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'Doublethink': The prevalence and function of contradiction in accounts of organizational life

Amal El-Sawad, John Arnold and Laurie Cohen

ABSTRACT

Those engaged in conducting qualitative research frequently acknowledge the presence of contradiction in their data. However, within the organization studies literature little attention is paid to teasing out these contradictions and subjecting them to critical analysis. This article advances our knowledge of contradiction in accounts of organizational life. Drawing on new empirical evidence from a qualitative interview study of employees working in a large blue-chip corporation, we critically assess a number of instances of contradiction or 'doublethink' within this particular organizational setting. We challenge the assumption underpinning much of the existing literature that individuals are uncomfortable with contradiction and seek to resolve it whenever it arises. We argue that doublethink provides a means of containing contradiction such that it is neither acknowledged as contradiction nor experienced as uncomfortable. We consider the findings in relation to notions of role positions which reflect/constitute different ways of ordering an individual's experience, the mobilization of an overarching idiom to 'contain' the contradiction, and the privileging of practice over reflexivity.

KEYWORDS

career account ▪ contradiction ▪ doublethink ▪ organization ▪ qualitative

> I want to live two lives. I want both lives.
>
> (Amanda)

> The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.
>
> (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1956: 69)

Those engaged in theorizing about and conducting qualitative research frequently acknowledge that contradictory stances are a common feature of qualitative interview data. However, it is surprising that within the organization studies literature little attention is paid to teasing out these contradictions and subjecting them to critical analysis. In other words, in qualitative studies of organizational life to date, contradiction within individuals' accounts is rarely of itself the feature of analytic interest, representing a missed opportunity to understand the significance of such accounts. This article seeks to address that gap.

We identify three different types of contradiction which may occur in accounts of organizational life, including that which exists between stated organizational policy versus the experience of practice, and between the account of one organizational member versus the account of another. However, our primary focus in this article is on what we consider to be the least explored and most theoretically intriguing type of contradiction – 'doublethink'. Drawing on new empirical evidence from a qualitative interview study of the careers of employees working within a large blue-chip corporation, we seek to examine examples of such 'doublethink' stances. All participants in our study demonstrate doublethink and, with one partial exception, they appear oblivious to it. This apparent oblivion is a key defining feature of doublethink which distinguishes it from other forms of contradiction. We ponder the reasons why actors might engage in acts of doublethink and what might be achieved by such acts.

'Doublethink' and contradiction

The notion of doublethink is drawn from George Orwell's literary classic *Nineteen eighty-four*. In a world controlled by the original Big Brother (rather than his emasculated TV game show descendant), not only the actions, but also the thoughts of the population are closely controlled. One mechanism by which this control is achieved is doublethink, defined thus (Orwell, 1949: 38–9):

> To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two

> opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy; to forget what it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself. That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink.

We are not claiming that all aspects of this definition of doublethink fit the data we report in this article. However, there are key and perhaps surprising elements in common. In particular, we argue that, in their accounts of their careers in their employing organization, our interviewees frequently presented arguments that were logically contradictory. Yet apparently they believed both at the time they articulated them. It was as if they forgot what it was necessary to forget in order, at a given moment, to present a certain account as 'the way things are'. They then drew the forgotten material back into memory, and forgot the point they had made only a few minutes earlier, in order to present a contradictory account, again as if it was 'the way things are'. It seems to us that existing theory and research offers only a very limited basis for understanding how or why doublethink might be so evident in individual accounts of organizational life. We now expand a little on that point.

Critical theorists have frequently pointed out how corporate culture can be used by top managers as one of a number of tools to ensure not only behavioural compliance, but also the 'right' perceptions, opinions and attitudes among other members of the organization (e.g. Ogbor, 2001). Such accounts tend to view organizational culture as in some sense overwriting individual identity, rendering members of the organization able only to reproduce the received wisdom. Even where an individual resists socialization, he or she is assumed to arrive at an internally consistent set of behaviours and cognitions (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). There is little scope in these analyses for the notion of individuals contradicting themselves. In his theoretical piece, Willmott (1993) presents a critical analysis of the corporate culture literature, identifying the 'seductive doublethink' of culture which involves 'the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the conditions of autonomy' (p. 526). However, although Willmott uses the term 'doublethink', even he does not appear to be suggesting that it will manifest itself in the accounts of organizational life offered by individuals.

It is not that alternative versions of reality are unavailable. Organizational culture is often held to offer an individual the security of an internally coherent and convincing world-view in the face of a confusingly large number and variety of alternatives (e.g. Alvesson, 2002; Fineman, 1999). Furthermore, this world-view is reassuringly shared by others with whom one meets most days. Giddens (1991) among others has similarly argued that individual identity is fragile, partly because the story a person adopts in order to keep their narrative of self intact is just one of many that could be told. According to Giddens, living in times of late modernity presents tensions and dilemmas which create challenges for conceptions of the self that must be resolved 'in order to preserve a coherent narrative or self-identity' (1991: 188). Therefore, Giddens argues, people hold on tight to well-rehearsed emotional and behavioural routines. So the argument being presented in work of this kind is that a consistent and stable sense of self is something people need and will work hard to construct and defend (Collinson, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1989). Once again, this suggests little room for contradiction within the accounts a person presents to the world, or indeed to self.

Theories developed by psychologists over many years also seem to point towards consistency rather than contradiction in individual accounts. Ever since Festinger (1957) articulated his theory of cognitive dissonance, it has been axiomatic that people seek to establish and maintain consistency within and between their various thoughts, emotions and behaviours (see, for example, Van Overwalle & Jordens, 2002). In an experimental study of people's recollections of events in their lives, Beike and Landoll (2000: 313) conclude on the basis of their data: 'Do people really need consistency more than they need simply to bask in a pleasant memory? Our contention is that they do.' Related to this is recent psychological literature concerning how people deal with apparent contradiction. Contradiction is defined by Choi and Nisbett (2000: 891) as occurring 'when two pieces of information are inconsistent with each other in such a way that if one of them is true, the other is likely to be false.' They, and also Peng and Nisbett (1999), offer experimental evidence that in western culture, contradiction is disliked and is a source of surprise which requires resolution. Furthermore, although the resolution may involve some synthesis of elements of the competing points of view, on the whole, western people appear to want one version to be mostly right and the other(s) mostly wrong. Peng and Nisbett (1999: 742) summarize their position thus:

> The key feature of Western dialectical thinking is integration, starting with the recognition of contradiction, then moving on to the reconciliation of basic elements of the opposing perspectives. Its rational

> foundation is still the law of noncontradiction, so that a satisfactory solution to contradiction is a noncontradictory one.

Everywhere we turn then, so far it seems that consistency reigns supreme. However, there do seem to be some limits. Several of the studies referred to above have found that people from East Asian cultures are much more tolerant of contradiction than westerners (Ho, 2000; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). It also seems that older western people are, on average, more likely than younger ones to be able and willing to deal with contradiction (Baltes & Smith, 1990) and, in the case of bitter–sweet emotions, even prefer it (Williams & Aaker, 2002). Indeed, some theories of adult development give a prominent place to the ability to recognize and tolerate contradiction as a mark of maturity (e.g. Kramer, 1989 – though maturity is not synonymous with age), and some have sought to analyse how that and other aspects of adult development might find expression in career development (e.g. Arnold, 1997).

In a sociological study of life insurance agents, Oakes (1990) found that the sales process is characterized by two contradictory 'idioms', the commercial idiom and the service idiom. Oakes likens the former to a 'contest between salesperson and prospect' (p. 5) whose purpose is to maximize the salesperson's commission. The latter is oriented to the building of trust and the delivery of a highly personalized, caring service based on respect for the clients' integrity. However, unlike those theorists who argue for people's desire to resolve such contradictions, Oakes suggests that this paradox is fundamental to the performance of a sales role and cannot be resolved in favour of one or the other idiom. Indeed, he goes beyond the selling of life insurance, to reflect on contradiction as central to the human condition.

Some theorists argue that there is no unitary sense of self (Zurcher, 1977). Instead, we have a different identity for each role, or even each situation, and that identity is constructed and reconstructed during the course of an interaction rather than being brought to that interaction as a finished article. Some other social psychological approaches distinguish between our personal identity (which is our sense of what we are like in terms of personality) and our social identities, which are the attributes we perceive ourselves sharing with social groups that matter to us, and to which we belong (Hewstone et al., 2002). Experimental studies often include manipulation of the salience of various identities in order to test the impact on (for example) attitudes to other groups, and recent work by Ashforth (2001) has used theories of identity to explain how people make sense of transitions from one workplace role to another.

The identity approach suggests the possibility that, even within one research interview, there may be frequent unannounced changes in the role played by the interviewee, and in the aspects of identity evoked by the interviewer's questions and by the interviewee's own train of thought. For example, at one moment he or she may construe self as a representative of the company defending it against a potentially critical enquirer. At another moment, the most salient self-perception may be of a fellow student of work organization with the researcher, and at yet another the interviewee may be most conscious of his or her status as parent in a dual-career household. Soon after that, the interviewee (prompted by the interview conversation) might start to construct a new self-identity as, for example, a high flyer, or an exploited underling.

To the extent that such roles and evoked identities encourage or even require different perceptions of organizational life, we might expect contradiction within a person's account, even though the moments of transition between roles or identities may be unannounced by the speaker and difficult to spot. In other words, consistency would be present, but only within a role or identity. Because roles and identities might change from moment to moment, it could look like contradiction. Even so, the weight of evidence from the theory and research described earlier might lead one to think that the interviewee would notice the contradictions and seek to resolve them. Indeed, if the drive for consistency is as strong as claimed by some, it might even constrain switching between roles and identities if that would lead to the presentation of inconsistent accounts.

To us, then, doublethink is a phenomenon that merits further research attention, both in terms of its prevalence and its function in individuals' accounts of organizational life. In what follows, we outline the methodological approach taken in this study, and examine examples of doublethink contained within the accounts of our interviewees.

Method

Derived from a broader qualitative study of career in context, the evidence presented in this article is drawn from the organizational and career accounts provided by 20 employees (8 men and 12 women) qualified to at least first degree level, aged around 30 years and drawn from a range of job functions, levels and UK locations within a multinational blue-chip corporation. An outline profile of each participant is incorporated in Table 1. Names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.

Career and organizational accounts were obtained primarily through

unstructured interviews launched with a single request from the interviewer – 'tell me about your career.' Prior to the interview, participants also completed two versions of the Twenty Statements Test (TST) providing their conceptions of both self (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954; Rees & Nicholson, 1994) and organization (Locatelli & West, 1991). TST-self asks participants to respond to the question 'Who am I?' to define themselves in their own rather than the researcher's terms. TST-organization also elicits free responses from participants who are given the following instructions:

> Think of the organization for which you currently work and your experiences within it. In the spaces provided below, think of different statements to capture the way in which **you** would describe it.

The qualitative research interview successfully accessed much of that which was contained in each participant's TST-self and TST-organization and TST responses are therefore considered to be complementary to rather than separate from the interview accounts.

The original study set out to explore career accounts within this particular organizational setting, not doublethink per se. At this stage, it would be premature to make any grand claims about how doublethink should or should not be studied. However, there are several points of methodological interest worth flagging here. We suspect that this indirect approach helped us access doublethink stances. One alternative – setting out to uncover directly individuals' contradictory stances and then immediately confronting those individuals with them – might actually obscure the very thing of interest. We surmise that the reasons for this lie in first, individuals' apparent lack of awareness of their doublethink stances and second, a need to reconcile contradiction when confronted with it in order to regain and represent a single consistent and coherent narrative to both self and others. This need might also have influenced the remainder of the interview. Furthermore, most instances of doublethink were found embedded within these organizational career accounts *after* the detailed analysis of them had begun, rather than during the interview itself. Hence, although it might have been informative to discuss instances of doublethink with the respondent at the end of the interview, this was not possible.

In Table 1 we outline each instance of doublethink from each participant's account along with the theme to which it relates. Space prevents an exhaustive review of every instance and so we focus our detailed analysis on a selection chosen partly to demonstrate the various themes of our participants' doublethink stances, but more particularly to help us to make sense of and theorize doublethink. We have been struck by the finding that all 20

Table 1 Participant profiles and instances of doublethink

	Participant's name	*Sex*	*Role*	*Age*	*Dependants*	*Years service*	*Full/part-time?*	*Doublethink themes*
1.	Alison	F	Manager (2nd-line)	28	None	7	Full	Political vs apolitical Sponsorship received – yes vs no
2.	Graham	M	Manager	30	One	8	Full	Political vs apolitical
3.	Sue	F	Technical Manager	31	One	10	Part	Equal opportunities Fair vs unfair employer
4.	Amanda	F	Technical specialist	34	One	10	Part	Equal opportunities Work–life balance/family-friendly – yes vs no
5.	Asif	M	Technical specialist	30	None	5	Full	Self vs manager-managed career Open vs obstructed access to training
6.	Cathy	F	Technical specialist	31	One	9	Part	Family-friendly/work–life balance – yes vs no Loyal vs not loyal to company
7.	Keith	M	Technical specialist	30	None	5	Full	Work/non-work persona same vs different
8.	Linda	F	Technical specialist	30	None	8	Full	Self vs manager-managed career
9.	Jane	F	Technical specialist	29	None	7	Full	Self vs manager-managed career Organization very supportive vs not at all supportive
10.	David	M	Specialist (Finance)	30	Two	5	Full	Work–life balance achieved vs not achieved
11.	Gillian	F	Specialist (Finance)	30	None	10	Full	Self vs manager-managed career Recognition for those who deserve it vs don't deserve it
12.	William	M	Specialist (HR)	28	None	5	Full	A 'Lifer' vs not a 'Lifer'
13.	Adam	M	Generalist	31	None	9	Full	Self vs manager-managed career

Table 1 Continued

	Participant's name	*Sex*	*Role*	*Age*	*Dependants*	*Years service*	*Full/part-time?*	*Doublethink themes*
14.	Nick	M	Generalist	30	None	5	Full	Self vs manager-managed career Work affects vs does not affect salary dissatisfaction
15.	Bethany	F	Generalist	30	Two	9	Part	Equal opportunities observed vs not observed
16.	Siobhan	F	Generalist	31	One	3	Part	Confidence vs lack of confidence in abilities Concern vs no concern about managerial/peer assessments
17.	Peter	M	Generalist	34	One	11	Full	Self vs manager-managed career
18.	Ruth	F	Generalist	30	None	7	Full	Bemoans excessive work hours vs bemoans 9 to 5 mentality
19.	Leanne	F	Generalist	28	None	3	Full	Worrying vs not worrying about work at home Applying for different vs same type of job
20.	Joanne	F	Generalist	28	None	3	Full	Self vs manager-managed career

participants in this study demonstrate doublethink stances yet, with one partial exception, none seem aware of it.

Locating 'doublethink'

As noted earlier, our interest and main focus in this article is on instances of doublethink. However, for the purposes of clarity, it is worth pausing to flag two other types of contradiction in organizational life: (i) stated organizational policy versus the experience of practice; and (ii) the account of one organizational member versus the account of another.

Instances when official organizational policy appear not to translate into practice come as no surprise. For example, Hatch (1994), Legge (1995) and Sisson (1994) have demonstrated the contradictions which seemingly reside between what is understood as organizational policy and what is experienced. An illustration of this type of contradiction is offered by the comments of one of our participants:

> **Asif**: They [the company] do say it's no more a job for life, we can hire and we can fire as and when if we're not doing well. I haven't seen such cases . . . It is a job for life. [This company] is still a company where 'job for life' holds good.

A key feature of such 'policy versus practice' or 'rhetoric versus reality' contradiction is that members appear to be aware of it and draw attention to it. Contradiction also can be found between accounts where the viewpoint of one individual conflicts with the viewpoint of another. This is due to contrasting personal experiences, and also inferences made about the organization on the basis of those experiences. We can illustrate this with the following example:

> **Amanda**: I think the company as a whole is very keen to be flexible around families.
>
> **Bethany**: My career stopped with the birth of my first child.

Given that the notion of multiple realities is by now well established, the identification of this type of contradiction, like the policy versus practice type, is unsurprising. Whilst these two types are interesting features of organizational life, our main purpose in discussing them is to differentiate them from what we are interested in. This is the doublethink type of contradiction. We believe this to be a theoretically intriguing and

underdeveloped form of contradiction. We therefore devote the rest of the article to exploring such instances.

Instances of doublethink

Our interest and main focus is on instances of doublethink, i.e. when one individual holds simultaneously two (or more) conflicting beliefs. In line with the Orwellian notion of doublethink presented earlier, individuals remaining unaware of their doublethink stances is a key distinguishing feature. Our analysis begins with two examples of doublethink relating to organizational and career politics.

Alison is 28 years old, has worked for the company since graduating from university, and has very recently been appointed from a first- to a second-line managerial position. At various points in her account she raises the issue of organizational and career politics.

Alison: There's a pecking order, you know . . . And I suppose I'm trying to sort of raise [this function's] pecking order . . . rather than [this function] being seen as a sort of second class citizen.

[To get promoted in this company] I think it helps to know the right people.

How [career management] happens here is that the first line work out who it is they think are stars, and the second line sort collate that.

Alison: From the political point of view, I don't think it [career progression] is political . . . This bit really frustrates me actually because . . . the people who call it political are the people who just do their job and who are only willing to do their job. They're only willing to do the nine to five, who don't want to do anything further than that and that's their choice . . . I think people who can't be bothered to get involved are the kind of people that will tell you that it's political and that you have to know the right people.

In the left-hand extract Alison alludes to the politicized nature of life at the company. She describes politics as central to three aspects of her own experience: first, what she sees as her priorities in her new role as a second-line manager (to raise her function's position in the pecking order); second, what she thinks helps those pursuing promotion (knowing the right people); and third, management's power to pick and choose 'rising stars'. In contrast, in the right-hand extract, Alison vehemently denies career progression as a

political process. In so doing she performs an act of doublethink. She dismisses colleagues' suggestions that career progression is political by dis-crediting the individuals who have made those comments as 'people who can't be bothered.' Through doublethink, she is able to deny the political nature of promotion and thereby maintain her belief that her own was based on merit, while simultaneously describing the political activities she engages in as part of her role as a second-line manager overseeing the careers of others. Alison's account hints at the possibility that she is performing two roles. Although they are unannounced and may be unrecognized by Alison herself, as researchers we get the sense that she is stepping in and out of different pairs of shoes: Alison as the newly appointed second-line manager relishing her new position, its responsibilities and its power; and Alison as the aspiring employee, insisting that she has been singled out from her colleagues because she is more committed. She *can* 'be bothered' to get involved.

This idea of shifting roles might also help to illuminate William's doublethink stance.

William: I see myself as I suppose, quotes, a career person. You know, as opposed to what I might deem a Lifer. You know, you see a lot of them in the business. They get to a certain level . . . They've already got a salary which keeps them in, you know, keeps them comfortable and they can have a lifestyle that they want. I don't think I've reached that. Well I know I haven't reached that stage yet.

William: Over the last few years my salary has progressed very well. [The company] has treated me very well. I'm in a final salary pension scheme . . . being in HR I recognize the value of certain benefits. . . Now I've gone above the five year mark there's sort of some comfort in terms of long-term disability covers and all that sort of thing. Which is nice to know. So security-wise, I feel very secure in my employment, because you know, I'm basically unsackable. So I feel very confident . . . and I'm sure I can stay here for the rest of my life.

On the left William speaks as the aspiring Human Resource manager, keen to advance his career. He contrasts this role with that of the comfortable 'Lifer' who has progressed to a certain level and is focused on maintaining current lifestyle rather than pursuing career progression. There is an implication here and elsewhere in William's account that careerists are superior to Lifers in terms of their contribution to the business. Indeed, later on in his

account, William describes feeling suspicious of applicants he has interviewed who have been with their current employer for more than five years which he believes may be indicative of their status as sedentary 'Lifers' rather than go-getting careerists. However, on the right, William presents himself as a 'Lifer' – having stayed long enough, he now has a comfortable salary and reassuring benefits. He is unsackable, and able to remain at the company indefinitely. Throughout his account he makes it clear that he is planning his long-term future at the company.

In several cases, respondents described their company as, on the one hand, fundamentally good and fair, but on the other hand, not so. This contradiction can be seen in Amanda's account.

Amanda: The reason I was keen to work for [the organization] is that I saw them, and that they were certainly sold to me very much as an equal opportunity employer. And that has been pretty well borne out. You can get a few individuals who can be fairly obviously racist or sexist but the company policy is very clear, and if you do have any problems like that then it is very easy to complain about them and get them sorted.

The company is an equal opportunities employer.

Amanda: The occasion that I believe affected me, although I can't know for certain, is when I was pregnant with [my daughter] . . . Before I went on maternity leave, when I was full-time, I'd been pursuing a certain promotion. For two years. I'd had various pieces of work and I was told if you do this you'll get promotion . . . It was going on and on and I was getting fed up with this . . . and I'd had these carrots dangled and I'd done what they wanted and I hadn't got the promotion. I'd been fairly quiet about it. In the end I got fed up and I went in to [my manager] and said look, you know, if I'm not going to get it this year then I'm going to move to a different department. He said, well you are, you are going to get it this year. You're in the plan, your name's down, you're going to get a promotion – this year. And then a couple of months later I found out I was pregnant and I told them very

> early in the pregnancy . . . I felt that it wouldn't count against me and it would give them plenty of time to plan. I told them and my promotion didn't happen. I wasn't told anything, it just evaporated and I was quite upset about this . . . I raised it with my new manager when I got back and she held the company line.

At first glance this could be seen as an example of a policy–practice contradiction noted earlier. However, as we explained, this is not the type of contradiction which we are examining in this article. What interests us in Amanda's story is that it is not simply the case that she is reporting company policy. In the extract on the left she makes it clear that this is in fact her personal view of and belief about the company. This view is illustrated twice in the example. First, she describes that she has complete faith in the existence of equal opportunities and the ease with which one can complain about suspected policy breaches. Both this and her second statement that the company is an 'equal opportunities employer' were freely elicited. In contrast, however, in the extract on the right, Amanda recounts her own experience of what she suspects was direct discrimination: she firmly believes that she was denied a promised promotion because of her pregnancy. Here she succeeds in maintaining two opposing positions.

We also spotted doublethink stances in relation to self-managed 'new' careers, with several participants insisting that they manage their own careers, then stating they do not. We present examples from Asif's and Adam's accounts.

Asif is a 30-year-old technical specialist. In his account he describes how he had always, throughout his days as a student and during his early career, longed to work for the company. He described receiving a job offer as 'a dream come true.' The pedestal he has put the company on may in part explain his doublethink stance.

Asif: Earlier it was not free to choose whatever training you wanted to. Your personal manager would decide . . . but now you have a free choice.

Asif: I have been trying to get on an MBA course within [the company] for the last two years and my manager calls me in a few days ago and says that no, you have not been selected . . . Whatever training you want to go for, whatever career path you take you need the support of your manager.

Asif's doublethink stance resonates with that of Adam.

Adam: The individual must form their own career . . . You can sort of steer your own path . . . there are a lot of opportunities that will allow you to more or less do what you want to do . . . you can generally find something which more or less suits both your career and personal aspirations.

Adam: Certainly earlier I would say that I was restricted in my [career] choices because I was recruited to do a specific role . . . if you just accept that and get on with it then you'll be OK . . . A lot of people don't and they kick and scream and shout and stuff and the management are just well, you know, I'm sorry, this is the way it is.

There are two very distinct personal narratives contained within these two accounts. Both Asif and Adam refer to the role of management in controlling, restricting and even dictating career development opportunities whilst also retaining their belief in the notion of careers as self-managed. Although each narrative is internally coherent, it contradicts the other. Neither Asif nor Adam make a connection between the different narratives running through their accounts and therefore seemingly perceive no contradiction between them. There is no attempt within their accounts to reconcile these two contradictory stances.

The next examples, from Sue's (a technical specialist and first-line manager) and Gillian's accounts, elucidate doublethink stances in relation to the notion of meritocracy.

Sue: Everything [in this company] is based on merit.	**Sue:** If I ever give someone a bad rating, not because they did a bad job but because you would have to give out so many [bad ratings] – which happens – I would have felt a bastard.
I've got no complaints about [this company].	Some of the things that they've done to the senior people who basically can't afford to leave because of the pension plans and stuff . . . the fact that they've given a 4% pay-rise over 8 years . . . it's just unforgivable.
Gillian: Recognition goes to those who deserve it.	**Gillian:** You can never really tell but from my opinion I think . . . from personal experience, yeah, there are a couple [of awards] that they've made that perhaps they shouldn't have done, or they couldn't justify. And whether it's because that person is shouting the loudest or whatever, I don't know.

Both Sue's and Gillian's left-hand comments convey their belief that the company is meritocratic. However, later on in the interview they contradict this position in their description of promotion and appraisal practices which in their view have been unjustified. Sue describes a company practice 'which happens' of allocating appraisal ratings based on a quota system, not on merit. She also describes the company's failure to award pay rises to long-serving staff which she sees as 'just unforgivable'. Whereas on the left she says she has no complaints about the company's practices, on the right she complains. In the case of Gillian, although she says that recognition goes to those who deserve it, she relates a couple of awards that seemingly went to people who did not merit them. Interestingly, Gillian is due to be promoted to a managerial position in a few months time and at another point in her interview she vows to try and tackle this issue by challenging unwarranted promotions.

Discussion

In this article we have identified instances of what we term doublethink, and we have differentiated this form of contradiction from some other forms that can be found in accounts of organizational life. We also see doublethink as distinct from other constructs that might at first sight seem similar. For example, the concept of *post-formal thinking* (Kramer, 1989) concerns the simultaneous and conscious processing of potentially conflicting information. The quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald at the start of this article nicely summarizes the attributes of a post-formal thinker. In contrast, doublethink seems neither simultaneous nor conscious. *Cognitive complexity*, a prominent concept in personal construct theory, is usually defined and operationalized as the number of distinguishable dimensions a person can use when perceiving and/or thinking about any given domain. For example, Zinkhan and Braunsberger (2004) investigated the number and nature of statistically separable dimensions (e.g. stylish – not stylish; attractive colour scheme – unattractive colour scheme) people use to distinguish between and evaluate consumer products like training shoes, calculators and cameras. Unlike doublethink, this again implies simultaneous use of alternative ideas, and contradiction is not inherent in cognitive complexity. What some attitude researchers term *ambivalence* (e.g. Brooks et al., 2003) occurs when a person holds (and can report) positive beliefs and/or feelings about some aspects of a particular entity, and negative beliefs and/or feelings about other aspects. This differs from doublethink in the conscious and simultaneous use of different perceptions, and also the breaking down into components of the entity being considered. Finally, Ashforth's (2001) use of the notion of *selective forgetting* in work-role transitions refers to unlearning past roles in order to make way for new ones. The focus on the past as well as the more or less permanent forgetting distinguishes selective forgetting from doublethink.

The different positions our participants occupy and the roles they play may, in part, explain the doublethink we have detected within their accounts. Oakes' (1990) work alludes to this in his description of the commercial and service idioms, both essentially about performativity, to which salespeople and the sales process are tied. Oakes highlights two contradictory roles within the sales job. In our data, however, the roles are sometimes quite distinct, for example, employee and mother. Sometimes the distinction is more subtle, for example second-line manager and loyal employee; soon-to-be first-line manager and 'grass-roots' employee. Doublethink may be one way of containing the contradiction created by the performance of different roles. Gillian herself offers such an explanation, with strong Orwellian overtones:

> One of the things that I always joke about to some of the colleagues that are in positions similar to me is that we always say that as soon as you get into the management team you seem to have a frontal lobotomy. You forget what it was like at the grass roots, you know? Yeah, you go on a management course and they give you, you get an operation. And I don't know whether people have intended to do it and they just get shouted down or whether they're too scared or I don't know, or whether they . . . you change when you get to that position. You think well, seeing as I've gone through it, you might as well go through it. I don't know.

Whilst each of the roles individuals play (manager versus grass-roots employee in this quote) may have their own coherent logics, *if* put together, they are contradictory. In fact, with just one possible exception, participants in our study do not put them together. Only Amanda, juggling two roles as employee and mother, appears to do so, albeit fleetingly. She says:

> I want to live two lives. I want both lives. I want my life back, when I could work all the hours I wanted, it's mainly the work . . . but I still want two lives. It's time that is so valuable. It's the time. I want a full-time life working but then I want the time with family as well.

Amanda constructs her work life and family life and her roles as employee and mother as separate, what Giddens (1991) refers to as 'bracketing' one from the other, thereby absolving her of the need to 'resolve' the conflicts produced by maintaining connections between them.

We also see Giddens' (1979, 1984, 1991) notion of practical consciousness (what is done) and discursive consciousness (what can be said) as helpful in accounting for and explaining acts of doublethink. Practical consciousness, or knowing 'how to go on' is defined by Giddens as 'knowledge embodied in what actors "know how to do" ' (1979: 73) that is 'skilfully applied in the enactment of courses of conduct' (1979: 57). Though he labels it differently, Oakes (1990) too points to the distinction between pragmatics and reflexivity, between practice and theory, to explain how sales workers deal with their inherently contradictory work and the contradictory commercial and service idioms. He explains 'the sales process as a practice, rather than an object of theoretical reflection, does not employ either idiom rigorously or systematically. As a result, their mutual inconsistencies do not become visible within the work world of the agent' (1990: 89). In our data, although individual accounts demonstrate contradictions, they appear not to be experienced as such by the individual. This is in part achieved by the

process of 'bracketing' (Giddens, 1991) noted earlier, whereby a separation is maintained between, on the one hand, descriptions of the specifics of personal action and the day-to-day activities associated with pursuing career (i.e. what is done) and, on the other hand, descriptions of what are announced as the general defining features of the organization (what is said). So, for example, Alison describes the essentially political practical activities engaged in on a day-to-day basis (what she does – her practical consciousness) whilst also describing the organization and the career management process as not political (what she can say – her discursive consciousness).

The commercial and service idioms which Oakes (1990) describes are, he argues, subsumed within an overarching and enveloping idiom or discourse of the value of insurance, including the security and peace of mind it gives the purchaser. Insurance salespeople believe in this wholeheartedly. This overarching idiom serves to 'naturalize' the work they do, and to contain the contradiction between the (inherently contradictory) commercial and service idioms. We suspect something similar also helps explain our data and account for the doublethink contained therein. The overarching idiom here is tied to the pursuit of a successful career within this blue-chip organization and the value of having that career. The pragmatics of a successful career or, in other words, 'doing career' successfully within this organization require declarations of allegiance to and belief in the goodness of the company, whilst also dealing with practical experiences which may be at odds to this. For example, in our data, Amanda describes the practical difficulties of securing a promised promotion once she has informed her employer of her pregnancy, whilst also standing by her firm belief that the company is an equal opportunities employer.

'Doing career' in this organization involves engagement in an essentially political game with a simultaneous denial of the process as political. A successful careerist must become skilled in political manoeuvring in a corporate culture in which 'politics' is at times seen as a dirty word. Successful careerists must thus also simultaneously be able to promote the notion of an apolitical corporate culture. In such an arena, truly effective political manoeuvres require an act of doublethink – demanding a political performance which includes a denial of its political nature as central to that performance. The act of doublethink facilitates this performance. It serves a further function too. Because the contradictory stances are kept separate, there need be no associated performance anxiety.

Operating in this way becomes occupational and organizational common sense. Because any reflection and questioning would interfere with and obstruct the containment of the contradiction, the absence of reflexivity which Oakes (1990) observed becomes necessary and arguably intentional.

Doublethink and reflexivity are arguably mutually inconsistent, at least across the brackets or boxes which contain the contradiction. This leads us to a further possible explanation for the act of doublethink (which Gillian's 'frontal lobotomy' Orwellian doublethink example points us to) associated with the construction of ignorance (Wynne, 1995). We turn again to Oakes (1990) here who draws on Nietzsche's notion of the 'will to ignorance' (Nehamas, 1985).

> The will to ignorance is a decision not to know something: that in acquiring and practising skills essential to personal sales, the salesperson not only remains ignorant of other things, but also fails to know what these other things are. In the final analysis, this amounts to a decision to limit reflection to a certain sphere of occupational functions in a way that excludes recognition of the conflicts of the sales process. As a result, the experience of these conflicts remains below the salesperson's cognitive horizon. Thus in learning the practice of the sales process, the salesperson also learns the means of rendering the antinomies of the process invisible.
>
> (Oakes, 1990: 87)

Doublethink is thus usefully employed to keep one utterance separate or bracketed off from its contradictory counterpart such that never the twain shall meet. It is not that there is no reflective activity, but that such reflection is confined to a particular box or bracket. There is no apparent tussle between our participants' contradictory beliefs, no detectable sense of implacable struggle, and no need for one to win out over the other. One is not more true than the other. This is not a case of either/or but a case of both/and. Both co-exist and they are able to do so through the act of doublethink. In this way, organizational members are able to go about their organizational lives free from the sorts of crippling dilemmas which, in the absence of doublethink, they might have to confront day in day out. Doublethink creates and sustains a 'protective cocoon' (Giddens, 1991). We argue here, however, that these tensions are not resolved, at least not in the way Giddens and others have suggested. Security does not derive from a stable and consistent single personal narrative. As we have seen, participants in our study have more than one personal narrative. Whilst each individual narrative may be internally consistent and coherent, it frequently conflicts with and contradicts other narratives which the individual articulates. We see security as deriving from keeping separate or bracketing these contradictory and conflicting dimensions. Both recent work (Ashforth, 2001) and not so recent work (Lieberman, 1956) has shown how people's roles shape their

attitudes and actions, but this refers to roles held sequentially. That is, people leave one before taking on the next. Our data suggest that multiple roles held simultaneously can have similar effects.

Several elements of our tentative explanations for doublethink discussed above imply that although doublethink is not conscious, it is in some way intentional, or at least performed to fulfil a goal. Lurking here, then, is the question of whether non-conscious mental operations can be thought of as intentional. Clearly, the language of psychoanalytic psychology is consistent with unconscious intention, and indeed the notion has been applied to Freud himself (Halpern, 1999). Findings of some experimental studies have been said to support the idea that volitional action is triggered before it reaches conscious awareness, although this has been challenged on the grounds that the person can articulate a general intention well before they perform a specific action consistent with it (Zhu, 2003). Perhaps most relevant to this article, however, is Bargh and Chartrand's (1999) analysis of what they call 'the unbearable automaticity of being'. They conclude that unconscious monitoring of stimuli helps us maintain focus on specific tasks, so that effectively the conscious and the unconscious are working together. It may be that doublethink is one product of unconscious processes allowing conscious attention to focus on whatever enables the person to function at that moment.

Conclusions

In some senses, our findings run counter to the voluminous research suggesting that people dislike contradiction and seek consistency. It seems that our interviewees did not even reach Peng and Nisbett's (1999) first stage, which is recognizing contradiction. However, most research on consistency poses people with dilemmas which highlight inconsistency between expectation and outcome, or between different sentiments and beliefs (see, for example, Choi & Nisbett, 2000; Williams & Aaker, 2002). Furthermore, the inconsistency is usually manufactured using experimental manipulations, and in relatively controlled situations in which a person's multiple roles and identities are not particularly salient. In contrast, interviewees in this study were free to give whatever accounts they pleased in response to very general questions. In fact, it might be argued that our findings agree with prior research by suggesting that people do indeed find contradiction uncomfortable. Where our findings differ from other work concerns how people avoid the discomfort. We suggest that, rather than confronting and attempting to resolve contradiction, people contain it by offering different (and separate) narratives.

We therefore challenge the assumption that underpins much of the

existing literature that individuals seek to resolve contradiction whenever and wherever it arises. We have no examples in our data of such spontaneous resolution. This begs the question why does existing theory and research persist with this assumption and why does it continue to neglect the study of contradiction? We suspect part of the answer is that it is methodologically difficult to spot. In this study, there was frequently a considerable time delay between the utterance of one statement and its contradictory counterpart. Both are genuine statements and both express a genuine, albeit conflicting, view of (in this case) career and organizational life. Furthermore, both statements are embedded in their own coherent narrative. Whilst these two (or more) narratives conflict, in the account itself they do not collide but are kept separate, thus ensuring that the contradiction has to be neither obviously acknowledged nor confronted.

Perhaps the inclination of many researchers steeped in traditions of logical positivism and correspondence theories of truth (whether or not they agree with them) is to look for consistency and coherence in accounts. Researchers neither look for, nor indeed expect to stumble upon, doublethink in accounts of organizational life. Bar one exception, in this study instances of doublethink were detected after the interview had finished and the analysis of it had begun. This, it turns out, has proved beneficial. We suspect that, confronted with their contradictions and asked to explain them, individuals may then attempt to adjust their account to 'resolve' them. As Kvale (1996: 57) warns, 'if social processes are essentially contradictory, then empirical methods based on an exclusion of contradictions will be invalid for uncovering a contradictory social reality.' It may be true to say that individuals neither like being inconsistent nor being *seen* as inconsistent and self-contradictory. However, it seems also fair to conclude, from these data at least, that they (we) are.

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Amal El-Sawad BA PgDip MSc PhD is a Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the Business School, Loughborough University. She has previously worked as a human resource practitioner in both the public and private sectors. Her research to date has focused on career and career contexts exploring the process of structuration and the ways in which career rules are created and re-created, the disciplinary effects of career, and the functions served by a variety of discursive features and forms (e.g. contradiction, metaphor, cliché and songs). She is currently running an ESRC-funded seminar series – 'Critical perspectives on career and family friendly policies' – with Loughborough colleagues Dr Laurie Cohen and Dr Peter Ackers. Amal has developing interests in the experiences at work of ethnic minority groups, and the role of music in and around the workplace.
[E-mail: A.El-Sawad@lboro.ac.uk]

John Arnold BA PhD is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Business School, Loughborough University. His interests span all areas of careers and their management, especially personal development and adjustment, work-role identities and transitions, and the evaluation of the impact of career management interventions such as mentoring, development centres and succession planning. Other interests include how professionals and managers relate to each other, psychological contracts at work, and the link (or lack of it) between work attitudes and behaviour. He has conducted many research and consultancy projects in these areas, and published widely across a range of social science and management journals. John is increasingly interested in multidisciplinary and qualitative research, as well as the more usual quantitative work characteristic of most work and organizational psychology. He is currently editor of the leading European applied psychology journal, the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. He is also author of the book *Managing careers into the 21st century* (Sage), and lead author of the textbook *Work psychology*, published by Pearson Education, the fourth edition of which was published in July 2004.
[E-mail: J.M.Arnold@lboro.ac.uk]

Laurie Cohen BA MA PGCE PhD is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the Business School, Loughborough University. Her doctoral research focused on women's career transitions from employment to self-employment. Her current research interests include changing careers and the emergence of new career forms and patterns, and research methods in the study of career, focusing in particular on interpretive approaches and the use of narrative. Central to her work is an interest in the role of language and meaning-making. Laurie is also involved in a series of studies into perceptions and enactment of management in professional organizations – specifically in legal and architectural settings, as well as in public sector scientific research establishments, where she has explored the negotiation between discourses of management and professional practice and the production of scientific knowledge. This research into professional work has been funded by the ESRC through a series of grants and fellowships. Laurie is currently working on a new ESRC-supported study into scientists who have moved from the public to the private sector. Laurie has published in many journals, including *Human Relations*; *Organization*; *Work, Employment and Society*; *Science, Technology and Human Values* and *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*. She is also co-author of *Understanding organizations through language* (Sage 2003) with Susanne Tietze and Gill Musson.
[E-mail: L.Cohen@lboro.ac.uk]