The complexities of discourse, power and identity at work

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Abstract: In this paper I illustrate the usefulness of identity as a lens for exploring the complexities of power. Drawing on poststructural literature, specifically Foucauldian, which directs attention to the complexities of the relationships between discourse, power and subjectivity, I explore the shaping of worker identities in a large public sector organisation in Australia. Here, identity is understood as an *effect* produced through, often intersecting, discourses. Discourses produce particular subject positions, which are differentially available, and these can be taken-up or resisted. In taking-up a subject position a particular subjectivity, or relation to self, is produced. It is in this way that complex power relations extend into every aspect of our lives. A poststructural approach disrupts the notion of power as only being top-down and oppressive and the idea of an autonomous, cohesive, essential self; two discourses that have dominated the organisational and management literature. Instead I offer another story about subjectivity and power. Power is distributed and multiformed and subjectivities are multiple and in constant deferral. This suggests that the subject of management, the subject that can be known and therefore governed, is a flawed concept as identity is always ‘in process’.

The subject of management

Management and organisational studies texts tend to take explanations of subjectivity which come out of the social sciences for granted. Either the autonomous, self-actualising subject is represented, particularly in mainstream management texts, with its psychological underpinnings of ‘the individual’ as the centre and origin of change; or the subjugated worker of neo-marxist literature – the ‘cultural puppet’ – who is determined by social structure. In the latter version, usually found in critical management texts, we hear stories of the worker who has been duped into aligning with management’s goals, thereby having their essential autonomy crushed by this dominant group (Miller & Rose, 1995). In both these approaches subjectivity is understood as autonomous and cohesive and power is either removed from the equation completely, as in mainstream texts, or theorised as top-down and oppressive, in the critical management literature. An underlying assumption of both these approaches is that language unproblematically reflects reality and that meanings are fixed.

The notion of agency/structure, where ‘the individual’ interacts with their particular social setting, provides another discourse of identity. This theory takes into account the historical and cultural contingency of the subject which mainstream theories overlook. The communities of practice literature (eg. Wenger, 1998) provides an example of this discourse and foregrounds the importance of *practice* in shaping identity. Here the individual through the process of socialisation in their communities of practice negotiates an identity. However this approach still remains within an individual-society dualism where neither ‘the individual’, nor the setting is adequately theorised (Walkerdine, 1997). The interiorised subject of psychology still lingers in the background as the networks of power that have contributed to producing ‘the individual’, including the heterogeneous networks of ‘psy’ (Rose, 1996), are overlooked. Again, an underlying assumption is that
language is simply descriptive rather than constitutive, and is used to label social norms that are taken as ‘facts’ (Weedon, 1987).

‘Changing the subject’

I offer another story about subjectivity in this paper. Using the Foucauldian concepts of discourse, power and subjectivity I draw on and contribute to literature which understands subjectivity and identity as being produced through discursive practices (eg. du Gay, 1996; Hall, 1996; Henriques et al., 1998; Law & Moser, 1999; Rose, 1989, 2000; Usher & Solomon, 1999). Discourses constitute particular subject positions. For example, the subject positions that are made available through the institutional discourses of the workplace include ‘the worker’, ‘the manager’, ‘the boss’, ‘the subordinate’, and so on. These subject positions are differentially available, ‘the boss’ only being available to some workers. Subject positions can be taken-up or resisted. In taking-up a subject position a particular subjectivity, or relation to self, is produced (Weedon, 1987). In understanding our selves in a particular way, we are able to think, say and do particular things. It is in this way that complex power relations extend into every aspect of our lives.

Taking up the idea that identity is produced discursively, I explore the identities being produced in a contemporary Australian workplace. In this next section of the paper I draw on my recent involvement in a three year, Australian Research Council funded project which examined learning in the workplace. This project was conducted in a large public sector organisation in Australia. The following story is ‘about Beryl’, a senior manager in this organisation.

Setting the scene

I feel like a bit of a spy – an outsider looking in – in the telling of this story. But I’m not trying to pretend that I’m the objective onlooker. I’m constructing this story through reading written transcripts from interviews and meetings that were conducted with Beryl, sometimes individually, and sometimes with other members of her workgroup, as part of a government funded research project. This project was a collaborative project between the university and an industry partner with the aim of exploring ‘everyday’ learning at work.

Our industry partners were a large public sector organisation in the business of training and further education. More specifically, the collaboration was between a group of professional developers from this organisation and a group of workplace learning researchers from an Australian university. In undertaking the project the cross-institutional research team worked with four workgroups from the partner organisation over a three-year timeframe. This involved conducting interviews with individual members from each workgroup about their work, providing feedback and discussion sessions with each workgroup, and then exploring a specific learning theme with the groups over a series of meetings. Beryl and the senior managers were one of the workgroups involved in the project.

I was a member of the research team working on the project and my job was to write my doctoral thesis on a topic related to everyday learning at work. This story comes out of my

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1 (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1998)
doctoral thesis which explores the discursive constitution of worker subjectivities in a contemporary workplace.

About Beryl

This story is about Beryl. Beryl is a senior manager at the Metropolitan Institute of Further Ed.\(^2\) In some ways Beryl reminds me of the Queen of Hearts from Alice in Wonderland:

*First came ten soldiers carrying clubs; these were all shaped like the three gardeners, oblong and flat, with their hands and feet at the corners: next the ten courtiers; these were ornamented all over with diamonds, and walked two and two, as the soldiers did. After these came the royal children; there were ten of them, and the little dears came jumping merrily along hand in hand, in couples: they were all ornamented with hearts. Next came the guests, mostly Kings and Queens, and among them Alice recognised the White Rabbit: it was talking in a hurried nervous manner, smiling at everything that was said, and went by without noticing her. Then followed the Knave of Hearts, carrying the King’s crown on a crimson velvet cushion; and, last of all this grand procession, came THE KING AND QUEEN OF HEARTS…*(Carroll)*

Referring to the Beryl as the ‘Queen of Hearts’ is probably a bit of a cheap shot\(^3\) in that she didn’t display the brutality or insensitivity of Lewis Carroll’s Queen of Hearts. But Beryl did convey an air of superiority and command over her domain, which is why I’ve called her ‘the queen’.

In this story I take-up and work with the idea of subjects as effects, rather than the cause or origin of action (Rose, 1996). I want to draw attention to the way particular workgroup practices, and in this case the practices of a group of senior managers in a large bureaucratic organisation, produce particular forms of subjectivity. I examine the discourses that are in circulation in this workgroup, the way players are positioned in these discourses, the take-up or resistance to these positions, and the particular forms of subjectivity that are produced. In other words, the way particular discourses regulate what Beryl, a senior manager in this workgroup, is able to think, say and do.

I was not present at most of the meetings with the senior managers;\(^4\) I worked more closely with other groups. But the materiality of the typed transcripts enabled me to connect with Beryl. I sit here in my workplace and read about Beryl in her workplace. And these written transcripts are not pure pieces of text that I read in isolation. These texts are ‘messy’ (Law, 1994) and jostle and knot with other texts: texts from other workplaces, including my current workplace at the academy; the multitude of ‘organisational’ texts that I bring with me to this project;\(^5\) other texts produced as part of the project such as project reports; and so on. For example, we spoke a lot about Beryl at our project planning meetings. Beryl was an interesting subject. Beryl would be furious if she knew I

\(^2\) This is a pseudonym.

\(^3\) But it’s easy to take cheap shots from where I’m sitting, after all, I’m writing this story.

\(^4\) I expect this group were too important in terms of the political relations of the project to be handled by ‘the doctoral student’ (more positionings).

\(^5\) I have worked as a casual academic in the field of HRM since 1997.
was writing this and would probably command: ‘off with her head’. Beryl and I are entangled (MacLure, 2003).

The senior managers work in a very beautiful old building which is much grander than the other worksites that I visited during the project. This building exudes tradition. Let me take you on a tour – a bit like the ‘European gentleman’ from Russian Ark who guided viewers through the Hermitage. He was also a bit of a spy, another outsider looking in, gazing at objects. Follow me up the wide, wooden-railed staircase. Turn around and look out through the beautiful leadlight windows. The plumbers, electricians, mechanics and hairdressers – the apprentices of the past – gaze back in their (lead)bounded splendour. Follow me down the long corridor, lined with sepia-toned photographs of previous institute directors, to the meeting room of the senior managers. Beryl treads this tradition-steeped path each day.

**Act 1 – the anointment**

A heavy, solid wood boardroom table fills the room. The director of this workgroup, John, sits at the head of the table with his staff strategically positioned around him. Beryl and the rest of the workgroup are here. Beryl hasn’t become director of the group, yet. (If we sit down and be quiet they mightn’t notice we’re here). A meeting is taking place between the researchers and the senior managers to feedback the findings from Stage 1 of the project, where individual interviews were conducted with each of the workgroup members; and to discuss and develop a direction for Stage 2 of the research project. John and the senior managers are talking about the ongoing changes in their work.

**John. …**There’s not a lot of time for reflection, there’s not a lot of time for ‘what if’, you just make the decision and run with it [pause]. There’s more complexity. **What do you think Beryl?**

**Beryl.** It’s shifting ground all the time...In this unit in particular, we got on top of what we thought were some of our key goals, but there’s more coming in with the tide and it’s driven by external factors...It’s creating complexity in the job ...and not quite knowing which way to go. Whether we jump in and become a leader with some of the new initiatives or sit back and watch what’s happening. And over all is that we’re supposed to be making sure that there aren’t any waves made between now and the election.**6 Is that right John?** [my emphasis]

John and Beryl continued to confer with each other in this way throughout the meeting.

(Let me tell you about Beryl. Come a bit closer so we don’t interrupt them. Beryl only started working fulltime at this organisation thirteen years ago. Now she’s a senior manager. John, the current director of this work group, is retiring next year. You can tell from the way John talks to Beryl that she is the anointed one.)

The anointment of Beryl by John (the current director) exemplifies the discourse of sovereign rule that was in circulation in this workgroup. This discourse emphasises hierarchy and the notion of legitimate authority. This discourse, which I suggest overlaps with a discourse of bureaucracy, produces the subject position of ‘the superior’, or more specifically in this case ‘the director’ and ‘the subordinate’.

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6 A state government election was pending. Big ‘G’ government was another important political force in this workplace.
By this stage in the research project we were all aware that John was planning to retire. The workgroup meetings provided an opportunity for workgroup members to be positioned and to take-up/resist positions. But the following dialogue illustrates that not just any positions were available, these positions were regulated through a bureaucratic discourse. The position of ‘the director’ was not available to all the senior managers, only to John. Discourses and the positions they produce are differentially available and work to maintain particular relations of power. Discourses specify what relations of power are possible in specific contexts (Weedon, 1987).

Beryl. … another thing that came out is that the work isn’t routine and the work does have a political element. And I guess John plays quite a role in that and he’s quite a good tutor in terms of how we manage the political. The job that we do is usually more than just research and the presentation of the findings of the research. It really is how you manage that through the politics of the organisation itself, or further out through the organisation.

This quote draws attention to the way Beryl renegotiated her position in relation to John. Here Beryl draws on a teaching discourse with the pedagogical relations of ‘the tutor’, still a position of authority, and ‘the student’. This suggests a different form of power relation to that provided through a bureaucratic discourse. This text illustrates the way discourses can be taken-up and used for purposes other than which they were intended. For example, in naming John as her tutor, Beryl strategically positions herself as protégé. ‘The protégé’ is a position where one is developed in order to take-up the responsibilities of a higher position. In constructing her self as ‘the protégé’ Beryl has symbolically taken-up the position of ascendant to the throne. And this appeared to be an effective strategy as John used this meeting to position Beryl as the heir apparent, another position produce through the discourse of sovereign rule. But Beryl’s not the only one in the group that wants to be ‘the director’…tick, tick, tick.

‘The boss’ and his subordinates

When we first started meeting with the senior managers it was clear that John was the legitimate authority in this group – John was ‘the boss’. John sat at the head of the table. His authority was not openly questioned by any members of the group, at least while the researchers were around, and it seemed that the group were relatively content with this hierarchy. John’s position was unchallenged.

John’s position as ‘the director’ enabled him to take-up particular subjectivities and to position other members of the group in particular ways. For example, he was able to take up the position of ‘the disciplinarian’. At one meeting I was surprised at the vicious verbal ‘dressing down’ that John gave one of the female senior managers. I was transported back in time and I was sitting in class watching the angry schoolmaster giving the naughty kid the cane, and we were all shaking in our boots. John was the patriarch. This suggests yet
more overlaps, this time between a discourse of bureaucracy and a discourse of masculinity.

‘the political player’

A bureaucratic/sovereign discourse produced political practices and players. Beryl frequently referred to the political nature of her work. For example, social activities like having lunch were organised around what needed to be achieved and who needed to be lobbied. Beryl considered that skills in lobbying were a way of demonstrating competence in her position and that a senior manager needed to be able to ‘work via influence rather than direction’. Beryl’s interviews were filled with political language including reference to: ‘stakeholders’, ‘negotiation’, ‘influencing’, ‘alignment’, ‘goals’, and ‘lobbying’. Beryl knew and understood herself as a political player. This particular subjectivity was capacitated through the everyday practices of the senior managers.

With John’s retirement imminent, and Beryl being positioned as ‘the heir apparent’, various male members of the workgroup began talking about the potential disruption this might create – some even spoke of the possible dissolution of the group. The discourse of sovereignty was in tension.

A bureaucratic discourse produced particular technologies of self (Foucault, 1988) or what Rose (1996) refers to ethical scenarios or codes of conduct that the senior managers used to conduct their own conduct. Beryl’s regulation of self manifested in various ways: in her posture – very upright and controlled; her grooming – always elegant and not a hair out of place; her actions – very strategic; and particularly in her speech.

Beryl’s language

One thing that stood out from an initial reading of the interviews with Beryl is the carefully constructed nature of the language that Beryl used, particularly in the initial interviews. Spoken language is usually messy and flows erratically, often with incomplete sentences, abbreviations, colloquialisms and ummms and errrs (Burns & Joyce, 1997). But reading Beryl’s first interview was very similar to reading a piece of written text. Beryl spoke very carefully, formulating well-structured sentences, suggesting a high level of consideration and self-regulation in what she was saying.

Another example of the regulated nature of Beryl’s speech is the ‘brilliant ambiguity’ (Keenoy & Anthony, 1992) that Beryl demonstrated while being interviewed. For example when Beryl was asked in an initial interview ‘what does your job entail?’ she described her position as determining the ‘level of activity’ across the institute that is ‘appropriate’. Beryl was well versed in the art of speaking ambiguously, where ambiguous language is used intentionally to avoid being ‘pinned down’ later.

Beryl emphasised the care that needed to be taken, both inside and outside the organisation:
Beryl. Well it is quite a political position, internally politically but we’ve also got to be very careful because some of the things I have to look into are whether we continue particular course areas or not and that’s got to be handled very carefully because the industry can become very upset and to go to the Minister or to the press or whatever and so some of the things we have to do have to be done with quite a lot of sensitivity and care taken as to who’s involved and how you involve them and I keep coming back to stakeholders because that would be an example where you can identify ‘well I can do all of this project, when it comes to it’, but when it comes to it, if the industry person goes and lobbies the Minister we might find that we’re stopped from going ahead with it.

Beryl was a very cautious and careful self. This text also draws attention to some of the other networks of power that Beryl needed to negotiate in her position, including big ‘G’ government, and various industry organisations. There were multiple authorities in this workplace.

But a discourse of bureaucracy and the language and practice of politics were definitely not the only practices in use in this group. Rather than thinking of ‘the political player’ as a fixed and cohesive identity, the next section of this paper explores other discourses that were in circulation in this workplace and the subject positions constituted through these discourses. Some of these discourses may have reinforced the identity of ‘the political player’, while others were in tension.

‘the rational manager’

Another discourse in circulation in this workgroup was the discourse of scientific rationality which draws on the ‘truth’ of science and scientific methods. This discourse constituted the subject position of ‘the rational manager’

The senior managers were responsible for determining the direction of this particular institute in terms of the programs that it would provide. While they were intentionally vague in describing their work to the researchers, we gathered that this involved collecting and analysing labour market data and political intelligence and using this information to project programs and courses that would be conducted by the institute. Beryl often drew on a discourse of scientific rationality to talk about her work.

Beryl. ...Some of the disagreement isn’t there any longer in relation to the shifting profiles because it is dependant on us agreeing with ourselves and not taking a position of ownership over our own faculties because the profile only works if you’re quite hardheaded about the appropriate profile directions to move in based on research, rather than trying to protect territory. I think there were quite a lot of disputations over that and its sorted itself out.

Here Beryl describes the way the (what she presents as) unambiguous goals of the profile directions enabled her to perform as the ‘hardheaded’ manager, making tough decisions that involved going beyond personal interest. Beryl claimed that these goals were able to be rationally determined through the process of research. Beryl’s interviews were strewn with the language of objectivity and rationality. For example, when describing her work

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7 The profiles are the projected programs, courses etc that will be run by the institute.

The senior managers used various tools, or technologies, in their everyday work practices that contributed to producing a rational subjectivity. For example, they used a planning package called LOGFRAME which provided a framework for developing ‘project definition’ which Beryl claimed assisted them in creating ‘alignment’ with the goals and business plans of the organisation. But while Beryl talked about these tools in a way that suggested that they would automatically produce alignment, the very need for these tools and techniques suggests that creating alignment might not have been as straightforward as Beryl proposed.

Beryl and the senior managers understood themselves as objective managers using approaches based on the rationality of scientific methods. The group mentioned that much of their time was spent reading and researching and gathering ‘the facts’. Research tools such as the internet were used frequently for sourcing documents such as government reports and material produced by the Bureau of Statistics. Scientific methods had authority in this group and quite a few of the workgroup members came from disciplinary backgrounds in science and technology.

A discourse of scientific rationality enabled Beryl to re-present her self as immune from the infection of irrationality and emotion. For example, Beryl referred to the way previous disputations amongst the senior managers had ‘sorted itself out’ through the application of seemingly ‘neutral’ knowledge obtained through their research. The language of rationality and ‘truth’ enabled the removal of disagreement, thus rendering power invisible. The discourse of scientific rationality and neutral knowledge contributed to producing the identity of ‘the intelligentsia’.

‘the Intelligentsia’

Beryl and the other senior managers in the group identified as ‘the intelligentsia of the organisation’:

Beryl. …it’s quite an exciting group to work with because people are very talented. We call ourselves “the intelligentsia of the organisation”, the “brains trust” of the organisation.

This group understood themselves as an elite group. They were the ‘brains trust’ – the collectors and the repository of organisational knowledge. And just as a body can’t function without a brain, this group couldn’t imagine the organisation functioning without them. For Beryl, hierarchy was natural and the senior managers naturally fitted at the top of the organisational hierarchy.

In the group meetings the senior managers frequently spoke about the rest of the organisation, but rarely about themselves. Just as the senior managers were the objects of our gaze (‘the researchers’), although this turned out to be an ongoing struggle, the lower levels of the organisation were the objects of the senior managers’ gaze. The problem parts of the organisation (for the senior managers) were the lower levels.

Beryl … I think that Further Ed. is just very slow in terms of accepting change really – down at the bottom level
Beryl painted a picture of the rest of the organisation as a plodding dinosaur, in contrast to
the senior managers, who she understood as ‘exciting’, ‘innovative’, and ‘the agents of
change’. At one meeting the senior managers’ adopted an anthropological perspective to
analyse their subjects and were talking about the sections of the institute as tribes and
clans. When the interviewer asked them where they fitted into this description, that is,
what tribe they belonged to, Beryl replied:

Beryl: we’ve left those behind – we’ve left our past

The distancing work performed by Beryl in relation to other parts of the organisation is
evident in both what she said and what she didn’t say at the interviews. Beryl spoke little
about her past in the organisation. I know that she had commenced work in the
organisation as a teacher, but there was no mention in any of the interviews of the
disciplinary area in which she taught or her life as a teacher. Beryl had reconstructed her
self as a member of ‘the intelligentsia’, the ruling class in the organisation. This was
evident in the way she spoke about the teachers as a distinct group separate from, and
different to, who she ‘is’. Teachers were ‘the other’ and she no longer identified with this
group. For example:

Beryl. I do like to deal directly with people but what I found was that the
stories, particularly from the teaching section were already so clouded
and overlaid with stories that may not even be pertinent to what the issue
is, I’d then come back and try to seek more objective advice if that’s
possible.

Beryl positioned herself in relation to ‘the teacher’ rather than as ‘the teacher’, suggesting
that teaching had little authority in her current work as a manager. This is given voice in
the above quote in her description of the teachers’ stories as ‘clouded’ compared with the
more ‘objective advice’ from the senior managers. The teachers were (naturally) irrational
selves compared with the (naturally) more rational senior managers. The identity of ‘the
intelligentsia’, the position of natural and neutral leaders was produced through a politics
of exclusion. Hall (1996, p. 5) describes the way unification is achieved through
discounting other positions in the following way:

So the 'unities' which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within
the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and
inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, overdetermined
process of 'closure'

A discourse of scientific rationality contributed to producing hierarchy and legitimate
authority as natural and normal (at least for the senior managers). Beryl as ‘the rational
manager’ was not seen to be playing a power game within the workgroup, although truth
claims are always an exercise of power (Foucault, 1980). In taking-up the position of ‘the
rational manager’ Beryl was in a much stronger position to govern as politics and power
had essentially been erased.

Act 2 – the king is dead, long live the queen!

Fast forward by six months. John had retired and Beryl had ascended to the throne. The
Stage 2 meetings of the research project had been negotiated with the senior managers
around the theme of ‘learning through transition’. The meetings were held in a meeting
room adjacent to Beryl’s office.
'the people person'

According to some of the senior managers John’s vacating of the throne had the potential to split this group. And no one seemed more aware of this than Beryl. The transcripts from the Stage 2 meetings can be read as Beryl using this forum as an opportunity to establish her new position within the workgroup as ‘the queen’. But power was not automatically transferred to Beryl when she took up the position of director, even though legitimate authority was ‘normal’ in this workgroup. There appeared to be other forces in play. Beryl strategically positioned herself at these meetings in an effort to establish and consolidate alliances with her work colleagues.

Beryl’s first move was to make sure that the king was dead.

[Beryl talking about John’s retirement]

Beryl. It was really like someone who had terminal cancer and he [John] was making sure that everyone in the family knew how to do the accounting. He was actually very honourable. It was important to him that he left the place with us. He was perfectly empowering to those under him. Like he was giving you this because it’s important that you have a go at this because I won’t be around. So I think he did that to all the staff deliberately and it was important to him that he left us all feeling strong and he was shoving people on committees and pushing people forward – trying to do different things

Here Beryl metaphorically kills the king, thereby creating space for ‘the queen’. And once John was officially dead, Beryl was able to resurrect him, when required, to reassure the group that this was going to be an egalitarian workplace. Beryl drew on a discourse of empowerment and the language of the collective (lots of reference to ‘all’ and ‘us’) to re-construct her self ‘the people person’. Beryl was to be the Queen of Hearts but in a Princess Di rather than a Lewis Carroll sense – the people’s queen. This draws attention to another form of power in operation in this group – Beryl was acting on the conduct of the senior managers using the techniques of persuasion and strategy.

[Beryl talking to the group about the transition in leadership]

Beryl. I thought that when you are handing over to someone [referring to John handing over ‘the director’ position] that you can, that you are handing over to people who will do things perhaps differently – and perhaps better in some aspects of the job. In John’s debriefing of me he would say when it came to a people thing ‘oh you’ll probably do that better than I would’. Kind of that soft womany kind of thing. I don’t have to tell you that he’d say, you’ll know. John’s strength was data and manipulating agendas and things like that …

Here Beryl takes-up a feminine subjectivity and re-presents her self as a new style (and implicitly better) manager. Beryl was re-constructing ‘the director’. Beryl’s strategy was to reign (and rein in) this group through alignment. But there were people in the group who were determined that Beryl would not be their leader.
A struggle for power was played out at this meeting over the identity of ‘the director’. The senior managers were no longer on their best behaviour. Perhaps the meeting was viewed as an opportunity to destabilise the current government? One person made reference to the politics by likening the ‘transition’ to a cabinet reshuffle. While these ‘lads’ had been prepared to be positioned as ‘the subordinate’ by ‘the patriarch’, in a ‘father knows best’ capacity, there was no way they were going to be positioned by Beryl. A norm of male authority had emerged in this group. But Beryl was not powerless, her position as director enabled her to do and say things that the rest of the workgroup were unable to say and do. The norm of legitimate authority meant that resistance to Beryl’s rule was not voiced outright but manifested in other symbolic ways.

For example, it is interesting to consider who did and who didn’t turn up to the rest of the ‘learning through transition’ group interviews. The numbers attending these meetings declined rapidly after the first meeting. Allegiance to the queen was in decline. At the second meeting we found out that Graham, the person who’d seemed most discontent at the first meeting, had temporarily moved out of the group into another position at another college. Graham, in a very literal sense had repositioned himself. By the third meeting it was just Beryl and three other senior managers.

The point here is that Beryl is not the abstract, universal subject presented in mainstream management texts. She is embodied, and this particular body is positioned in particular discourses (Rose, 1996; Weedon, 1987).

**Multiplicities and tensions**

There were still more discourses in circulation in this workgroup, including the discourse of enterprise (du Gay, 1996) and the discourse of organisational learning (Gherardi, 1999) constituting yet other subject positions. This story could go on and on. But hopefully I’ve illustrated that: there were multiple discourses in circulation that produced multiple subject positions; these subject positions were differentially available to different members of the group; at times subject positions were taken-up and at times they were resisted; and when a subject position was taken-up, a subjectivity – a relation to one’s self – was produced.

And far from being a seamless shift from one subject position to the next, in some kind of linear progression, at times shifting positions created tension and discomfort for Beryl:

Beryl … we had individual learning and development plans – articulating really early on that the issue was how to manage stakeholders – and doing a lot of research – talk that was about stakeholder involvement – actually consciously focusing on that because it was so difficult from being
someone in charge of people – because that was something I’d always done – all my working life – I’ve always been a line manager and suddenly to be put in this position where you have to work a completely different way...

My story about Beryl directs attention to complexity of the relationship between power and subjectivity. Power is multiformed and distributed. Power was exercised not only in a top-down, power over mode but also in a form that:

applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (Foucault, 1982, p. 212)

There were various technologies of power in operation in this group. Power relations were established through the techniques of pedagogy, persuasion and discipline. These differing technologies produced different relations of power and different subject positions.

Power is exercised through discourses in the ways they constitute and govern subjects (Weedon, 1987). I have described some of the discourses in circulation in this workplace and the subject positions constituted through them. Beryl took-up positions that suited her purposes in specific situations – ‘the rational manager’, ‘the political player’, ‘the people person’. Beryl is an active subject, she is not merely acted on by social forces. Rather than viewing power as top-down and oppressive we can see the way subject positions are actively taken-up and at times negotiated.

Beryl is also regulated through discourse. In taking-up a particular subject position, Beryl takes up a particular relation to her self. She becomes ‘the rational manager’, ‘the political player’ and so on. Power is exercised through the mechanisms of subjection. Beryl regulated her self and acted on her body in ways which contributed to producing a cautious, rational self. The codes of conduct used by beryl included legitimate authority and scientific rationality.

This case illustrates the way particular subjectivities are produced through particular workplace practices, for example the practice of attempting to create alignment with a group of managers, or the disciplinarian practices of a boss, or the scientific/research practices of a group managers involved in planning. This directs attention to the contingency of the subject and suggests that a universal notion of the self as offered in the psychological notion of the cohesive, autonomous, essential subject is a governmental fantasy. As Rose (1996) claims, no theory of ‘the individual’ is needed and the question of agency is a false problem. The capacity for action comes out of ‘the specific regimes and technologies that machinate humans in diverse ways’ (1996, p. 187). It also problematises the notion of a fixed manager-employee relation. Beryl’s managerial self was not fixed but produced through the circulating discourses in the workplace and always ‘in process’.

In both the mainstream managerial literature and more critical approaches power is understood as coercive and repressive, as an illegitimate control, as ‘power over’. This approach is anchored in a tradition based on a sovereign understanding of power.
(Foucault, 1981). However, a focus on identity enables a conceptualisation of power that recognises the multiplicities of power. Here power is understood as both constraining and enabling (Ransom, 1997).

This is not to suggest that oppression and domination do not exist in contemporary workplaces. There were ample examples of top-down power relations in play in the senior managers’ group. However, as Foucault reminds us, in only paying attention to a top-down mode of power, the ongoing operation of power which reaches into the capillaries of our everyday lives is overlooked. Our contemporary struggle is around who we can be. A poststructural approach provides a useful framework for understanding the complexity of the mechanisms of power. It enables an analysis of the modes of subjectivity that are made available through particular practices, including those of the workplace. If subjectivity is understood as being produced discursively, then the ‘who we can be’ is opened up to continuous redefinition (Weedon, 1987).

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References