I observed did not in fact disrupt or disturb the production and promotion of their flexible working discourse. I suggest that the consultants constructed pragmatic, instrumental and dramaturgical selves in order to manage the tension between being preacher and practitioner. I conclude by suggesting that cynicism, ambivalence and contradiction constitute important but neglected features of work and organization.

KEYWORDS

contradiction ■ discourse ■ flexible work ■ identity ■
management consultancy ■ subjectivity

Introduction

Interest in the realm of employee subjectivity – the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires that comprise our self-understanding or self-identity – has a long heritage. The ‘human relations’ movement of the early 20th century was

influential in highlighting the importance of the psychological and social needs of workers. Even as far back as the industrial revolution, the more paternalistic employers expressed concern about the social and moral, as well as physical, well-being of their workforce. More recently, developments within labour process theory (e.g. Knights & Willmott, 1989), analysis of 'enterprise' discourse (e.g. du Gay, 1996) and corporate culture programmes (e.g. Kunda, 1992), not to mention the broader linguistic turn in the social sciences, has placed employee subjectivity at the heart of debates within management and organization studies.

The appeal of subjectivity, for managers at least, lies in the goal of controlling employee behaviour (what workers do) by colonizing employee subjectivity (who workers are). From a managerial perspective, it is hoped that employees will act in the best interests of the organization not because they are coerced, threatened or rewarded, but rather because they are motivated by a strong identification with company goals and values (Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). The issue of 'subjectivity' therefore lies at the heart of our understanding of human relations within organizations, that is, 'how individuals relate to the groups and organizations in which they are participants' (Brown, 2001: 114).

The concepts of 'corporate culture' and 'enterprise' are just two of the many discourses in, of and about organizations that attempt to reconfigure the organization of work.¹ Discourse can be understood as a set of concepts, texts and practices that frame the way in which we relate to, understand and act upon a particular phenomenon (Knights & Morgan, 1991), in this case the human subject at work. The term 'frame' is apt in the sense that discourses do not completely colonize processes of meaning-making, nor determine how they are acted upon (du Gay, 2000). Discourses can be enacted for strategic purposes not intended by their producers (Watson, 1994). The colonizing power of discourse is also rendered fragile as discourses meet and mix with other discourses (Kondo, 1990; Fairclough, 1992; Newton, 1998; Fournier & Grey, 1999; Gabriel, 1999; Trowler, 2001; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Barratt, 2003; Garrety et al., 2003; Karreman & Alvesson, 2004). Discourses can themselves contain a multiplicity of at times contradictory elements (Foucault, 1979).

It is this tension, clashing and contradiction within and between discourses that is the central focus of this article. To be sure, existing research has produced many insights into how employees react and respond to the schisms, fractures and gaps created by inconsistent and incompatible discourses. For example, Wilkinson and Willmott (1995) explored the contradictions between the concepts of 'trust' and 'participation' espoused in discourses of Total Quality Management (TQM) and the experience of

job insecurity and work intensification in the UK manufacturing industry. Studies of TQM implementation in a US manufacturing firm have also revealed the confusion and frustration experienced by employees faced with a conflict between the new TQM vision and the established values and power structures of the firm (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Wendt, 1993). Similar patterns have also been observed in the service sector. For example, Tracy (2004) notes how workers in two US correctional facilities struggled with the paradoxical demands of their job, including the tension between rehabilitation and punishment. Employees in the UK financial services sector have also been found to struggle to reconcile the demands for 'quality' and 'customer service' with the concomitant pressures to reduce costs and increase the pace of work (Knights & McCabe, 1997, 2000).

This existing body of literature has tended to focus on how employees respond to tensions and contradictions imposed upon them 'from above', for example from senior management, head office or from the wider normative expectations of the role. Much less has been said about those involved in producing, promoting and implementing organizational discourse. This could refer to senior or middle managers, head office staff, business gurus or management consultants. Key questions remain about these workers. Are discourse producers consistently and unambiguously identified with the discourses they produce? Are they passive channels for the transfer of discourse? Or is tension, contradiction and ambivalence to be found amongst the purveyors as well as the recipients of organizational discourses? If so, what does this mean for the discourses they produce?

In this article I address these questions by drawing on data from an in-depth ethnographic study of a group of UK management consultants called 'FlexiTeam' (a pseudonym). Management consultants present an ideal case study site because they have been recognized as a key actor in the production, promotion and implementation of new organizational discourses (Newton, 1996). The case also provides an ideal site for exploring the central tension at the heart of this article, namely *preacher* versus *practitioner*. This is because the consultants not only sold the concept of flexible working to clients but also practised flexible working themselves. Moreover, the tension between their role as preacher and practitioner is interesting precisely because it was not openly recognized as such. In fact, the consultants publicly claimed that their lived experience of flexible working made them experts, exemplars and embodiments of the discourse they sold. This makes FlexiTeam something of a 'hard case' for exploring subjectivity and discourse because the consultants publicly claimed to believe in and practise what they preached. In contrast, I will present ethnographic data that reveal the tensions, schisms and contradictions in their role as preachers and practitioners of flexibility. I will explore

what these findings mean for both their sense of self at work, their effectiveness as consultants and the discourse they produced.

The article is structured as follows. I start by examining existing literature that focuses on the tensions and contradictions experienced by discourse producers. A brief discussion of the study is provided, along with a short introduction to FlexiTeam and the 'flexible working' discourse they produced. The article moves on to reveal the ruptures and contradictions that appeared in the consultants' relationship to the discourse. Finally, I conclude by outlining the implications of these findings for theories of subjectivity, discourse and resistance in organizations.

Producing organizational discourse

A short note may be helpful on the intended meaning of the term 'discourse production'. The term is not used to imply a wholly distinct and discrete activity performed by a particular group. For example, the production of discourse invariably involves the consumption, appropriation and reconfiguration of existing discursive elements. As Newton (1996) observes, management consulting involves the re-presentation of knowledge and ideas as much as their invention. Indeed, the consultants at the centre of this article also 'consumed' discourses circulating in the wider discursive arena, such as the concept of 'work-life balance', and repackaged them into a form that supported the sale of their 'flexible working' discourse. Similarly, the 'consumption' of discourse also involves 'production' insofar as it entails the production of new meanings within each local context. The distinction between production and consumption is therefore intended merely as an analytical heuristic to distinguish different approaches to the study of discourse and facilitate thought about the relationship between discourse and the subject at work.

As I noted earlier, existing research has provided many insights into how employees deal with clashes and contradictions in the organizational discourses they are subject to. Much less attention, however, has been devoted to understanding the production of organizational discourses. Who is involved in producing new discursive regimes? What does their work involve? How do they relate to the discourses they produce? These questions are crucial for developing our understanding of how organizational members relate to discourse. As McCabe (2000: 937) suggests, it is important to interrogate assumptions that discourse producers constitute 'transparent ciphers' of discourse that merely 'enact it, live it, reinforce it and reproduce it'.

Managers as missionaries?

The role of managers in the production of organization discourse has received considerable attention. In their role as preachers of officially sanctioned organizational discourses, managers often face a dilemma when this clashes with their day-to-day experience of managing. For example, the role of 'missionary' can rest uneasily with their experiential knowledge of the problems and perverse consequences of new discursive regimes. The heady visions and optimistic euphoria surrounding a new discourse can often be far removed from the realities of implementing change. Indeed, leaders have been found to experience doubt, confusion and anxiety when confronted with the contradictions between the new vision and the old culture of the organization (Fairhurst, 1993). Managers have also been observed switching between new 'empowerment' and 'quality' and old 'control' and 'costs' discourses in an inconsistent and contradictory fashion (Knights & McCabe, 1997, 2000, 2003).

It is therefore not surprising that managers have been found to experience forms of ambivalence, instrumentality, superficiality, scepticism and cynicism with regard to the discourses they are expected to promote (Scase & Goffee, 1989; Watson, 1994; du Gay, 1996; Ackers & Preston, 1997; Knights & McCabe, 1997, 2000, 2003; Clark & Salaman, 1998; McCabe, 2000, 2002; Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Those expected to 'convert' others clearly do not always find their own 'conversion' unproblematic (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Therefore, if managers do not comprise a 'unified body' pedalling a 'cohesive philosophy' (McCabe, 2000: 937), it seems inadequate to characterize them as 'missionaries' on an 'evangelical crusade' (Mueller & Carter, 2004: 229). In fact, managers may even be hindered by a total and absolute identification with a particular discourse. For example, research has shown that an uncritical commitment to a discourse can render managers ineffective and vulnerable if another discourse begins to gain more legitimacy (Mueller & Carter, 2004) or if subordinates begin to dismiss them as 'brainwashed' or 'careerist' (Knights & McCabe, 2000).

Taken together, this body of research is valuable in moving beyond the assumption that managers are dupes, dopes or simple 'automatons' (McCabe, 2000) in relation to discourse. It reveals the complexity and indeterminacy involved in managers' experiences of the discourses they are expected to produce, promote and/or change. Identification and internalization on the part of managers, it seems, cannot be assumed. But are similar patterns to be found elsewhere? Do other discourse producers experience similar tensions and contradictions? The next section explores management consultants, the focus of this article.

Consultants as missionaries?

Existing literature on management consulting has tended to focus on how consultants convince clients to 'buy in' to the discourses they peddle, leaving aside questions about the level of 'buy in' on the part of the consultants themselves. We therefore know much about the tactics used by consultants to enrol clients (see, for example, Clark, 1995; Sturdy, 1997; Berglund & Werr, 2000; Legge, 2002) but comparatively little about how consultants themselves relate to the discourses they sell. Are consultants completely and unambiguously identified with the discourses they sell? What, if any, tensions and contradictions do they experience in their working lives?

The work of Wright and Kitay (2004) comprises an important empirical contribution to these questions. Using data from interviews with Australian human resource management consultants, they conclude that the consultants they studied *did* largely identify with the concepts they sold and *did* believe in the worth of their activities. The authors use the metaphors 'priest' and 'missionary' to emphasize the strength of the consultants' faith in the discourses they promoted. These consultants apparently believed what they said and said what they believed, with no tension between the two. This presents a vivid contrast to the findings of research on managers discussed above.

Wright and Kitay (2004) also use reflexive analysis to assess the role of self-presentation and self-assurance in the production of their respondents' interview accounts. They note, for example, the positive self-image that was produced by the appeal to a higher moral justification for the consultants' work. However, the use of reflexivity in this case seems strangely at odds with the conclusions drawn from the study. For instance, if interviews are understood to constitute a key site of 'identity work' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), the accounts produced by the consultants could be attributed to the desire to present a positive self-image as opposed to a deep underlying belief in the discourse they sold. Moreover, tape-recorded interviews may simply be an unlikely context for consultants to perform an account that calls into question the value of their work or their commitment to their job. Another issue also casts doubt on Wright and Kitay's 'identification' thesis. If, as the literature suggests, consultants are skilled at producing convincing rhetoric, it would not be surprising to find this rhetoric reproduced in a research interview. Yet reproducing rhetoric is not the same thing as being personally convinced by it and committed to it.

This discussion opens up the possibility of an alternative interpretation to Wright and Kitay's (2004) 'identification' thesis. It suggests that, rather than reflecting the underlying beliefs of a 'consultant-as-missionary', the

consultants in their study constructed an interview account that a) portrayed their identity in a positive light, b) was reflexively informed by the interview context, and c) they were well-versed at producing. Impression management, political sensitivity and the strategic use of alluring discourse are, after all, part of their job (Clark, 1995). In terms of identity and identification, then, this leaves the consultants more akin to 'car salesmen' than 'missionaries', to borrow another metaphor (Sturdy & Gabriel, 2000).

This re-interpretation of Wright and Kitay's analysis precludes any firm conclusions about the subjectivity of consultants, leaving it an open question. One avenue through which this could be addressed would be to employ a methodology that goes further than the 'front-stage' performances (Goffman, 1959) found in interviews. For instance, ethnographic research involving in-depth fieldwork would enable the researcher to observe the actions and identities of consultants performed over time and across a range of different contexts, not just in a one-off interview performance. Indeed, many of the insights into managers discussed earlier that challenged the identification/internalization thesis were uncovered using ethnographic methods. The point here is not that interviews are categorically unable to achieve these insights or that ethnographic methods are guaranteed to get to the 'truth' behind what respondents say in interviews. 'Back-stage' performances are not somehow more 'valid' or 'real' (Goffman, 1959). They are also shaped by the context, including the presence of the researcher. The point is rather that participant or non-participant observation, often in conjunction with semi-structured interviews, enables the researcher to gather a richer data-set from a wider range of contexts. In the case of consultants, for example, this would extend beyond 'front-stage' presentations to include the 'back-stage' accounts and activities that clients and interviewers alike rarely witness (Goffman, 1959).

The depth of ethnographic insight can of course be seen as a trade off against the additional breadth offered by interviews with a greater number of respondents. Yet the ability to generate in-depth, experiential insight into how subjectivity is shaped and performed in a range of contexts offers a key advantage in shedding light on the question: how do workers relate to the organizational discourses they produce? On the basis of interviews with management consultants in Australia, Wright and Kitay (2004) suggest that the relationship is unambiguous, consistent and complete. Drawing on an ethnographic study of management consultants in the UK, I will reveal a very different picture and suggest that the relationship can be inconsistent, ambivalent and incomplete. It is to the study that I will now turn.

The study

The study was conducted between 1999 and 2003 in a large UK telecommunications firm called 'TeleCo' (a pseudonym). Although three different teams took part in the study, this article focuses on one – a team of management consultants called 'FlexiTeam' (a pseudonym). The study of FlexiTeam comprised an intensive nine-month period of non-participant observation followed by several follow-up visits with the group and with individuals, some of whom had since left the team. I gained access to the team as an independent researcher as opposed to salaried employee. While I initially described my role as a 'fly on the wall', I quickly became regarded as 'one of the team', as one consultant put it. For example, at team meetings I was included in the 'round robin' of progress updates, regardless of how little I felt I could contribute. This suggests a high level of acceptance and an optimal opportunity to gain an experiential understanding of their lives as consultants. I nevertheless remained largely an observer as opposed to participant, aside from one small, unpaid assignment I undertook in an attempt to repay their kindness and generous access.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the consultants' working lives I attempted to access as many work-related activities as was permitted, regardless of how they were mediated. Access was generously awarded and refused on only two requests, once for access to personal email exchanges and another to attend an apparently 'sensitive' performance appraisal meeting. I was able to attend three client visits, two client workshops, ten team meetings, five performance appraisal meetings and numerous social activities, including lunches, end of year parties, 'leaving do's' and after-work social events. Field notes were written in 'real time' as events happened when appropriate. However, where note taking did not feel appropriate, such as during informal discussions over lunch, notes were written as soon as possible after the event. This was usually on the train home or sometimes in the privacy of the toilets. While I initially tried tape-recording the team meetings, I abandoned this method after the first attempt due to the adverse effects on the interaction (the consultants began literally talking to the microphone in the middle of the table as opposed to each other). This kind of reflexive adaptation was a recurrent feature of the ethnography. To adapt to their 'virtual' work style, I also collected some of the consultants' email interactions from the group distribution list and tape-recorded each of the weekly audio-conferences held on a Monday morning. Tape-recording the audio-conferences did not appear to generate the same adverse effects, probably because the presence of the researcher and microphone was not immediately apparent (the recording was conducted at a distance and after the event).

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with all but one of the 10 team members (one consultant was 'too busy' when asked and the matter was not pursued so as not to appear 'pushy'). The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were tape-recorded. It should be noted that interviews comprised a small part of the rich, deep and broad dataset that was gathered during the nine months of non-participant observation. The interview questions focused on three main topics: the respondent's current role as consultant; their experience of flexible working; and their general career trajectory. However, the interview questions were not identical in every case. The aim was not to 'compare' answers to standard questions but rather to gain experiential insight into the meaning systems through which the consultants made sense of themselves and the world around them. In this regard, combining interviews with ethnographic insight was a significant methodological advantage as questions could be tailored to the relevant experiences of each respondent. For example, I was able to ask relatively new members of the team and newcomers to flexible working to reflect upon their experiences of change. In total, four books of field notes, over 100 emails, numerous electronic and paper documents and more than 20 tapes of interviews and audio-conferences comprised the final dataset.

Data were analysed by firstly transcribing and then collating all the disparate sources of data (field notes, email exchanges, documents, interview transcripts, audio-conference transcripts) into electronic form in Word documents. The data were then read and re-read to identify both common or recurrent themes and contrasting or ambiguous issues. Points of similarity and difference within and across data sources (e.g. client presentations, team meetings, interviews) were both part of the analytical frame. Data from the disparate sources were then copied and collated into new files representing the key themes and issues identified in the analysis. Where data extracts appeared relevant to more than one theme, multiple copies were created and references attached to the original source (e.g. page number in field notebook or location on tape).

The analysis process was informed by a 'discourse analysis' approach and thus was not identical to a wholly inductive, 'grounded theory' approach. The analysis was not 'theory-free' and was informed by my own (more or less explicit) 'way of seeing' (Silverman, 1993). For example, this involved a dialectic process of reading and re-reading relevant literature to explore points of resonance and disparity with my own data. It was therefore less a case of letting the 'findings' emerge and more a case of actively constructing interpretations that lay somewhere between the emic (my understanding of the meanings prevalent in the group) and the etic (my understanding of academic theories and concepts).

The discourse analysis approach also brought benefits from its openness to redefining what literature was 'relevant' and what the study was 'about'. For instance, the themes discussed in this article would have been difficult to define *a priori*. Indeed, the original remit of the study was to investigate how flexible workers managed their careers, not the tension they experienced as preachers and practitioners. FlexiTeam were chosen because they practised flexible working. It was not until having left the field that I noticed the most interesting aspect of this case, that is, the intimate, intense and reflexive relationship with flexible working that arose from their role in *promoting* as well as practising it. This also demonstrates one of the methodological advantages of the open and holistic approach of ethnography: the researcher is able to uncover issues and dynamics that are unexpected or counter-intuitive.

Finally, the methodology also involved attempts to verify the accuracy of my analysis. After leaving the field, I produced a written report of my findings and gave a presentation to the remaining members of the team. At this presentation, the consultants did not openly contest any aspects of my analysis and confirmed many of my interpretations by nodding or highlighting their resonance. However, as I noted above, the aim of the study was not to merely 'repeat' what was 'found' in the field but to produce an analysis that engaged and synthesized both emic (participant) and etic (academic) understandings.

Preaching and practising flexibility

FlexiTeam were employed by a large telecommunications company to sell 'flexible working' consulting services to external clients. This involved helping clients to utilize Information and Communication Technology [ICT] to enable work to be conducted flexibly in time and/or space. Telework, virtual work and e-work have also been popular terms used to refer to these changes (Jackson, 1999). The consultants saw their role as agents of 'culture change': guiding the client through the difficult change in 'mentality' required for them to implement an effective flexible working strategy.

FlexiTeam sold their consulting services on the basis of a particular claim to expertise. The consultants claimed not only to possess 'textbook' knowledge of flexible working but crucially also personal knowledge of making flexible working 'work'. This was because they were themselves practising flexible workers, organized into a 'virtual team'. In discourse terms, FlexiTeam were engaged in both producing (selling) and consuming (practising) a discourse of flexible working. It was this experiential knowledge of

being a practising flexible worker that the consultants routinely used to convince clients that flexible working was both possible and desirable. As business development manager Kevin explained, having 'been there, done that, got the T-Shirt' was a significant advantage in selling their consulting services. Yet this claim to expertise also made the consultants feel personally responsible for the success of their flexible working arrangement, and for implementing the advice they gave to clients. For instance, business development manager Barry confided in me over lunch one day:

We feel like we must make it [flexible working] work, because if we don't, how can we sell it to clients?

In other words, FlexiTeam seemed to strive to practise what they preached and preach what they practised. It was in this context that, during data analysis, I was surprised and puzzled by the data extracts that follow. The first section describes my ethnographic observations of what the consultants preached during a consulting workshop with clients. The following section compares this 'preaching' with the practice I observed during an audio-conference recording. In the front-stage interaction during a client-consultant workshop, the consultants preached the value of holding regular face-to-face team meetings, suggesting they were in fact exemplars of this 'best practice'. In the back-stage interaction during a team audio-conference, the consultants contradicted their own advice by cancelling their own team meeting. The analysis that follows will focus on how and why this contradiction occurred and what this suggests about the relationship between the consultants' subjectivity and the discourse they sold.

Front-stage preaching

The consulting workshop was entitled 'Managing Virtual Teams'. The participants, all managers of groups of flexible workers, were 'brainstorming' the benefits and challenges of managing virtual teams. The discussion moved to team meetings. Several workshop participants admitted that they frequently had to cancel their team meetings due to time and resource constraints. The consultants reacted with shock and dismay at these revelations. Senior consultant Martin insisted that flexible workers needed to meet face-to-face in order to build effective teams. Consultant Kevin agreed with Martin and also highlighted the knowledge sharing benefits of being able to tap into the 'office grapevine'. Martin reminded the workshop participants of FlexiTeam's 'best practice': FlexiTeam held a face-to-face team meeting every month in addition to their weekly audio-conferences, he said, and

ensured the team meetings were made interesting and informative to encourage people to attend.

The consultants were clearly keen to demonstrate not only their knowledge of 'best practice' but also their personal commitment to its implementation in FlexiTeam. They presented themselves as experts, exemplars and embodiments of the discourse they sold, in this case the 'best practice' of holding regular team meetings. Hence I was surprised and puzzled when I listened to the audio-conference recorded a few weeks later to find them cancelling their own team meeting. How and why did FlexiTeam fail to practise what they preach? What does this contradiction suggest about their relationship to the consulting discourse they produced? These questions require a more detailed analysis of the audio-conference data.

Back-stage practice

The conversation during the audio-conference arose when Barry, a business development manager, pointed out that the next team meeting clashed with the dates they had planned to visit the potential clients for whom they were preparing consulting proposals. The tendering process involved a strict deadline for submitting the proposals. Martin (the senior consultant and team leader) began debating the options that might be available:

- 1 Martin: I'm just thinking whether I could push the [job] interviews out.
- 2 Barry: If that is the case, I think realistically, in the cold light of day, having looked at my calendar, I think we're only gonna have time to ping them [clients] a proposal.
- 3 Martin: OK. We may need to do something that I don't wanna do, which is actually to postpone the Team Meeting on the 25th.
- 4 Barry: So that'll give us another day to try and get clients/
- 5 Martin: /yep. Well if we've fixed interviews in that week and other meetings and stuff. And if I shift the interviews you [Barry] won't be around to help with them, so I've then got to find someone else. If I could free up one more day.
- 6 Kevin: One thing you might want to consider is the launch of the NewProduct [internal marketing event] on the 14th, and maybe do something around that for the Team Meeting? Do the morning after? [pause] I was just thinking, if you need to move the Team Meeting.

- 7 Martin: I suggest we cancel the Team Meeting and we use that as one of the dates that I know that everyone will be around. . . . Sorry Carol. [the chair of the next meeting]
- 8 Carol: That's alright. That's fine.
- 9 Martin: . . . how about we keep it nice and simple and say [to client]: 'We'll be sending this [proposal document] out early next week, we'd like to follow up with a face-to-face meeting on 26th or 27th'.
- 10 Carol: So team meeting on 15th August, yep?
- 11 Martin: Yes, we'll do something to compensate, Carol, yep. OK? Well that's a decision anyway.

The analysis that follows will not look simply at the act of contradiction – cancelling their team meeting contrary to their own consultancy advice – but crucially what this can reveal about the relationship between the consultants and the discourse they produced.

Pragmatic preachers

The decision to cancel the team meeting seemed to be carefully framed as a temporary, reluctant and one-off solution, not a case of flagrant hypocrisy. For example, Martin was seen to consider the alternative option of cancelling the scheduled job interviews (turn 1). He carefully justified rejecting this option (turn 5) and explicitly framed cancelling the team meeting as a reluctant move (turn 3) generated by externally imposed circumstances (turn 5) for which he apologized (turn 7) and vowed to compensate (turn 11). He also took time to reiterate the benefits this would bring for clients (turn 9). While of course Martin was the team leader and it was his 'decision' (turn 11), the other consultants collaborated in the performance and displayed their agreement with the proposed decision by offering an alternative date for the team meeting (turn 6), which the chair accepted (turn 8).

This analysis seems to suggest that the decision to cancel the team meeting was a pragmatic, reluctant and temporary solution to a particular problem. The contradiction was not a deliberate disregard of their consulting discourse or a deception device aimed at political gain. The contradiction arose simply from the complexities of the organizing process (Putnam, 1986) because many tasks competed for their time and resources. The consultants did not completely reject their consulting discourse. Indeed, the value of holding team meetings was upheld and efforts made to 'compensate' for this

'reluctant' decision. In this sense the consultants could be seen as switching allegiance to the discourses according to time and task demands. They were neither fully identified (dogmatic) nor completely un-identified (heretical) in their actions. In this instance, the consultants appeared to be 'pragmatic preachers', prepared to compromise and adapt their actions when the situation seemed to require it.

To sum up, I have suggested that the consultants were not completely identified with the consulting discourse they produced but were instead pragmatic and flexible in their relationship to their own prescription. This was because they were faced with contradictions and tensions between the 'ideals' they prescribed in the front-stage context of a client workshop and the 'practicalities' they faced back-stage when trying to implement their own advice.

Cynical consultants

Another ethnographic experience is worth detailing for its relevance to the analysis given above. The data that follow also support the conclusions I have drawn and go further by suggesting that cancelled team meetings were neither an unusual event nor were they neutral in their identity effects.

At the beginning of my study, I spent a day with Duncan and Carole, both relatively junior members of the team, as they 'hot-desked' together at a TeleCo office in west London. As they packed up their laptops at the end of the day, I asked them how they felt about their flexible working arrangement. Duncan and Carole did not hesitate in telling me the things they disliked about flexible working. As they told me about the loneliness of working from home, Carole pointed out that the team meetings, which were supposed to alleviate these factors, were often cancelled. The contradiction analysed above was clearly noticed by some of the consultants. This seemed to leave Carole with a distinctly cynical taste in her mouth, sighing as she stated, 'I'm afraid the team just doesn't practise what it preaches'.

The discussion at the hot desks carried on however. Carole emphasized the social isolation she experienced. Duncan agreed and said he missed working in an office, particularly the beers after work. Carole claimed that the team meetings had too much 'crammed' into one day and it was hard to 'get a word in edgeways'. Moreover, she felt that her so-called 'team mates' felt more like strangers because they met so rarely. She could not turn to them for work queries, let alone social support. The cynicism crept in again as she described being 'shot down in flames' when she tried to raise these issues at a team meeting a few months ago. Duncan signalled his agreement with Carole and claimed that he could even be dead for two weeks without

his boss even knowing. Not quite knowing what to say, I simply nodded and smiled while attempting to scribble all of this down in my notebook.

Carole and Duncan hardly sounded like 'evangelists' converted by the flexible working discourse they sell. They clearly did not 'buy in' to the discourse in any complete or uncritical manner. The data suggest a significant element of dissatisfaction, disillusionment and cynicism arose from their experience of being preachers and practitioners of flexible working. How, then, can the data be understood? At first sight, it appears to be a clear case of 'voice' and 'resistance' to the discourse of flexible work. Yet when these data are combined with my other observations of Carole and Duncan over the course of the ethnography, this conclusion becomes less tenable. Carole and Duncan were highly effective and often enthusiastic about their role as flexible working consultants. In fact, it makes little sense to suggest that these consultants were resisting the discourse they were also expected to sell. For instance, at a team meeting just a few weeks later, Carole delighted in telling her colleagues that she had attempted to 'convert' a stranger at a dinner party into implementing flexible working in his organization. Duncan also spoke with considerable enthusiasm about his role as consultant, stating in our interview:

Interviewer: So does your job involve seeing clients as well?

Duncan: Oh yes, chasing new business, trying to drum up things. [Pause] . . . I've been kind of successful at that and it's been something I've really enjoyed . . . It's about changing perception and saying [to clients] 'You've got the hot buttons there, so why don't you develop a flexible working strategy? Get people talking about it. Changing their minds. I think I've maybe converted maybe one or two, I've had maybe 10 opportunities.

Although these data clearly demonstrate the presence of contradiction and ambivalence (describing enthusiasm about 'preaching' flexible working while expressing disillusionment and cynicism about their experience as practising flexible workers), it is also understandable. 'Preaching' flexible working is, after all, their job. Telling clients about their dissatisfaction, disillusionment and cynicism would have been unlikely to convince clients to implement flexible working, let alone enlist the advice of FlexiTeam. In fact, given that the consultants were keen to keep their jobs and maintain their career in the organization, it was understandable that they were enthusiastic and ambitious about their work and keen to 'convert' as many clients as possible. This link between self, role and career will be discussed further in

the next section, along with discussion of the theoretical implications of my findings for theories of subjectivity and resistance.

Discussion

The analysis has revealed how the tension between practising and preaching flexibility created schisms, fractures and contradictions that circumvented any complete and unambiguous identification with the discourse produced and sold by the consultants. These ethnographic findings stand in stark contrast to the zealous 'priests', 'missionaries' or 'evangelists' described by Wright and Kitay (2004). The consultants in this study clearly could not be described as 'missionaries' because they did not always believe in or practise what they preached. This closely resonates with the literature on managers reviewed earlier. It seems that consultants, like managers, are not always 'converted' by the discourses they preach. Yet the interesting finding was that these forms of psychological distancing and pragmatic compromising did not mean that they were ineffective in performing their job or *role* as a missionary of flexible working. Psychological distance and contradictory practices did not fundamentally disrupt or disturb the production and proliferation of the consulting discourse. The consultants carried on performing their 'front-stage' role as evangelists of flexible working in spite of their 'back-stage' contradictions and reservations.

My findings also suggest that the tensions and contradictions I observed were not explicitly recognized as such by the consultants. I observed few attempts at 'meta-communication' (Putnam, 1986), that is, communication about the message process where subjects sought to recognize and find solutions to the contradictions they faced. Where Carole does describe such an attempt at meta-communication, when she tried to raise her concerns about social isolation at a team meeting, she describes being 'shot down in flames'. Rather than engaging in open discussions about the tensions between their role as preachers and practitioners, reflection and debate were apparently deemed unnecessary, unwanted or a private affair. This points to a distinct lack of reflexive awareness of the contradictions involved in their working lives. This absence of reflexivity has in fact been noted as a key element in the management of contradictions (El-Sawad et al., 2004). Indeed, it was actually the way in which the contradiction was denied, dismissed, sidelined and pragmatically worked around that enabled the consultants to perform their role as 'missionaries' and allowed the discourse of flexible working to be sustained.

This finding also has implications for notions of 'resistance'. Theorists have frequently classified phenomena such as contradiction (such as failure

to practise what you preach), cynicism and other forms of psychological distancing as forms of resistance that disrupt, disturb or displace the effective operation of discourses. Indeed, this seems logical if discourses are understood to work by reconfiguring employees' identities (who they are) and conduct (what they do). Surely, then, my observation that the consultants contradicted their consulting discourse (i.e. failure to change what they do) and expressed disillusionment, dissatisfaction and cynicism about flexible working (i.e. failure to change who they are) points to the presence of resistance?

The findings of this study actually point to a counter-intuitive conclusion. The forms of contradiction and voice uncovered in this study did *not* appear to disrupt or disturb the consulting discourse. Clients remained unaware of the contradictions that occurred 'back-stage' and even those consultants who expressed dissatisfaction and discontent about their flexible working arrangement continued in their role as flexible working 'evangelists'. The consulting discourse was therefore left unchallenged and unchanged. This resonates with Fleming and Spicer's (2003) 'ideological' theory of power. According to Fleming and Spicer, forms of psychological distancing such as cynicism do not constitute resistance because *practices* are left unaffected. With our external actions unchanged, institutional power arrangements remain unchallenged. Cynicism is therefore self-defeating because it inadvertently reproduces the power relations it seeks to resist (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Furthermore, I would add, the contradiction I observed had similar 'ideological' effects because it did not challenge the prevailing practice of 'evangelism' enacted with clients. In other words, this study demonstrates how power can work through dis-identification as much as identification, and through contradiction as much as consistency. It also contributes by suggesting that contradiction and cynicism are a feature of the work of champions of new organizational discourses as well as their recipients. Consulting therefore seems to demand a 'dramaturgical self' (Collinson, 2003), where the key skill is the ability to manage different and even contradictory identities and actions.

The final point that arises from this discussion is the question of why the consultants remained trapped in this 'ideological' dynamic. Why did the contradiction and cynicism I observed fail to challenge or change the discourse they produced? Why did the consultants continue to manage the contradictions and ambivalence that accompanied the 'dramaturgical selves' they performed? Existing research offers some possible insights here. A number of studies have pointed to the role of career discourses as a medium and outcome of the contradiction, cynicism and ambivalence that has been observed. For instance, du Gay (1996) notes the career concerns underlying managers' ambivalent relationship to the 'enterprise' discourse propagated

by head office. Critical comments were coupled with a resigned awareness of the need to be seen to 'buy in' in order to 'get on' in terms of career progression. Collinson (1994) also notes how the perception of career damage mitigates against the surfacing of oppositional forms of resistance. El-Sawad et al. (2004) even suggest that the concept of career can act as an 'overarching idiom' that helps subjects to neutralize and contain the contradictions they live with and live within. The absence of reflexivity, they suggest, can facilitate the maintenance of 'doublethink', arguably a key feature of the work of the management consultants discussed here.

The concept of career can therefore help us to understand the contradiction and ambivalence found in this study. In order to maintain their careers, the consultants needed to be seen to do their job well, and with enthusiasm and commitment. After all, a group of openly cynical, disillusioned and hypocritical consultants would hardly be in a strong position to convince clients to implement flexible working, let alone buy their 'expert' advice. If evangelical testimonies of conversion and religious observance would help them to convince clients and impress their superiors, it is not surprising that it was used. The concept of career could therefore be seen to operate to sustain the practice of 'preaching' in spite of any doubts or discrepancies. This then points to an element of *instrumentality* accompanying their role as management consultants.

Conclusion

How do workers relate to the organizational discourses they are responsible for producing and promoting? Are workers passive channels for the transfer of discourse that are wholly identified with and committed to the discourses they advance? This article has tackled these questions by examining data from an ethnographic study of a group of UK management consultants called 'FlexiTeam'. Management consultants were chosen because they represent a key actor in the production, promotion and promulgation of organizational discourses. I have shown that during public performances to clients the consultants performed as 'missionaries' or 'evangelists' who preached about the virtues of flexible working on the basis of their own 'conversion'. Yet I have also revealed another story. I have also detailed the contradiction, disaffection and cynicism I observed during the 'back-stage' interactions not witnessed by clients. Tensions were apparent between their roles as preachers and practitioners of flexible working. This meant that the flexible working discourse did not completely colonize the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and behaviour of the consultants. In other words, there were limits to

the colonizing power of discourse, even in the case of the actors at the heart of the colonizing process.

However, I also have argued that while the consultants' identities (who they are) and conduct (what they do) were clearly not colonized, the discourse itself was left relatively unaffected. This enabled me to question whether the contradiction and cynicism I observed constituted 'resistance'. For instance, the tensions and contradictions they faced were not openly recognized as such, meaning there was little opportunity for the discourse to be reflected upon, challenged or reconstructed (cf. Putnam, 1986). This absence of reflexivity also enabled the consultants to maintain their role as expert adviser. Clients still had to be convinced that flexible working was desirable and that they were the experts and exemplars to guide them through the process. The consultants therefore continued their role as evangelists in spite of their contradictory actions and cynical feelings. The concept of career seemed to be useful in understanding why the consultants failed to recognize and reconcile the contradictions and ambivalence they experienced.

To conclude, I have suggested that the consultants in this study maintained a *pragmatic*, *instrumental* and *dramaturgical* self in order to manage the tension they experienced as preachers and practitioners of flexible working. This questions the assumption that 'faith', 'devotion' and 'observance' is always present in (or even required of) the 'evangelists' of new organizational discourses. Furthermore, I have also highlighted some counter-intuitive effects. Rather than disrupting, disturbing or discrediting the consulting discourse, contradiction and cynicism were actually sustained alongside its production, promotion and promulgation. In other words, the power of the discourse was maintained in spite of the dis-identified subjects and inconsistent actions that lay behind the surface. This adds to a growing body of literature that suggests that contradiction and ambivalence are not so much problems to be overcome but instead represent an integral part of organizational life (Putnam, 1986; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; El-Sawad, 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004).

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Note

- 1 Discourses do not exist 'out there' with an essential 'nature' that can be captured and represented by the researcher (Watson, 2000). The notion of discourses as discrete and bounded entities is an outcome of the labour of the author, not a reflection of their ontological status. This labour may of course involve reducing heterogeneous, interlinked and constantly changing texts and practices to a single static label (Fournier & Grey, 1999). While this may be somewhat inevitable for the purposes of argumentation, it also suggests the need for scholars to be reflexive about the constructed nature of their own representational practices. The terms 'consultancy discourse' and 'flexible working discourse' are used in this article for purposes of brevity only.

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