Stretching the Iron Cage: The Constitution and Implications of Routine Workplace Resistance

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Managerial control and employee resistance are core processes in work organizations, but their operation is often hidden and difficult to observe. The implementation of a new computer system in a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) provides an occasion to gain insight into some unexpected ways that resistance can be constituted in discourse and interaction.

Brian T. Pentland

Abstract

Organizational scholars have shown considerable interest in the rise of complex systems of organizational control, sometimes referred to metaphorically as the process of tightening the iron cage, as well as patterns of workplace resistance to it. More recently, the scholarly spotlight seems to have shifted from formal modes of employee resistance to more informal or *routine* forms of workplace resistance. This paper presents a detailed ethnographic account of informal resistance and its ability to limit managerial control in a health maintenance organization undergoing the computerization of its administrative functions. Our study adopts a more problematic approach to understanding routine resistance, tracing its *discursive* constitution in the workplace. Using the findings of an ethnographic study involving observation and interviews, we show *how* routine resistance was discursively constituted and how it limited organizational control in interesting and unexpected ways. This discursive constitution was achieved through (a) owning resistance, (b) naming resistance, and (c) designating indirect resistance. The paper also analyzes how these different discursive constructions limited managerial control by affirming autonomous self-identities, renegotiating roles and relationships, and reinterpreting dominant managerial discourses. Finally, broader implications for understanding routine resistance in organizations are drawn.
(*Resistance*; *Discourse*; *Symbolism*)

The overwhelming preoccupation of organizational scholarship with control, exercised through technology (Edwards 1979) and the rationality of the "iron cage" (Barker 1993, Heydebrand 1981) has increasingly been challenged by the post-Bravermanian labor process theorists, who propose that systems of control are better understood as *contested relations of power* (Knights and Vrudubakis 1994) wherein resistance and opposition play crucial roles. In other words, organizational control, be it coercive (Edwards 1979), hegemonic (Burris 1986), unobtrusive (Hardy 1985), or concertive (Barker 1993) is never complete or easily accomplished. Rather, systems of control are constantly resisted both formally and informally by different organization members, frequently in unexpected ways. The focus of this paper is on the more *informal* aspects of workplace resistance, or on what James Scott (1985) so evocatively refers to as "routine resistance," practiced mostly at the more mundane levels of work life in organizations. We employ findings from an ethnographic study of work computerization in an organization to show (a) how routine resistance was constituted in the workplace, and (b) how it limited systematic attempts at organizational control.

Routine Forms of Workplace Resistance

Discussions of workplace resistance in general emphasize a difference between formal, and informal or routine forms of resistance (Hodson 1991, Nord and Jermier 1994). The former refers to any kind of organized collective opposition that typically takes the form of organized

1047-7039/00/1104/0387/$05.00
1526-5455 electronic ISSN

worker protests, strikes, grievances, output restrictions, etc. (Edwards and Scullion 1982, Friedman 1977). Routine resistance (Scott 1985), on the other hand, refers to *less visible* and more *indirect* forms of opposition that can take place within the everyday worlds of organizations. Unlike much of formal resistance, routine resistance is often unplanned and spontaneous, occasionally being even covert in nature. Scholars of routine resistance, however, emphasize that it is actually likely to be more pervasive in organizations even though it is far less evident to the casual observer (Nord and Jermier 1994, Prasad and Prasad 1998). Scott's use of the term, "routine" resistance is therefore rather significant because of its emphasis on the more *mundane* actions of workers, which nevertheless represent persistent efforts to oppose forms of control and domination. To many commentators of workplace resistance, routine resistance becomes a central component in the ongoing struggle over control in organizations. ''They are the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow, and they are likely to persist after such forms have failed or produced in turn, a new pattern of inequity.'' (Scott 1985, p. 273).

Even as routine resistance has become a source of lively interest in organization studies, some scholars point out that it does not easily lend itself to traditional modes of social scientific inquiry (Hodson 1991, Nord and Jermier 1994). Routine resistance, for one thing, belongs to that domain of organizational experience often designated as the informal organization (Fortado 1994, Weinstein 1979), comprising the less visible and more ambiguous arenas of everyday workplace activities. While the informal organization itself is not easy to study, resistance is even more difficult to examine given its frequently covert and hidden nature, which sets it squarely outside the scope of traditional survey and laboratory research.

A recognition of these difficulties in understanding routine resistance has triggered an increase in detailed and proximate field studies in the ethnographic tradition offering a number of insights into the phenomenon. Without question, ethnographic field studies of routine workplace resistance have been on the rise, providing us with vivid glimpses into the dynamics of opposition and control at the workplace. These ethnographies, moreover, have looked at different categories of organizational employees ranging from traditional blue-collar workers (Burawoy 1979, Graham 1993) to women service employees (Gottfried 1994) in a wide variety of work situations, including automobile plants in North America and the United Kingdom (Graham 1993, White 1987), Chinese silk factories (Rofel 1992), a New Jersey restaurant (Paules 1991), and electronic chip factories in Malaysia (Ong 1987).

What these ethnographies primarily alert us to is the rich and often unanticipated ways in which resistance is enacted in organizations. Prasad and Prasad's (1998) comprehensive review of this literature indicates the multiple ways in which resistance can be expressed in contemporary workplaces. Using a four-fold typology, they categorize resistance as being (a) open confrontations to supervisors and clients (McFarland 1980, Paules 1991), (b) subtle subversions of control systems through the use of gossip (Gottfried 1994) and horseplay (Thompson 1983), (c) employee withdrawal and disengagement (Fuller and Smith 1991, Graham 1993), and (d) even ambiguous accommodations to authority such as Burawoy's (1979) discussion of the practice of ''making out'' on the shopfloor. Most of these expressions of resistance covered by the Prasad and Prasad (1998) review are not easily or immediately recognizable as resistance by either outside observers or even local workplace actors, being cloaked in secrecy or disguised as more ''legitimate'' action. It is this elusive and troubling phenomenon of identifying routine resistance and understanding its implications that is the main focus of this paper.

The Constitution of Routine Resistance

Ethnographies of resistance confirm the omnipresence of everyday forms of opposition and suggest that this opposition is likely to be expressed in a multitude of mundane actions and behaviors at the workplace. While recognizing the mundane nature of informal resistance however, we are still left with the problem of distinguishing *resistant* mundane actions from a multitude of other (possibly nonresistant) mundane ones (Scott 1985, Zacharias 1993). This is particularly relevant when examining subtle subversions and forms of disengagement that are often hard to detect in the workplace (Prasad and Prasad 1998). To illustrate, let us look at the phenomenon of aberrant dress styles as resistance. Gottfried (1994) persuasively argues that temporary female service workers often dress deviantly as a way of expressing resistance. The question that Gottfried does not confront is whether *all* instances of ''deviant'' dress at the workplace can be interpreted as routine resistance. We suggest that accepting such an interpretation at face value might mislead us into regarding any instance of ''aberrant'' dress styles as oppositional practices, which may not always be the case. It is, after all, entirely possible to argue that dress code violations may be mere reflections of personal aesthetic preference or even an unawareness of rules relating to personal appearances at work.

The central point being made here is that one cannot automatically infer that resistance is taking place on the

basis of a specific type of action (e.g., horseplay, gossip, aberrant dress style, etc.) occuring in the workplace. Yet ethnographies of routine resistance increasingly tempt us to treat all manner of everyday actions as resistance. Some scholars have already observed that from holding narrow and restrictive conceptions of formal workplace resistance, we may be moving dangerously close to seeing resistance everywhere and celebrating it somewhat unreflectively (Milkman 1985, Zacharias 1993). Identifying routine resistance becomes further complicated because it is often difficult to specify where compliance ends and where resistance begins (Knights and Vrudubakis 1994, Martin 1988). Some observers of routine resistance, for instance, assert that daily oppositional practices can sometimes be indistinguishable from employees' efforts to accommodate themselves to industrialization (Gottfried 1994, Martin 1988). These ''ambiguous accommodations'' (Prasad and Prasad 1998) are resistant in two ways. First, their appearance of consensuality and cooperation can often conceal resistance. Second, these seemingly accommodative strategies can *maintain* rather than dampen workers' opposition to relations of control (Martin 1988) because, under certain conditions, accommodation itself can become the basis for resistance. A case in point is provided by White's (1987) study of worker resistance in two English electrical component manufacturing plants. White argues that workers' systematic efforts to bypass certain factory rules in order to ensure the smoother maintenance and functioning of the production process could actually be viewed as resistance (despite its obvious benefit to management) because it represented an attempt to restore worker pride and autonomy into an otherwise alienating work environment. For White, therefore, compliance can also be resistant if it is able to diminish employee alienation.

What we are now confronted with is the possibility that seemingly subversive or disruptive practices are not necessarily resistant by intent, while ostensibly compliant ones may well contain seeds of resistance and opposition. In sum, the task of identifying routine resistance is an immensely problematic one, in part because of its commonplace nature, and in part because it holds multiple connotations for different organizational members. The framework of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969, Strauss et al. 1963) can be somewhat helpful here. For symbolic interactionists, routine resistance, like any other category of social action, is produced out of the everyday interpretations and negotiations of local organizational actors (Prasad 1993, Strauss et al. 1963). Based on these insights, we propose that researchers cease reifying routine resistance as a prespecified set of actions (e.g., horseplay, gossip, disengagement) and look instead at *how* it is *constituted* in local workplace situations. For, as Knights and Vrudubakis (1994, p. 169) assert, ''to treat resistance as self-evident is to miss the actual interpretive practices through which knowledge about it is acquired and communicated.''

What this means, first of all, is that routine resistance is likely to be enacted in very different ways in different work contexts. Furthermore, in focusing on its constitution, we are suggesting that routine resistance emerges out of a complex interplay between individual and collective action *and* interpretation at the workplace (Ong 1987, Kondo 1990). In other words, specific actions and events occurring in organizations may hold oppositional connotations for certain local actors. When these actors vocalize these oppositional meanings (in a wide spectrum of private and public domains), they discursively constitute routine resistance (Fairclough 1995, Rofel 1992). We use the term discourse here to refer to the use of language as a social practice that represents the world and locates actors own positions and relationships within it (Fairclough 1995, Kress 1988). From a discursive standpoint, language itself is action, and therefore, language acts to shape, create, and define reality (Stubbs 1983). As Lacitiy and Janson (1994, p. 145) put it more simply, ''people do things with words.''

This discursive turn is theoretically compatible with a symbolic interactionist position. Contemporary strands of symbolic interaction have shown a growing interest in language as a primary shaper of meaning itself (Fine 1992), seeing it as the vehicle through which meaning itself is constructed and meaningful action enacted. In particular, symbolic interactionism recognizes the role of ''accounts'', i.e., retrospective explanations and justifications in shaping and constituting organizational practices (Fine 1992, Scott and Lyman 1968). Routine resistance is therefore best understood as a *local social production* involving the discursive participation (willing or otherwise) of different organization members. While many ethnographies have enumerated different instances of routine resistance, to date few have focused on the actual processes whereby it is discursively constituted at the workplace. Our primary interest in this paper, therefore, is to understand this process by looking at both the kinds of actions that are discursively constituted as routine resistance, and the ways in which this constitution takes place.

Additionally, we propose that the discursive production of routine resistance has implications for the extent and effectiveness of organizational control. In the past, a number of organizational scholars have systematically documented the processes of everyday organizational control.

Fortado (1994), for instance, minutely shows how supervisors exert informal control over their employees, while Barker (1993) demonstrates the ways in which employees themselves intensify or "tighten the iron cage" that controls them through their willing participation in self-managed work teams. Our study looks at the obverse side of these informal control attempts by focusing instead on how these controls are mitigated or on how the iron cage is metaphorically "stretched" by employees in a multitude of ways, many of which may be less significant to the casual observer. Our second interest in this paper, therefore, is on how routine resistance limits organizational control. Both of these issues are addressed in the context of a wider ethnographic study of work computerization in a health maintenance organization (HMO) in the eastern part of the United States.

The Setting of the Study

This paper discusses findings from a field study of work computerization in a health maintenance organization (HMO) in the eastern United States that was conducted by one of the authors (Prasad 1992). The study primarily focused on the process of work transformation following the introduction of a new computerized system from a symbolic interactionist perspective. To begin with, the central focus of the study was not on the emergence of workplace resistance. However, in the course of fieldwork it became apparent that employee resistance was discursively present in the organization's encounter with computerization. Accordingly, the fieldworker kept detailed notes of this phenomenon in the course of the day-to-day observations, and also made it a part of her focus in the in-depth interviews conducted with various organizational participants. Once the study was completed, the researcher, along with a second colleague, revisited the fieldnotes on resistance and engaged in a second level of data analysis. This section of the paper provides a brief overview of the research site.

The study was conducted in a medium-sized health maintenance organization (163 employees) that was a part of Superior Corporation (pseudonym), a major health care organization headquarterd on the West Coast of the United States. The HMO had only recently been taken over by Superior, having been an independent medical center prior to that event. In the health care industry, Superior is regarded as an exemplary prototype of a PGP (Prepaid Group Practice) system of medical care. Under the PGP system, the organization employs physicians who agree to provide, in exchange for a fixed remuneration, a wide range of specified medical services to an enrolled population. This kind of health maintenance organization (HMO) both finances and undertakes to deliver health care without resorting to a third-party insurance agency. One of the striking features of Superior Corporation is its famed "duality of management", which refers to a tradition in which administrators and physicians share the responsibility of running the organization.

The HMO was staffed by individuals from a diverse array of occupational groups, including physicians, nurses, physician assistants, radiologists, nutritionists, receptionists, managers, and clerical staff. The organization had ten clinical departments, departments of health education, referrals, and nutrition, and a records office. The employees came from diverse social and economic backgrounds and were of varying ages. Aside from the physicians, most of the employees were female. The HMO was frequently described by employees as being a "friendly" place having an "informal" and "cozy" atmosphere. It was certainly accurate that throughout the working day, small groups of employees would gather together for brief conversations over coffee at various coffee machines, and were in the habit of regularly greeting each other and chatting briefly if they met one another in the corridors.

Simultaneously, there was a sense that the culture of the HMO had undergone a definite change after it had been taken over by Superior. Many of the employees expressed concern that the organization no longer had the old "family atmosphere" and sense of closeness that had been with it as an independent medical center. There was also a sense that the pace of everyday work had quickened under the Superior Corporation management, and that the HMO was now developing a culture more typical of organizations playing in the "major league". Among other changes mentioned by employees were different expectations, higher levels of formality, and greater anxiety levels. The HMO had also recently been placed under the direct leadership of a new administrator who was seen by some as a "true Superior type" who practiced new management styles that were a departure for the organization.

A few months before one of the authors entered the organization as a researcher, the decision to computerize a number of administrative functions had been announced. The system that was being implemented was designed to computerize a variety of administrative functions, including the maintenance and retrieval of medical records, the regular maintenance of a membership data base, the scheduling of medical appointments, and the billing process. Prior to the introduction of this technology, all of the administrative operations in the HMO had been performed manually. Appointments were scheduled

in log books, records were maintained in large files in a records room, and so on. Four months after the computerization announcement, the HMO began its "training of trainers." Three nurse supervisors and one treatment nurse were selected to conduct most of the training sessions under the guidance of a project manager from Superior, and after yet another four months, official training sessions for the rest of the organization were initiated. Simultaneously, the HMO brought in "dummy" terminals with fabricated data bases to familiarize employees with the computers on a regular basis. After three months of batch training, the HMO officially went "online", putting all scheduling, billing, and record maintenance functions on the computer.

Research Methods and Data Analysis

Studying complex processes such as employee resistance and technological change processes requires an immersion in the everyday life world of the organization being examined (Hodson 1991, Kilduff et al. 1997). At the same time, organizational scholars also suggest that these first-hand insights and experiences of a researcher are likely to be sharpened when augmented by a more "detached" second-order analysis (Gioia and Chittipedi 1991, Kilduff et al. 1997). Keeping this in mind, the first researcher was directly engaged in conducting an ethnographic study of the HMO, while a second researcher helped later with a more distanced analysis of the data.

Ethnographic Observation

The study is best characterized as an ethnography (Prasad 1997, Schwartzman 1993) involving intense researcher immersion in the field, and emphasizing an understanding of local interpretations of actions and events (Geertz 1973). The predominant method of data collection was extensive observation at the site over a period of 19 months. From the inception of fieldwork, there was a full disclosure of the researcher's identity as an academic interested in studying the process of work computerization. The researcher used what Denzin (1970) called the method of observer-as-participant, spending extended periods of time during work and breaks observing the nature of work and interactions, and trying to enter the everyday lives of various organizational members. Given her interest in work computerization, the fieldworker spent hours watching receptionists, nurses, physician assistants, and record clerks at work. Occasionally, some of the receptionists allowed her to "play" with the new system, and when the work became high pressured, she was sometimes asked to help mind the phones and even to set up appointments on the new system. Sometimes she accompanied employees on their lunch breaks, and went into town with them to run errands or to have a cup of coffee.

The observation was designed to cover different phases of the computerization process in the HMO, including several months of the precomputerization period, the training and implementation phases, and the postcomputerization period. The researcher spent most of her time observing everyday work and interactions in four clinical departments, the records room, and the referrals department both before and after computerization. She also made an effort to attend any event or occasion which seemed connected to the computerization of work in the HMO. For instance, she attended a get-together of employees held to "celebrate" the successful implementation of computers in the organization, during which one of the nurses was publicly honored for her proactive role in the training process, and was given a plant as a token of managerial appreciation. In addition, she attended several training sessions and a number of staff meetings held to discuss problems arising on account of the computerization process. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher visited the HMO regularly, on an average making two visits a week. The duration of these observation visits varied, occasionally lasting an entire day, but more often lasting anywhere between two and five hours. The researcher found that when she spent very long stretches of time at the site, she was unable to recall events and conversations with the same clarity that she could when the visits were shorter.

After every session of fieldwork, extensive notes documenting the observation were written up. The fieldworker tried to do most of the writing as soon as possible after the observation and restricted the amount of note-writing at the site. She found that if she took notes while observing, people were apt to become self-conscious and to ask her what she was "finding" about them. However, as the fieldwork progressed, many employees grew so accustomed to the researcher's presence that they seemed to worry less about her note-taking. In some sense, the researcher grew more "invisible" the longer she stayed. In the last few months of observation, people became increasingly forthright about management policies and personalities in her presence.

In-Depth Interviews

The researcher also used in-depth ethnographic interviews with various organizational participants representing a diverse array of occupations and organizational positions. Those interviewed included HMO administrators, physicians, physician assistants, nurses, nurse supervisors, receptionists, and record assistants. In many instances, the interviews helped to illuminate, clarify, and

modify some of the observations. In some cases, the interviews confirmed the researcher's assessment of a particular interaction or event. In others, they contradicted her earlier conclusions by offering alternative interpretations, and thereby forced the authors to rethink their analysis. Furthermore, the privacy of the interviews provided many individuals with a space in which they could reflect and articulate their reactions to the computerization of work in the HMO.

All interviews for the study were conducted in a three-month period after the new system had been in use for more than five months. The interviews were scheduled in advance and each respondent was interviewed once. The interviews lasted anywhere between 45 minutes to one-and-a-half hours, and followed a semistandardized and semistructured format.

The overall format of the interviews followed Spradley and McCurdy's (1972) suggestions for conducting an ethnographic interview employing both "grand tour" and "mini tour" questions. It is worth noting that while the researcher never actually initiated a discussion of resistance in the interviews, many respondents made reference to certain "resistant" actions, interpreted the significance of them, and even alerted her to less visible oppositional practices. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed later. A few interviewees voiced discomfort at the idea of being recorded. In those cases, the interviewer took notes during the interview and wrote up a detailed summary of the interview after the session. These summaries were eventually shown to the interviewees, who were able to comment on their accuracy.

Data Analysis

As in any extended qualitative study, the sheer volume of data collected was enormous. Over 1,800 pages of field notes from observation and nearly 800 pages of interview transcripts needed to be analyzed. The field notes and transcripts were jointly analyzed by the primary researcher and a second outside researcher. As a broad framework for analysis, we used the techniques of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which provide guidelines for the classification and interpretation of qualitative data, mainly through the maintenance of concept cards (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Martin and Turner 1986). Generating concept cards was a way of identifying prominent themes in the data. In keeping with Martin and Turner's (1986) suggestions, we began by creating concept cards containing common or similar data elements. If a card contained too many themes, it ceased to function as a meaningful category and was divided into further concept cards.

Clearly, maintaining the concept cards was an iterative process. New elements were frequently added to them, and sometimes a particular concept card was reorganized into different categories and labels requiring a whole new concept card. To illustrate, when we began our analysis we had a single concept card containing several discursive allusions to resistance. As our analysis progressed, it became evident that this card was overfilled with data elements and was becoming far too unwieldy to be meaningful in any way. A closer examination revealed that these discursive allusions could be more meaningfully reclassified into further concepts. The card contained processes whereby routine resistance was constituted at the workplace, and a whole set of actions that were being constituted in different ways. We eventually came up with several different concept cards that were contained on the one hand the kinds of actions that were being designated as resistance, and another set of cards containing the ways in which this resistance was being constructed at the HMO. A second level of analysis tried to establish linkages between and within these different concept cards.

Discursive Practices Constituting Routine Resistance In the Organization

While our present paper is exclusively focused on the discursive constitution of routine resistance in the HMO, this focus was developed within a wider ethnographic study on the symbolic construction of work computerization (Prasad 1992, 1993). It makes sense, therefore, to briefly describe the overall computerization process taking place within the organization. The decision to computerize several administrative operations in the HMO was a corporate one not involving any input by employees from the HMO itself. Most of the employees at all levels of the HMO were unaware of the exact nature of the approaching technological change, and were perhaps understandably anxious about how their work would be transformed by the new technology. Much of this anxiety surfaced throughout the organization, but was most noticeable in training sessions and departmental meetings. The training sessions were additionally seen by many employees as being unsatisfactory because they failed to provide sufficient information, and often left individuals confused about some of the technological operations themselves. Concerns regarding the system's capability to replace people were also pervasive among the clerical and reception staff, and despite management's attempts to allay these concerns, they persisted for a number of months.

Once the system was actually installed, the response to it varied. Some individuals enjoyed working with it, some

grew reconciled to its presence, while a few employees continued to regard it with suspicion and hostility. By and large, managers and administrators expressed considerable satisfaction with the system's ability to provide them with instant access to medical files and patient information, while physicians, receptionists, and triage nurses were much more ambivalent about the impact of the system on their everyday work lives. During the first few weeks of fieldwork, the researcher witnessed managers expressing some concerns regarding the possibility of employee resistance to the system. However, as the system was implemented, more managers talked about the ease with which the computerization was proceeding. Several months after the system had been in use, a report written by the HMO manager describing the process of computerization as having gone ''smoothly'' and not having encountered significant employee resistance was circulated throughout the organization. Thus, the *official managerial interpretation* was that the computerization of work had not met with serious resistance in the organization.

Based on our own observation and analysis, however, we assert that this particular managerial position did not necessarily tell the entire story. What managers were mostly alluding to was the absence of formal protests and collective antagonism towards the new system. Yet, at different moments of our study, we noticed informal resistance emerging out of the discursive constructions of several seemingly mundane events. What is also noteworthy is that some incidents that managers themselves informally alluded to as resistant were glossed over in their own formal reports and discussions of employee reactions to work computerization.

What interested us was how certain actions and events were discursively constructed as being resistant in nature, and we elaborate on the *processes* whereby specific actions/behaviors were constituted as resistance, with subsequent implications for the enactment of organizational control. We identified three different ways in which routine resistance was constituted in the HMO. The first was a relatively straightforward process whereby some individuals constructed certain actions of theirs as being deliberately antagonistic or resistant. We refer to this process of discursive construction as *owning resistance*. The second involved the labeling of certain actions as being deliberately resistant by individuals and groups who had not actually committed them, and we refer to this process as *naming resistance*. And, finally, managers also discursively constituted routine resistance by their reactions to certain employee interpretations of managerial constructions. Paradoxically, managers framed these interpretations as potentially disruptive even though they acknowledged that employees may not have meant their actions to be so. We refer to this process as one of constituting *indirect resistance.*

In the remainder of the paper, we will first discuss in detail these different discursive practices through which routine resistance was enacted in the workplace. We follow this with an analysis of how these discursive constructions were able to informally limit organizational control or, to metaphorically stretch the iron cage. Before entering into a detailed discussion of our findings, some cautionary observations may be in order. It is important to point out that the resistance discussed here was not a constant or pervasive feature of the organization's dynamics. The actions described here were mainly random and sporadic, some taking place quite openly and others being more clandestine in nature. This study, therefore, is necessarily an account of marginal events and masked actions. Even though the discursive constitution of routine resistance was not a widespread dimension of the organization's encounter with computerization, we believe it warrants a close scholarly scrutiny based on the recent poststructuralist (Fraser 1989) argument that it is only through an awareness of the margins that one can understand the central dynamics of our institutions. Furthermore, by its very nature, routine resistance is more likely to occupy a peripheral part of organizational interactions. Understanding it requires a sustained focus on the less visible and less central aspects of organizational life.

Owning Resistance

The Process of Owning Resistance

Simple commonplace actions can often hold complex and significant connotations for actors performing them (Geertz 1973). In the organization we studied, some seemingly ''ordinary'' actions such as asking questions during training sessions and alerting managers to flaws in system design were often reconstructed in the daily life of the organization, and in interviews with the researcher, as being intentionally oppositional in nature. Put differently, one way in which routine resistance was discursively constituted was when individual employees identified and described some of their own actions as being confrontational, hostile, or oppositional, and therefore resistant. This took place through a discursive act of ownership over certain actions which employees claimed as being deliberate attempts at resistance to organizational control.

Periodic interruptions during training sessions were owned as resistance by some organization members. The HMO conducted several small training sessions in which ''batches'' of occupationally similar employees were

trained, to provide them with the familiarity and competence required to work with the new system. Each training session was attended by approximately six to eight employees and was held in a small room usually used for medical seminars. While the sessions proceeded quite smoothly for the most part, almost every training session was punctuated by interruptions by trainees who repeatedly asked questions about the impact of computers on their health, and who sometimes even commented critically on the prospect of organizational disruption resulting in poor performance levels. A number of employees asked health-related questions about repeated motion injuries associated with constant keyboard work, while others concentrated on the connections between working with computers and miscarrying or damaging unborn fetuses. Specific questions asked in these sessions included, "Is it safe to get pregnant if I'm working with this thing?," "Will my eyesight get worse if I have to stare at the screen all day?," and "How can we prevent carpal tunnel syndrome?" These questions were raised in the midst of a trainer's discussion on the technical aspects of the new system and typically resulted in a side discussion on computers, health, etc. Some individuals occasionally told stories about people they knew who had succumbed to various computer-related ailments, while others even circulated articles that had been published in *Working Woman* or *San Francisco Processed World* highlighting the darker side of computerization.

The researcher soon noticed that in the breaks between the training sessions some of the individuals who had asked a number of questions provided explanations as to why they had done so. Often these explanations or accounts framed the interruptions and questions as oppositional practices intended to publicly demonstrate managerial ignorance of several issues, and to simultaneously signal employees' own awareness regarding the complexities of technological change. A nurse who had asked several pointed questions on health issues asserted that:

> . . . Dawn (nurse supervisor and trainer) always came across as so all-knowing. . . .Yet when I asked her about [the effect of computers on] miscarriages she had no answers. All she could say . . . was hmm well refer us to the project supervisor for more information. I think . . . it was pretty clear to all of us that she had very little awareness about any of this."

On another occasion, the researcher was riding back to town with some of the organizational members who had been in a training session earlier that afternoon. During the bus ride, the group from the HMO discussed the impending computerization and the frustration they had felt in the training session. One of the nurses asked Georgia (a senior receptionist who had asked a number of questions earlier that day) why she had suddenly developed an interest in gynecological issues. Georgia explained that her questions had been intended more to deflate the trainer's sense of self-importance than to gather more information about computers and their impact on women's health. As she said,

> "I'm too old to care about miscarriages and pregnancies. But I think it's important that we show them that we are not stupid, that we want to know what goes on . . . Of course they could not answer any of our questions. But that also made them feel out of it and that's a good thing.

When this issue of the interruptions came up during the interviews later in the field study, others also admitted that the questions were more a way of asserting their own awareness of computers and their affects on society, "to keep them [trainers] on their toes", and to signal to managers that employees were not all about to passively accept any managerial initiatives.

Questions and interruptions were not the only actions claimed as oppositional practices. Following the completion of the training sessions, the HMO went online, and after a very brief trial period, employees were instructed to stop using manual written methods to do the billing and scheduling, and to access information only from the computer system. Despite this formal injunction, some of the nurses, record assistants, and receptionists continued to revert to the old manual system in addition to working with the new one. Some did this quite openly, while others did it mainly when they knew they were not being observed by the supervisors or administrators.

It seemed at first that this persistent habit of working manually was a way in which employees could gradually accustom themselves to the new system. Certainly some individuals mentioned that this was one way in which they could more gently ease themselves into the new system. At the same time, others also interpreted this practice as a way of asserting their own autonomy regarding the pace of change in the organization. For Bridget, an experienced nurse who had been with the organization for over fifteen years, the introduction of computerization was like a "shock" in her daily life. As she pointed out,

> once you get used to a way of doing things, it becomes like a particular rhythm you swing into automatically. I don't mind change but when something like this is put upon you so suddenly, its almost like a shock—and we cannot allow anyone to do that. . . . We have no union, nobody to speak for us. So, I just took my own time, kept working the same old way and let them know I would do things their way when I was ready.

The researcher also observed the actions of a receptionist who persisted in using the old system even though the nurse supervisor in charge repeatedly warned her that her actions were not acceptable. The receptionist listened

calmly to these warnings, and then reverted to the manual methods once the supervisor was out of sight. After several days of this, the supervisor somewhat sternly admonished the receptionist publicly, saying that she was "tired of dealing with ignorant women who could not appreciate the value of computers." The receptionist responded quite sharply, arguing that her reluctance to abandon the old method was not because she did not value computers, but because she wanted the right to make the switch gradually. As the supervisor left the work center, the receptionist turned to the researcher and a fellow worker and observed that,

> Management always takes its own time to make decisions about anything but expects us to dance to their own tunes at once. Well, I need a little practice to dance to these new tunes and if you don't give it to me, I'll take it anyway.

To some employees, continuing to work manually seemed a way of resisting the sheer rapidity of technological change. It was not just a matter of habit, but one of reasserting some control over work rhythms and managerial expectations. It is also worth noting that in her discussion with the nurse supervisor, the receptionist also resisted being labeled as ignorant by publicly defining her actions as resistant rather than unaware. Discursively, therefore, actions that could have been perceived as ignorant were publicly reaffirmed as resistant instead.

Once the computer system was fully operational, several informal complaints about it were also constructed as resistance. As they became more accustomed to the new system, some nurses and receptionists began to carefully document problems and flaws with the system, which they reported to the manager. The main argument behind these complaints was that the system was inefficient and was in need of improvement. The administrators referred to this practice as a simple case of "software bitching" and pointed out that no real design changes were possible at that time. However, our observations suggest that they may have missed what lay behind these well-articulated concerns.

Many of the employees who raised these grievances were the same individuals who had raised health concerns in the training sessions. Some of them had also raised these concerns in private conversations with managers. In general, these concerns were dismissed as "foolish" and even "hysterical." Employees were thus systematically denied a legitimate space in which their concerns could be voiced. Not surprisingly, they often went to a lot of trouble to detect and report flaws in the system so that these deeper concerns might get listened to as well. These complaints, we feel, were *proxy grievances*, i.e., grievances ostensibly intended to alert managers to shortcomings of the system, which actually provided a space for more fundamental concerns to be listened to. Complaining only about the computer's inefficiency meant that the employee could not be accused of being unprofessional or uncaring of the organization's interests. Simultaneously, the sheer legitimacy of the complaint opened up avenues for other concerns to be heard. The researcher also found that a few nurses collaborated with each other in discovering flaws in the system's design, which they then took turns reporting to their managers. Some of them enjoyed talking about this, both in informal situations with each other, and with the researcher during in-depth interviews. This interpretation by one of the nurses is illustrative of the importance of these proxy grievances to some of the organization members.

> . . . well, in the beginning I used to be scared of them. I still am. But I wanted to know about miscarriages and psychological effects and I tried talking to Dawn, Lisa, and Nancy [managers and supervisors]. But they only seemed to think I was crazy. But when I showed them that the computer was not such a perfect worker, they listened because to them that's important. And once they listened to that, I could get them to listen to other things as well.

Others narrated similar experiences. Another nurse emphasized that it was necessary to "talk like management" in order to be listened to. She had located a relatively serious problem with file retrieval in the system, which she took to the project manager. According to her, once she had convinced him of the legitimacy of her complaint, he was also more willing to listen to some of her other concerns. As she expressed it,

> I wanted to tell him honestly that I was worried . . . . But I knew he'd just laugh, hmmm, or pat my shoulder. So, I waited until I caught it [the system] out and could show him something he could understand. I think he was surprised really . . . that I could be so smart in a way. But he became more patient and, well, listened when I told him about my worry for my eyes and back. He even talked to Lisa about the chairs and colors, and she may order some new furniture for us. But . . . he would never never have listened any other way.

Proxy grievances thus became a way of limiting managerial control by creating spaces in which employees' concerns could be listened to. To many individuals who resorted to this practice, it was a more devious and subtle way of making the workplace more comfortable for themselves. It was also a way of getting managerial attention without openly asking for it. To Cathy, the young receptionist at Internal Medicine, it was a conscious strategy of reducing managerial control with a minimum of antagonism.

> I like some of them [the administrators] and I don't like to openly fight them. But they often don't hear us because—oh I

> don't know, so many things. But if you can grab their attention by these small things, you can take over your own job as you would like to.

Our findings illustrate how discursive practices whereby employees took responsibility over seemingly mundane actions and further defined them as being oppositional, transformed them into resistance. It is important to stress here that the actions on their own, in the absence of the discursive act of being claimed as resistance, were not necessarily seen as being antagonistic or adversarial to management. However, once claimed in this way, their status as resistance became much more fixed or reified within the organization.

Implications of Owning Resistance

By claiming responsibility over personal actions and acknowledging them as being intentionally resistant, employees loosened some constraints which were a regular part of their lives. This took place in a few different ways. First, at a more personal level, the discursive ownership over resistance had implications for some employee identities. The act of *willfully* and *consciously* resisting certain elements of everyday control constituted individuals' own subjectivities as autonomous individuals in charge of their lives, willing to stand up for themselves if necessary. The researchers were struck by the frequency with which claiming resistance was also accompanied by explanations such as, "I have never been a passive kind of person," or "I think I know when to speak up," Interpreting their own actions as resistance thus seemed to affirm, for many organization members, their own identities as autonomous individuals, fully capable of participating in key organizational processes, even when officially excluded from doing so.

The fieldnotes also indicated that much of the anger against the computerization of work had been stirred by a sense of exclusion from the whole process. Senior employees in particular resented the high-handed manner in which the computerization process had been decided and implemented, some of them describing it as having been "domineering", "undemocratic," and "arbitrary." In interviews, some employees pointed out the importance of conveying the message that the arbitrary style in which the technology was introduced was unacceptable to them.

By discursively owning certain actions as resistant, some individuals also interpreted it as a way of *placing limits* upon managerial demands and expectations. Some of these issues surfaced in a conversation between a receptionist and a clerical assistant. Wilma, a younger receptionist, observed that new policies and organizational changes were rarely accompanied by consideration towards the employees. This was seen in managers' expectations that they would instantly alter work habits and practices. In part, Wilma felt that these somewhat unreasonable expectations stemmed from managerial assumptions of worker compliance. By exerting authorship over resistance, she and others seemed to feel that they had unsettled managerial images of the passive employee, and had signaled their own willingness to voice disagreement and to dispute dominant managerial characterizations of technological change. In doing so, owning resistance also imposed some limits upon managerial expectations and authority. In interpreting her refusal to stop working manually, a senior receptionist provided the following account:

> . . . what I did in there was to show them they couldn't really make me do anything I didn't want to do. I did whatever I wanted and still learned from it. And they don't like that because we are telling them that there are some things they cannot control.

While it is difficult to make unqualified comments on the success of this strategy, we can assert that some supervisors were aware of and disturbed by these willful acts of resistance. As Fortado (1994) notes, most immediate supervisors are indeed troubled by deviant employee behavior. In the HMO, managers admitted privately that the informal discussions during training sessions and employees' refusal to relinquish manual methods had been difficult to deal with. As one supervisor suggested, "in professional work like ours, we are not used to disobedience . . . and that is what it is even if it didn't look that way. . . . that kind of thing makes me uneasy." One manager also admitted that when she had encountered this kind of resistance, she had made a number of concessions regarding workloads and schedules to placate employees who were openly resistant. Managers also tended to be more wary in their interactions with employees after incidents of owned resistance, taking more care to restrict their own demands and making work-related requests in a markedly friendly and courteous manner. Thus, owning resistance opened up a space in which dissent could be more publicly expressed. It also forced supervisors to reduce some of their demands and treat subordinates in a more courteous fashion.

Naming Resistance

The Process of Naming Resistance

A more complex form of resistance was discursively produced when some actions and incidents were *named* or *labeled* as resistance by various members of the organization. In calling certain actions resistance, individuals never identified themselves with these actions, but attributed them to other employees (either known or unknown)

in the organization. Two cases will serve to illustrate this. The first involved the flooding of a basement storage room containing new video display terminals, and the second involved a set of employee actions defined by some supervisors as ''careful carelessness.''

A few months before the official adoption of computerization, a number of brand new video display terminals (VDTs) were delivered and left in a storage room in the organization's basement. Shortly after the VDTs arrived, the basement was flooded due to an ostensible ''accident,'' the bursting of old pipes in the building. The fieldworker first learned of this incident from one of the managers, who at that time strongly emphasized the ''accidental'' nature of this flood. In a very short while, however, she realized that managers, nurses, receptionists, and physicians were interpreting the flooding as an act of employee sabotage, deliberately intended to prevent or delay and frustrate the omputerization of the workplace.

The first time the fieldworker overheard this interpretation was in a conversation between two nurse supervisors who mentioned not being aware of ''[having] sickos who could do something like *that*'' and expressing anger over the ''nasty piece of sabotage.'' Subsequently, she also overheard receptionists and record clerks refer to the flooding as ''our own IRA job'' and speculate as to who might be responsible for it. In a very short while, the flooding event was discursively reified in the everyday life of the organization as an undoubted act of sabotage. Managers referred to it in those terms in meetings, and more informally when talking about recalcitrant employees. At a lunch that the researcher went to with two administrators, one of them joked about having to deal with ''real guerilla warfare,'' while the other suggested that gas masks be part of the regular organizational uniform as well. The flooding incident was clearly on several peoples' minds for a long time. Months later, in the course of interviews, managers, staff, and even physicians repeatedly referred to the incident as a clever act of sabotage which had delayed the process of computerization by several weeks and had cost Superior Corporation thousands of dollars.

Naming resistance was also discursively enacted through supervisors' interpretations of some employee actions as ''careful carelessness.'' This term was used by supervisors in the HMO to refer to certain acts of negligence which employees passed off as carelessness, but which supervisors interpreted as being deliberate and planned. Many of these actions resulted in, or had the potential of causing, serious damage to the keyboards and terminals, and disrupting the everyday administrative work of the organization. They included employees carelessly leaving half-empty coffee mugs and Pepsi cans close to keyboards, where they were frequently knocked over by someone else. Other acts of ''careful carelessness'' included ''forgetting'' to turn the computer terminals off at night, sticking pieces of chewing gum on the terminals, ''forgetting'' to save important information on the new database, misfiling certain pieces of information, and washing the computer screen with a strong household cleaner (*Ajax*) in order to get rid of a smudge.

The fieldworker first came across the term ''careful carelessness'' when it was used by one of the supervisors who was describing to a fellow-supervisor a receptionist's failure to file information properly. The supervisor commented on this and other acts that seemed little more than chance mishaps, but which (in her opinion) were intended to disrupt the organization and annoy the managers. Suddenly, the term was in use in the shared vocabulary of the organization, invoked not only by supervisors but by a number of employees. While employees never admitted to having ever engaged in ''careful carelessness'' themselves, they freely attributed such actions to fellow workers and colleagues.

It is interesting to note that in both cases, there was no personal ownership over, or identification with, the ''resistant'' actions. What did take place was a systematic interpretation of certain actions and events as being resistant practices by *other* organization members. Also, at no point was the flooding of the basement formally established as an act of sabotage; its official status always remained that of an unfortunate accident. Yet the very act of informally labeling or naming events as sabotage or careful carelessness served to constitute them as resistance, because they were simultaneously constructed as being *intentionally disruptive* or *damaging* to the organization.

Implications of Naming Resistance

The discursive act of calling certain actions committed by other people resistance set up some interesting tensions that limited organizational control in unusual ways. First, named resistance eventually led to the construction and celebration of *local organizational heroes.* Even though the flooding of the basement was never formally defined as an act of sabotage, there was plenty of informal speculation regarding the instigator of the event. Eventually the person assumed to be responsible for this action also came to be seen by some employees as a champion of employee rights and a courageous dissenter. The fieldworker soon found that suspicion almost uniformly fell on Janet, an experienced nurse who had been a sharp critic of most managerial policies, and especially of the

decision to automate several administrative functions. Janet had predicted all along that the computerization process would result in layoffs and innumerable health hazards for various employees, and had asked several questions on these matters during the training sessions. Janet was regarded as being an ''old troublemaker'' by some of the supervisors, who also privately admitted to being somewhat intimidated by her caustic wit and quick intelligence. Janet had never been popular even with her immediate colleagues, partly on account of her tendency to be somewhat sarcastic with those around her.

In the months following the alleged sabotage, there was a distinct change in how Janet came to be regarded by people in the HMO. Discussions of her probable involvement in the flooding incident were frequently tinged with admiration, and she was often described as ''gutsy'' and ''willing to show them [Superior Corporation] a thing or two.'' From being a cantankerous colleague, Janet was soon transformed into a local organizational hero who had displayed a subtle cunning in standing up to management. Throughout this time, Janet herself never mentioned this incident even once. Nor did she indicate that she had been involved with it in any way. However, her silence on this subject in no way detracted from her heroic status. Even though the responsibility for the basement flooding was never established, employees remained convinced that Janet or somebody in the HMO had deliberately sabotaged the terminals with the intention of inflicting tangible harm on the organization. A strong tinge of heroism also clung to the individuals identified with committing careful carelessness, who were also admired by fellow workers and seen as artfully retaliating against supervisory authority. While anthropologists have long been cognizant of the mythic role of heroism in community living, organization scholars have tended to restrict their conceptualizations of heroism to formal leadership levels. Our findings suggest that workplace heroes created out of the discursive practice of naming resistance performed mythic roles by providing tangible testimonies of the possibility of employee revolt, and by keeping alive the dream of a nonacquiescent work force. Two records assistants talked one day of how ''empowered'' they had felt when they believed that individuals resisted the computerization process.

> You need someone to tell them that we are not all quiet and ready to be stamped on all the time. It doesn't have to be out in the open. But now and then this kind of thing [sabotage] reminds us that if we have to we can show some muscle . . . fight the good fight. That is really quite scary for everyone around here.

Above all, once actions were *named* as resistance, they became capable of exposing *managerial vulnerability* within the organization. This was especially the case with something as serious as the basement flooding. As long as the flooding of the basement had been treated as an accident, managerial authority remained relatively intact. However, once this incident came to be framed as an act of sabotage, the stability of managerial authority was considerably shaken. The same held true (though to a lesser degree) for actions that were called careful carelessness. Once these actions were no longer perceived as unintentional mistakes, supervisors were seen as having limited control over the workplace. Supervisors, in turn, were constantly frustrated by their inability to deal with ''careful carelessness,'' as they were unable to directly discipline these actions because of their appearance of being ''accidents'' or ''mistakes.'' At the same time, they were also convinced that their inability to deal with them made them seem more incompetent because it publicly highlighted their impotency and lack of control over certain subordinate behaviors.

The flooding of the basement also heightened a sense of managerial vulnerability. First of all, the internal employee grapevine swiftly interpreted the flooding as an act of sabotage, thereby signaling the presence of an adversarial attitude towards the upcoming technological change and its management. By and large, supervisors and managers did not publicly acknowledge this interpretation, even though they did so in private. However, even management's pretense that the flooding incident was an ''accident'' was regarded as a triumph by some of the administrative staff. They interpreted this as another instance of managerial vulnerability because the failure to publicly acknowledge the possibility of sabotage was seen as betraying managers' inner apprehensions and insecurity.

When tension and insecurity enter the realm of everyday work lives, control systems become open to negotiation. Within the HMO, the sense of managerial vulnerability led to increased managerial nervousness, which was used by employees to their own advantage. Managers were anxious to minimize resistant actions such as the flooding and the careful carelessness. One way in which they tried to achieve a more stable workplace was by again making a number of concessions that pacified their subordinates. These pacification measures were almost always informal in nature, and included turning a blind eye towards unpunctuality, ignoring minor errors in appointment sheets, allowing some employees to leave the organization earlier than usual, setting more flexible work schedules, etc. Managers were well aware that these measures were required to ensure the smooth functioning of the organization, especially during a somewhat disruptive change process.

Indirect Resistance

The Process of Constituting Indirect Resistance

A third and more complex construction of routine resistance took place when managers interpreted certain employee actions as disruptive, even though they simultaneously acknowledged that these actions were not necessarily intended to be so by those who engaged in them. This form of discursive constitution was most problematic to appreciate because of the degree of ambiguity that accompanies it. In essence, some managerial constructions of the computer technology were reinterpreted by employees in unexpected ways that were not what had been intended by the managers. These unexpected employee reinterpretations of managerial discourses could sometimes be quite problematic to management. Yet managers remained convinced that no harmful or disruptive outcome had been intended. A subtle and complex kind of resistance was thereby produced at the workplace. We use Ong's (1987) terminology, ''indirect resistance,'' to describe this phenomenon.

Two instances of indirect resistance will serve to illustrate how this phenomenon was discursively constructed at the workplace. The first illustration is provided by employee reinterpretations of the managerial discourse of computer anthropomorphism prevalent in the HMO. Early in the computerization process, the new technology was personified in a variety of ways when organizational members constructed it as being ''human,'' ''smart,'' and ''helpful.'' This terminology was especially prevalent with some of the managers. It is important to stress that the personification of computers in the HMO emerged as a result of both spontaneous and deliberate discursive acts on the part of different organization members. At times, project managers and trainers deliberately invoked the discourse of anthropomorphism in order to mitigate some of the prevailing nervousness towards computers. A few managers believed that the distrust of the computerization process could be minimized if employees were uniformly convinced of the technology's ''superior intelligence,'' ''top-class memory,'' and decision-making skills. In a meeting held specifically to discuss the persistent suspicion towards computers, project managers urged supervisors and trainers to actually work on convincing subordinates that the technology was smart and capable of making intelligent choices.

This advice was indeed taken seriously by a few supervisors who began to emphasize how clever and smart the computer system was. At different times, managers, trainers, and administrators at the HMO were actively engaged in discursively constructing a reality of the smart technology in order to manage the meaning of the computerization process. These discursive constructions seemed to hold considerable credibility for most of the employees. The language of the ''smart'' and ''thinking'' computer quickly permeated the entire organization and was used by a number of different employees. To all appearances, managerial discursive constructions seemed to have been successfully sedimented in the organization.

However, even while employees participated in the discourse of computer personification, they simultaneously reappropriated it in ways that were often contrary to managerial definitions. In doing so, they succeeded (perhaps unwittingly) in triggering actions that were not desired by managers. To begin with, the image of the computer as a smart machine was so strongly reified that it dysfunctionally affected some employees' interactions with the system. In other words, the managerial discourse of computer intelligence was so persuasive that employees accepted its superiority in cognitive and decision-making activities. They then began relying heavily on the computer, while simultaneously reducing their own thinking and judgment. Needless to say, this excessive dependence on the computer's superior intelligence resulted in many minor mishaps and an overall deterioration in some areas of work. When confronted by supervisors with this failure to exercise their own thinking, employees either asserted that ''the computer does your thinking for you when you are too tired to think'' or ''I thought this thing[computer] was supersmart . . . If I have to use my brains all the time, I can't see why we need them''. Managers and supervisors reacted to such constructions with frustration and annoyance. In private, between themselves, they often referred to such reinterpretations as ''passive aggression'' or ''dumb resistance''.

The same thing happened when employees also reinterpreted the discourse of computer intelligence to symbolize masculinity. While accepting managerial definitions of the smart and thinking computer, some individuals also repeatedly linked these cerebral qualities with masculinity, thus transforming the computer into a masculine object. In essence, the same discursive constructions of computer intelligence that produced feelings of respect and awe for the computers paradoxically also transformed computers into distant and dislikable male figures that were reminiscent of male parental authorities and unattractive nerds. To one of the nurses, for instance, it was ''. . . cold and hard . . . like my father when he was mad. I don't know but I'm afraid I'll end up like it''. A records assistant went even further when she said:

> You know I actually think they are kind of ugly. Smart but ugly, like the nerds we made fun of at school.

The point we would like to stress here is that employee translations (Czarniawska and Sevon 1996) of managerial discourses contributed in some ways to the reduced appeal of the computer technology. These translations seemed to add a layer of emotional discomfort in working with the system because of the negative connotations they carried. However, employees themselves mostly seemed to believe that they were accepting managerial definitions of computer technologies. Managers, on the other hand, saw these translations as a kind of ''dumb resistance'' because of the more problematic connotations that were brought into the organization's everyday discourse.

Implications of Indirect Resistance

Indirect resistance was neither confrontational nor aggressive in any way. What is also interesting to note is that this form of routine resistance was entirely constituted by managers and supervisors alone. Unlike the other two discursive practices discussed earlier, employees did not appear to see these actions as resistant. However, it was never clear even to managers whether these contrary interpretations were cleverly thought-out strategies or spontaneous (though problematic) appropriations of prevalent managerial discourses. For the most part, managers attributed these interpretations to either the ''ignorance'' or ''uninformed mindsets'' of their subordinates. Yet they simultaneously remained suspicious of a discursive practice that periodically reframed their own depictions of technology without directly confronting them. As one manager phrased it,

> It is hard to know with the girls . . . whether they mean to annoy you or are just so unthinking, hmm, have an uninformed mindset that they will talk this way—react, you know—to any intelligent piece of technology.

Managers constructed these actions more as a form of passive aggression or ''dumb resistance'' which they felt was not motivated by any malicious intent. Nevertheless, from the managers' perspectives, employees' reinterpretations of their own constructions were not entirely without their consequences. After all, the recurring sense that computers were like smart but unlikable males fostered a feeling of distrust towards the technology that made some of the receptionists, clerks, and nurses reluctant to work as enthusiastically as managers would have liked. Paradoxically, when other employees were completely persuaded by managerial discourses of the computer's smartness, they then withheld their own judgment while working with it, which was also not at all to managers' liking.

Overall, the cases of ''dumb resistance'' were problematic because they left managers feeling somewhat helpless in the face of what they saw as being unintentional resistance. They could not punish or discipline their subordinates because these interpretive acts were not really (in their minds) intentionally oppositional. Yet, by constituting them as resistant, managers contributed to their own sense of uncertainty and ambivalence in dealing with the introduction of the new technology.

Discussion

Looking at the discursive constitution of routine resistance shifts our focus from the kinds of action qualifying as routine resistance to *how* it is produced and performed at the workplace. In essence, we have shown three ways in which routine resistance discursively emerges in the workplace. Each discursive practice was also enacted by different groups of organizational actors. Owned resistance, for instance, was enacted entirely by nonmanagerial employees claiming direct responsibility over some of their actions, which they also denoted as being resistant. Named resistance was enacted by *both* managers and employees through a tacitly collaborative process of attribution, while indirect resistance was constituted solely by managers.

The paper clearly privileges the *agency* of local actors in constituting resistance. It might be tempting, therefore, to regard routine resistance solely as an outcome of individual agency on the part of organizational actors who use specific framing and rhetorical moves to disrupt organizational controls and to negotiate changes, providing them with some level of flexibility and autonomy in their own lives. However, the *structure* of organizational control and the structure of the actions discussed in the paper, can themselves limit the discursive agency of individual actors.

First, it may be important to recognize that contemporary organization structures (by curbing union activity and formal collective opposition) stimulate a need for creative discourses of resistance that utilize interpretive framing mechanisms to constitute resistance out of multiple actions and events in the routine life of an organization. Given the absence of formal grievance channels and a union, employees in the HMO were compelled to resort to the use of accounts and storytelling that reframed a variety of actions in oppositional ways. Second, the structure of different resistant actions discussed in the Prasad and Prasad (1998) typology lent themselves to different discursive moves.

For example, resistance was owned only over relatively innocuous behaviors, including both open confrontations and disengagement, that were unlikely to result in harsh punitive measures. Raising proxy grievances, questioning trainers, and even continuing to use manual methods were

not high-risk behaviors likely to land perpetrators in trouble. Owning resistance is therefore likely to take place with a certain degree of "careful circumspection" (Scott 1985). Employees were less likely to take ownership over more subversive actions that might have been interpreted as strongly subversive to the organization's well-being. By contrast, the more daring actions falling under the category of subtle subversions were more likely to be named as resistance. Naming or attributing resistance to someone else permitted more adversarial actions to be constituted as resistance. The class of actions categorized by Prasad and Prasad (1998) as ambiguous accommodations were constituted indirectly as resistance by managers alone, possibly because the ambivalence inherent in these actions was problematic to the logic of managerial control. We should also note that owned resistance was constituted as deliberate intentional action, named resistance as attributed intentional action, and indirect resistance as nonintentional action. Table I summarized some of these observations.

In concert with a number of ethnographies on this topic, our study also confirms the presence of workplace resistance at an informal and *discursive* level. Through its informal and discursive nature however, routine resistance contested control efforts at both symbolic and material levels by opening up a set of spaces within the iron cage. The spaces opened up included those that allowed employees to develop more autonomous identities, those that facilitated the redefinition of work and authority relationships, and spaces that permitted employees to renegotiate their own positions and preserve some amount of personal dignity in a period of technological change from which they had been largely excluded.

It is less easy to evaluate the relative efficacy of different discursive strategies of resistance. Our own interpretations are that the naming of sabotage and careful carelessness appeared to have the strongest impact on local workplace relations, because its dramatic character jolted managers and supervisors out of their habitual modes of taking employees for granted. The resulting informal negotiations by employees were arguably effective in gaining minor concessions for themselves. Owning resistance, on the other hand, provided more of a symbolic well-being for workers who engaged in it, by reaffirming specific identities and enhancing self-worth. Indirect resistance produced fewer obvious gains, though it contributed to the overall destabilization of the organization.

In assessing the implications of routine resistance for limiting managerial control, it is somewhat easy to slip into a romantic interpretation that treats it as a glamorous subterranean set of strategies that rescues employees from the constraints of the iron cage. However, our own study would suggest that routine resistance can stretch the iron cage only a little. This is because even at their most powerful moments, actions that are discursively constituted as routine resistance are typically confined to *local* workplace contexts and are therefore unlikely to stimulate organizationwide policy changes that substantively alter relations of power. The impact of actions such as careful carelessness, the raising of proxy grievances, etc., were experienced as resistance only by immediate supervisors, administrators, and colleagues. While the discursive constitution of these actions did elicit some concessions, these effects were contained within the local workplace and did not result in broader policy changes for the entire corporation. Thus, its *routine* and mundane nature may restrict the influence of such resistance with respect to limiting organizational control.

Conventional approaches to workplace resistance tend to regard resistance (routine or otherwise) as the sole prerogative of workers and employees. Our study indicates that the constitution of resistance was, at least in part, facilitated by managers as well. It was partly through managerial discourses that certain forms of employee negligence became constituted as "careful carelessness."

Table 1 A Summary of Routine Workplace Resistance

Discursive Constitutions	Key Participants	Construction of Motive	Types of Action
Owning Resistance	Nonmanagerial Employees (nurses, record clerks and assistants, receptionists)	Direct Acknowledgements of Intentional Opposition	• Interruptions and Questions During Training Sessions • Working with Manual Methods • Proxy Grievances
Naming Resistance	Managers, Supervisors and Nonmanagerial Employees	Attributions of Intentional Opposition	• Careful Carelessness • Flooding the Basement
Indirect Resistance	Managers and Supervisors	Attributions of Nonintentional Opposition	• Employee Reinterpretations of Managerial Discourses

Similarly, it was managers who also constructed the category of "passive" or "dumb" resistance as a more ambiguous but uncomfortable class of employee behaviors. Others (LaNuez and Jermier 1994) have already argued that managers themselves often engage in acts of personal resistance. Our paper further suggests that they are also (perhaps unwittingly) significant and active participants in the constitution of employee resistance in the workplace.

These multiple findings have implications for our understanding of the intentionality behind workplace resistance. Our study refutes the commonly held position that workplace resistance is always a conscious, calculated, and planned act (Jermier 1988). Our focus on the discursive constitution of resistance by employees and managers suggests that frequently resistance can be enacted even by parties who want to prevent it from happening. At the same time, we do not want to suggest that routine resistance is never planned or conscious. As the discussion on owned resistance indicates, it is often both of these.

As a final note, we would offer a view of resistance that emerges out of a complex constitution of both planned and noncalculative actions. Perhaps the best way to think of it would be in Swidler's (1986) terms as *strategies in action,* which are culturally specific configurations of habits, styles, skills, and reasoned decisions emerging out of one's multiple identity locations, including gender, age, profession, etc. Seeing routine resistance as discursive implies, therefore, that the act and art of resisting is both planned and accidental, strategic and spontaneous, often retrospectively constructed, but always emerging out of the local interpretations and discourses of multiple organizational actors. While routine resistance may not always result in metaphorically splintering the bars of the iron cage, it stretches it in ways that make it a more habitable space for those for whom escape or exit is not a viable option. In carving out these spaces, it thus endlessly redefines the boundaries of organizational control, rendering them more precarious than one might be tempted to believe.

Acknowledgments

The authors are greatly indebted to comments on earlier versions of this manuscript by Maureen Scully and Larry Zacharias, who raised some of the fundamental questions pursued in this paper. They would also like to thank three anonymous *Organization Science* reviewers, and Brian Pentland for his helpful editorial comments.

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Accepted by Brian Pentland; received September 25, 1997. This paper has been with the authors for one revision.