Organizational Discourses: Sounds Of Silence

Stream 10: Silence and Voice in Organizational Life Stream

Rosemary A. McGowan

University of Western Ontario
Brescia University College
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario
CANADA
N6G 1H2

Phone: 519.432.8353
Fax: 519.885.4629
e-mail: rmcgowan@uwo.ca
Discursive engagement in organizations involves complex microprocesses of talk and silence. Through talk, organizational members develop understandings of organizational policies and procedures, construct role identities, both organizational and personal, and generally learn the rules of the game (Boden, 1994). Through silence, organizational members suppress concerns about difficult or troubling personal as well as organizational issues (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Ryan and Oestreich (1991) use the term “undiscussables” to label topics that are frequently silenced in the workplace. Undiscussables include concerns about management practice, co-worker performance, bad news, conflicts, and personal problems.

One way to advance our understanding of organizational silence is to zero in on a specific issue that has been identified as “difficult” and to conduct a detailed analysis of the discursive processes associated with that issue. One such issue is the balance of work and family demands. The work and eldercare issue has been identified in the academic literature and in the popular press as a difficult issue facing a sizable number of employees (Conference Board of Canada, 1999).

The work and eldercare issue is marked by a number of attributes that make it a prime research topic for the study of discursive processes of organizational discourse and organizational silence. First, caregiving for aging relatives affects the day-to-day lives and activities of adult children, both men and women, in complex, subtle and unpredictable ways. The duration of care, level and type of care are frequently unknown and nearly impossible to predict. In addition to unpredictability, aging is associated with a variety of issues such as sudden onset illness (e.g., heart attack and stroke), declining health, forgetfulness and dementia. These health issues can present caregivers with challenges that they are unprepared for and for which there are few, if any, organizational discourses or scripts to call upon. This paper explores the discursive strategies of voice and silence that managers call upon when faced with a familial caregiving responsibility that is marked by uncertainties and a limited or non-existent script. The uncertainties, unpredictabilities and relative newness of this issue to the organizational context make this a difficult personal issue that merits study.

Second, caregiving for aging relatives tends to be provided by women – adult daughters, wives and female partners (Medjuck, O’Brien & Tozer, 1992). Women are more likely to provide personal care, while men are more likely to provide services involving household or garden maintenance. Differences in the types of care provided have direct implications for work. For instance, in the domain of personal care, meals typically occur during the regular workday whereas household maintenance can be done on the weekends or after work – times that do not generally conflict with business hours. For caregiving individuals, personal choices regarding the allocation of resources to work and eldercare become a crucial organizational issue because of the potential influence on employee stress, organizational commitment, absenteeism and turnover.

At the same time an increasing number of women are becoming involved in the workforce and an increasing number are assuming managerial positions – positions which are frequently governed by patriarchal rules (Ferguson, 1984). Some researchers have suggested that organizational texts are marked by gendered subtexts (Acker, 1992; Mills, 1992; Smith, 1987). Gender, patriarchy and deep structures of power and their influence on discourse have received considerable attention in the feminist and organizational communication literatures (Bradshaw, 1998; Martin,
Men’s ability to balance work and family caregiving is also affected by gendered discourses and expectations in the workplace. Some men face the challenge of wanting to assume the role of caregiver but are deterred in developing this role because of gendered role expectations (both societal and organizational) that place work commitments ahead of family responsibilities. Barham (1995) and Levine (1997) both report that male employees found that their organizations were not overly supportive of strategies that might help them better balance work with caregiving responsibilities.

Finally, in addition to being a gendered activity, caregiving including eldercare is a private sphere activity. It is not uncommon for activities in the private sphere to be silenced in the workplace (Ryan & Oestereich, 1999). Schwartz (1992) popularized the term “conspiracy of silence” to describe the subordination and silencing of the private in favour of the public. Schwartz (1992) reported employees protect their organizational status by silencing personal and family concerns. Martin’s (1990) deconstruction of executive discourse revealed the gendered construction of the public and the private spheres and the silencing of aspects of the private sphere within the public domain.

Silencing can have the unintended and undesirable consequences of reinforcing existing patriarchal structures and processes as well as positions of power and powerlessness. An examination of discursive microprocesses of voice and silence affords the opportunity to explore some of the ways in which organizational members sustain and challenge existing structures and processes, create opportunities for change and give voice (or not!) to subordinated and silenced perspectives.

This paper uses discourse analysis to identify some of the microprocesses of discursive engagement that contribute to the subordination and silencing of the private to the public within the organizational context. A discourse analytic framework allows a consideration of the interinfluential relationship of traditional, patriarchal structures and discourses with micro-processes of voice and silence. A discourse analytic lens also offers the opportunity to consider the repressive as well as the emancipatory capacity of language. The current study considers the discursive constructions of voice and silence of male and female managerial level employees who are involved in a particular type of family caregiving – namely, eldercare.

This paper has three main goals. First, this paper will identify and describe some of the microprocesses of organizational silencing evident in the everyday discourse of managerial level employees. Second, this paper will demonstrate how a discourse analytic lens can enhance our understanding of the subtle and complex ways in which organizational silencing occurs. Finally, this paper will provide a typology of silencing of the private sphere in the public domain.

**Research Participants**

The participants were 4 male and 12 female full-time, managerial level employees who identified themselves as the primary caregiver and/or care manager for an aging relative. Their duties and responsibilities met the Statistics Canada criteria for classification as a manager as identified in the Standard Occupational Classification code (Statistics Canada, 1996). The research participants were located through purposeful sampling, more specifically, snowball sampling.

**Depth Conversational Interviews**

Depth interviews lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. Each interview included
both a semi-structured interview component as well as unstructured conversational interview element. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest, “Asking everyone the same questions makes little sense in qualitative interviewing where the goal is to find out what happened and why, in rich and individualistic terms” (p. 11). Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that if participants, “can direct the conversation to matters of interest to them and that they think are important, interviews gain depth and reality. If you impose on them what you think is important, you may miss important insights about the subject you are investigating...” (p. 12).

All interviews were tape recorded and verbatim transcriptions were prepared. The transcription notation was based on Atkinson and Heritage’s (1984) notation for conversation analysis. Hesitations, false starts, laughter, emphasis, elongated tones, rising and falling intonations and verbal confirmations such as “uh huh” and “yeah” were among the qualities noted. In addition, each line of interview text was numbered for ease of reference.

**Discourse Analytic Approach**

Discourse analysis is a general analytic approach that is rigorously grounded in the language of the participants. A discourse analytic or discursive approach offers a language-based approach for understanding “...how events are described and explained, how factual reports are constructed, [and] how cognitive states are attributed” (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 2). Discourse analysis attempts to better understand how participants use language to construct identities and relationships. Discourse analysis involves the study of language in use “… in order to identify regularities and patterns in language...with the ultimate aim …to show and to interpret the relationship between these regularities and the meanings and purposes expressed through discourse” (Nunan, 1993, p. 7).

The interview transcripts were analyzed using an approach to discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2002) that involves a hyperempirical consideration of the interview text (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). In this approach, “Accounts are recorded in detail, presented carefully to the reader, and studied as accounts” (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 146).

The following section provides a detailed analysis of discursive processes of silencing both of the label as well as the activities of eldercare. In addition, a typology of silencing is developed.

**Analysis of Silencing**

*Silencing Specific Labels*

The analysis suggested that managers silence the eldercare label as well as their various, day-to-day caregiving activities. In naming their caregiving experience, managers referred to it as a “situation”, a “personal issue”, “stuff”, and/or a “demand”. Through systematic vagueness and pronominalization, eldercare becomes an issue with no name. This is well-illustrated in an excerpt from Sean who was constructing about advice that he would give other managers who might just be starting to look after an aging relative. Sean says,

(654) I think the first thing I would HAVE to do is to let my immediate

(655) boss know…uh..that..this situation is likely to happen↑. and…
that it may take some time away from my job... for the first little while and keep them apprised of what’s happening and,

what...and, and when it could be over...

Systematic vagueness is the hallmark of Sean’s advice in lines 655 to 658. Sean is vague about the label for his circumstances. He is vague about the extent of his commitments. Finally, he is vague about how to talk to your manager about your eldercare commitments. Each of these issues will be considered in turn.

In line 655, Sean says that he would inform his boss about his “situation.” He does not explicitly label his caregiving activities as anything in particular; rather his caregiving activities are referred to through generic references such as “this situation” (line 655) and the pronominalization “it” (lines 656 to 657). Twice in this brief excerpt, Sean substitutes the pronominalization “it” for a more specific label. By pronominalizing eldercare, Sean does not make explicit the personal caregiving activities that he is engaged in. He does not label those activities in a way that would clearly identify them as involving care for aging parents. Sean was just one of many managers who identified their caregiving circumstances as their “situation.” In the popular press, the term “situation” has connotations of and association with difficult experiences as in a police situation or a hostage-taking situation. By referring to his circumstances as “this situation,” Sean is alluding to something that may be difficult in a broadly and ill-defined way.

Sean’s use of systematic vagueness and pronominalization (”it” and “this situation”) for eldercare activities is in direct contrast to his specificity in his identification of the “immediate boss” (line 654). Sean’s advice recommends talking to the boss, then identifies the individual with the marked case of “immediate boss.”

Within an organizational context, the commonplace label of “boss” is readily given voice. Sean’s specification of “immediate boss” suggests that there is a specific individual in the organizational hierarchy who should be informed about the situation.

Sean is vague about the extent of the time commitment that eldercare would involve. He states that it “may take some time away...” (line 656) and later, he says “for the first little while...” (lines 656 to 657). “May” suggests uncertainty about the likelihood that eldercare will cut into work time. Sean’s advice is based on possibilities (“may take some time away from my job” line 656), rather than certainties (for instance, “will...”). His advice also downgrades the extent of the time commitment to “some” time. The phrase, “first little while” (lines 656 to 657) is vague. It gives no indication of the duration of “the first little while.” The phrase “first little while” does not identify the “first little while” of what. Is this the time involved in establishing home care? Or providing instrumental care? The unspecified nature of the discourse avoids constructing a situation where individuals miscalculate the time commitments involved in eldercare and are then forced to re-dress the perceptions. Given that research has shown that caregiving typically involves 5 to 20 years of an employee’s work life, it is likely that Sean’s prediction would involve a downgraded and optimistic, rather than realistic, time line.

Finally, Sean does not indicate how he would communicate with his boss. Is it through face-to-face communication, by way of a memo, through electronic mail or by a phone conversation? Similarly, Sean suggests that one should “keep them
apprised of what’s happening…” (line 657) but he offers no specifics on how this could or should be done.

In talking about workplace absences related to caregiving activities, managers reported that they would offer a fairly generic reason for their absence. In constructing the reason for their absence, managers often relied on ellipsis. For instance, managers reported that they would say that they had “gone to a meeting” but neither the location nor the purpose of the meeting were identified.

This extensive reliance on pronominalization and other silencing approaches can also be seen in the following excerpt from Kirsten. In this excerpt, Kirsten presents the advice that she would offer others with respect to balancing work and eldercare.

In response to my question about advice, Kirsten offers a very brief, two word directive – “own it” (line 842). Kirsten’s advice is contemporary and New Age in tone. The pronominal and elliptical nature of the phrase, however, does not offer to the listener what should be owned, or with whom. Since the full meaning of her expression was unclear, Kirsten was asked about it. She states that you should:

(840) Own it with your boss. Have a-ask for some time to cha- to have a
(841) talk about a personal issue. The trick is to make it formal, and
(842) say,"I need to negotiate some stuff with you." And I will just say,
(843) "I will NEED to take off time during the workday. I will make up
(844) every minute of that time. What kind of reporting do you want on
(845) that?"

In the elaboration on her advice, she repeats her initial advice of taking ownership of it (line 840) and then expands her advice by identifying with whom you should own it (your boss) and to some degree how you should go about that interaction. Her advice fails to make explicit the “it”— in other words, the caregiving for an aging parent. Kirsten submerges eldercare under vague labels (“personal issue,” line 841, “some stuff,” line 842). Kirsten’s advice also completely silences the issue in line 843 when she states “I will NEED to take some time off during the work day”; the reason for the time off work was never made explicit.

Kirsten makes several self-corrections to her advice. While she starts her advice with a clear directive in line 840 “own it with your boss,” she then structures her comments as a request or as seeking permission. She states that you should “ask for some time” (line 840). This sequence in lines 840 to 841 contains two repairs. First, there is the repair and upgrade in line 840 about the processing of arranging for a chat. The repair is from “hav[ing] some time for a chat” to “asking for time for a chat” (line 840). This repair repositions chatting with your boss from an unproblematic, possibly routine activity to one that is less routine and one for which permission must be sought. The second series of repairs commences in line 840. In constructing her advice, Kirsten ratchets up the character of the interaction. In line 840, Kirsten abruptly terminates and self-corrects the label of “chat” to “talk” in line 841. In the next line, Kirsten replaces the label of “talk” with negotiation. The evolution of the labels used to describe the interaction is noteworthy. “Chatting” refers to conversing easily and with familiarity. A talk is the subject of discussion while a negotiation involves conferring with others in order to reach a compromise or agreement. With each revision, Kirsten has upgraded the formality of the interaction between a subordinate and his or her superior.
Negotiation is a different level of interaction than is a chat, or even a talk. At the same time, Kirsten tries to normalize and even downplay the tone of the conversation in line 842, when she indicates that, “I will just say....”

Kirsten uses an interesting and rather striking turn of phrase in her advice. She suggests that there is a “trick” (line 841) in how this interaction should be managed. A trick is a ruse or a technique used to achieve a desired effect. In Kirsten’s case, the trick is making the interaction formal rather than informal. Formalizing the interaction helps players to co-construct a script that recognizes and sustains organizational roles and status differences in decision making within the organization.

Silencing the Activities

The previous section demonstrated how managers silence words or labels that specifically link their activities to notions of eldercare. In a similar fashion, it was found that managers silence – to varying degrees – talk about the specific nature of their caregiving activities. Silencing can be categorized as absolute, revisionist and selective silencing. The following section provides illustrations of each type of silencing. It should be noted that the excerpts are also peppered with examples of label silencing that were introduced in the previous section.

Absolute Silencing

Some managers report that they do not say anything about their eldercare activities to anyone in the organization. This is the most extreme form of silencing. For example, in response to my question about talking about eldercare issues in the workplace, Ted tells me that he does not talk about his caregiving while at work and then immediately shifts his comments to another context where he does talk about eldercare:

(814) Ahh:: (sighs)...not really (quiet tone)...No, we talk a=one, one of
(815) the strengths of our marriage is that we talk all these problems
(816) through ad nauseum, so, I=it’s been my rule of thumb and it maybe
(817) an antiquated management approach or maybe antiquated
(818) business tactics, but, this is what I’ve (↑) advised by and I think
(819) I’ve kept the personal, the personal grief around here to a
(820) minimum because of it. And HOW I deal with my personal
(821) problems um and how they deal with theirs is pretty much up to
(822) them. The-the-the area I will DISCUSS some of these things is
(823) my support group <>...we meet every other week. Sometimes
(824) that’s helpful. Sometimes it isn’t, but it, it is an outlet

In response to my question, Ted replies with hesitation, resistance and a politeness hedge (line 814). Ted resists and hedges (“not really,” line 814) the idea of talking to people at work. Ted then self-corrects his hedge and he upgrades his comment to a firm negative declarative (“No,” line 814), thereby discounting any idea that he talks about his eldercare experiences while at work. He positions eldercare as an issue that he talks about “ad nauseum” (line 816) with his spouse and later makes mention of his support group (line 823) as an outlet for talking about “some of these things” (line 824). “Ad nauseum” is an extreme case formulation to impress upon me that he does talk about these issues and that he talks about them extensively – just not at work.

For Ted, eldercare is framed within the context of a “problem” (line 815). He
says that, “we talk all these problems through” (lines 815 to 816). Problems are
difficult or puzzling issues or questions. For the many managers interviewed for this
research, personal problems such as eldercare are examples of just such difficult or
puzzling issues and are not given voice at work. Eldercare is potentially a doubly
difficult issue to talk about in the organization. Not only is it a family/personal issue,
it is also a difficult or problematic family/personal issue. Managers have referred to
the need for support, or the involvement in a support group. Support is linked to
notions of strengthening and providing sustenance in order to prevent failure. This
label reinforces the difficult nature of being a caregiver for aging relatives. Eldercare
is hardly an easy issue.

In the next part of our conversation, Ted continues his comments and rationale
on why he does not talk about his personal, caregiving activities,

(840) But my professional colleagues…no, I don’t talk about personal
(841) things at all with them. I, I was trained by a mentor, yeah, he
(842) was my mentor…to uh keep my personal/social life apart from
(843) my professional life.

The identity of others in the organization are differentiated through the marked
case of “professional colleagues” (line 840). Elderca re is an issue with no name – an
issue whose name is silenced by subsuming it under other labels. Ted states that he
does not talk about personal things (lines 840 to 841). “Personal things” is a marked
case (personal) of the generic “things.” Ted emphasizes his reluctance to talk to
colleagues with the extreme case formulation “at all” (line 841).

**Bridgit**

Bridgit makes a very explicit statement about who she would talk to about her
caregiving and the desire or need to keep the public and private separate:

(726) EXCEPT for friends. I mean, you know, friends, uh close friends
(727) certainly… I probably talk a little bit more about it. But in...in
that
(728) business environment and also I think that people are not going
(729) to get that personal with me in terms of questions...because of
(730) my position, so it’s not as, as if there’s COLLEAGUES...it is a
(731) professional working environment, so uh...it isn’t that
everybody
(732) is knowing the most intimate details of your life.

Bridgit makes an explicit statement of differentiating the business from the
private spheres. She acknowledges that she does talk about her eldercare
responsibilities to “friends” (line 726). Even among friends, however, those to whom
she is willing to talk fall into the marked case of “close friends” (line 726). Her
discourse makes a point of clarifying their identity with the phrase “I mean” (line
726). Her willingness to talk to close friends is, initially at least, unconditional
(“certainly” line 727). Then, however, there is a hesitation and a downgrade in her
espoused willingness to talk to even close friends (“probably” in line 727 and “little
bit more,” line 727). Bridgit establishes a sharp contrast in her willingness to talk to
close friends versus those in the business environment. She starts her discussion of
the business context with the contrastive, “but” (line 727). She specifies and upgrades
her working environment with the marked cases of “business environment” (line 728)
and “professional, working environment” (line 731). This differentiation clearly sets
these environments apart from other environments. Bridgit also constructs an explanation of why she did not talk about her caregiving in the workplace. Her explanation draws upon a face saving strategy for her non-disclosure or at least non-elaboration of her situation. Her explanation is based on a three-part list: her position within the organization (line 730), the behaviour of others, namely, their reluctance to initiate a conversation with her on these issues (lines 728 to 729) and the absence of “COLLEAGUES” (line 730). All of these reasons provide an attribution that is external to Bridgit (based on her situation and circumstances), rather than a personal unwillingness to disclose her situation. Her explanation also constructs the managerial position as one of personal isolation and distancing within the organization. Finally, she invokes two extreme case formulations to further support her non-disclosure of her personal situation (“everybody,” line 731; “most intimate details of your life,” line 732). It is interesting that, to Bridgit, an activity like caregiving for aging relatives falls within the category of “most intimate details of your life” (line 732). This discourse clearly situates caregiving in the personal sphere, a sphere that is distinct and separate from the public domain of work.

For those managers, any talk of the challenges, burdens and/or worries involving eldercare ended at the threshold of the organization (“NO. Not, not to the people I work with” Laurie, line 308). Discussions or chats about eldercare were reserved for those outside the organization – spouses, partners and close friends (“EXCEPT for friends. I mean, you know, friends, uh close friends certainly… I probably talk a little bit more about it,” Bridgit, lines 726 to 727). In general, the effect of this strategy is that the organization remains naïve about the emotional and resource demands experienced by organizational members. Yet, these managers who describe a strategy of absolute silencing are involved in caregiving during the day. They just did not talk about it – a scenario that often resulted in the kinds of revisionist silencing described in the next section.

Revisionist Silencing

Another form of silencing is revisionist silencing. Managers report that they re-write their caregiving activities as more traditional workplace activities. In this case, managers represented caregiving activities that were logical substitutes. Some managers, like Sean in the excerpt that follows, re-write off-site personal errands for Mom or Dad as meetings with unspecified clients,

(177) … if I have to go away for an hour or an hour and a half, I just
(178) let them know that I’m gone and when I’ll be back and I put
(179) voice mail on saying that I’ve gone to a meeting and-and
(180) when I’ll be back…Um…and because I do go out a lot visiting
(181) clients ANYWAY, so I’m out of the office a lot, so the fact
that
(182) I’m out it not a surprise to any of the staff (↑)...Um..that I may
(183) be out with=on personal errands with eldercare is another story.
(184) They don’t ALL know that, but some of them would and I would
(185) let some of them know that.

Sean normalizes and downgrades his caregiving activities at least three times in this excerpt. First, he initiates his comment with “if” (line 177). This word sets up
the scenario of possibility, rather than probability. Later in line 177, Sean says that he “just” lets them know that he will be away from the office. The downgrade “just” suggests that his approach to the situation is not out of the ordinary, it is a very routine way for managing absences – he does not make a big deal of it. Third, in lines 180 to 181, he normalizes his absence by indicating that he is frequently away from the office anyway, so this additional absence would not be out of the ordinary. Sean offers a fairly vivid description of the actions that he would take when he leaves the office. This vivid description (lines 177 to 180) creates an impression of familiarity with this course of action. The vivid description also allows Sean to show that he is skilled at managing a seamless transition between his work and non-work lives. Finally, Sean’s excerpt shares with me his awareness that in the course of the day, he may construct multiple stories for different audiences.

Although Sean may have let his superiors know about his situation, it would seem that his caregiving activities, at least the day-to-day encroachments on work face time, are not open to discussion with the broader organizational membership. Only selected individuals are made aware of the reason for his absence.

In a similar manner, Kirsten’s absences for eldercare commitments are twinned with work-related off-site meetings so that absences are not attributable to caregiving activities. In describing her own behaviour, Kirsten offers the following self-analysis:

(158) …there were times where I was, um, not deceptive (↑) but I’d
(159) have to sneak it in (↑). I-I didn’t always want to own to my
(160) employer that I was taking time off to get my Mom to the
(161) doctor. Um…the policy at XXX was (sighs)…the
(162) WRITTEN policy was that you were, you could take time
(163) off in lieu <uh huh>. The…cultural policy was that that
was
(164) not done. I would say something like, “Oh, I’m going off,
(165) um, I’m going to be at XXXX and then I’ve got some other
(166) running around to do.” So, I would, I would make a point
of
(167) making sure that I went to one of my work-related places.
(168) It might just be to drop off an envelope but at least it gave
(169) me a legitimate work-related reason to be out of the
office.Kirsten makes a distinction between deception, a label which she rejected (“not deceptive,” line 159), and “sneak[ing] it in.” (line 159) a description which she would allow. Kirsten’s taxonomic differentiation suggests that to Kirsten “sneak[ing] it in” is less destructive to interpersonal trust and relations than deception. In line 159 Kirsten says that she didn’t always want to “own” to her employer that she was out doing things for her mother. This is in direct contradiction to her earlier advice of “owning it with your boss” (line 840). Kirsten then offers a fairly detailed explanation of organizational catalysts for the difference between her espoused and her action experiences. Kirsten marks the cases of the espoused “written policy” (line 161) versus the enacted “cultural policy” (line 163). Kirsten’s behaviour falls in some space between the espoused value system (you can take time off) and the enacted system (you don’t/can’t take time off).

Using reported speech in lines 164 to 165, Kirsten told me how she balanced
the demands of caring for her mother and her work. Caring for her mother is not specifically identified; rather she subsumes it under the vague reference to “some other running around” (line 165). This excerpt suggests that eldercare involves absences from work – something which, despite her advice, Kirsten does not give explicit voice to in the workplace.

Kirsten’s excerpt highlights how context serves to define activities as legitimate – or not. Kirsten provides transportation to her Mother so that her Mother can attend medical appointments. Kirsten’s mother is legally blind so she is simply unable to drive herself to medical appointments. Within the organizational context, however, this activity is not legitimate enough to warrant open disclosure (“I-I-I didn’t always want to own to my employer,” lines 159 to 160 and it is subsumed under the “other running around,” line 165 that she had to do). So providing instrumental care for daily living can be mentioned sometimes – just not all the time. Yet, delivering an envelope, which could be framed as providing a (duplicate) postal or courier service is, in Kirsten’s organization, a legitimate work-related reason for being out of the office. Although Kirsten acknowledges the nonessential nature of this activity (“just to drop off an envelope…” line 167) this activity would carry enough legitimacy within the context of the organizational milieu to justify a workplace absence. This is very similar to Sean’s phrase that “I go out visiting clients any ways” (line 180). Sean, like Kirsten is able to either dovetail or mask his caregiving activities with workplace activities identified as legitimate. Sean subsumes his caregiving activities under the veneer of organizational activities, which in the normal course of Sean’s organizational responsibilities, would involve being away from the office. Sean’s strategy of covering the personal under the guise of the professional is very similar to Kirsten’s approach. In both cases the personal is not really given voice but is managed through a re-labeling shell game that hides and relocates the personal. These excerpts illustrate that legitimacy is defined by context. Understanding the contextual discursive factors within the organization that determine when a caregiving activity is given voice is important to understanding the actions and behaviours of managerial level, and potentially all, employees.

Revisionist discourses serves to silence awareness of caregiving activities, perpetuate “that lie” and reinforce, if not protect, traditional and gendered organizational identities. Re-writing activities suggests that managers are very well aware of the acceptable discourse and they are well aware of which activities are considered acceptable and which are not. From my results, eldercare falls into the latter category. Revisionist actions take place, in part, because of the unavoidable overlap in the daytime of eldercare and workplace responsibilities. Many eldercare activities such as medical appointments and meetings with financial institutions can sometimes only take place during traditional workday hours. As a result, managers find themselves trying to satisfy concurrent demands.

Managers deny/mask personal time to meet personal needs, use vacation time to provide care for dependents rather than for holiday time, indicate that they were late because of road conditions rather than dental/medical appointments for aging relatives. Managers were actively engaged in fictive discourses of denial or distortion about eldercare issues and needs. These revisionist stories are not far off from the kinds of actions that parents did (and still do) with respect to childcare. It is commonly acknowledged when children are ill, some parents call into work claiming
that they themselves are ill so that they can take the day off to provide care. One interviewee referred to this type of behaviour as “that lie” (Louisa, line 662) where caregiving for children, and now aging parents, is masked and hidden. Individual-level silencing is driven by a concern to portray the proper managerial image, for concern about how others perceive their organizational commitment or by a perceived necessity to mimic patriarchal standards of behaviour in order to succeed in the organization. Most managers were very concerned that they not do anything to harm their continued employment and, in turn, their company pensions. It is not unreasonable to suggest that individual level silencing around eldercare activities helps managers towards these ends.

Selective Silencing

A third type of silencing is selective silencing. Selective silencing involves not talking about some of the more difficult, concurrent or embarrassing aspects of eldercare such as dealing with dementia or changing an adult diaper. Instead, managers report a willingness to talk about activities that involve positive, upbeat activities. Acceptable topics include birthday parties held for the aging parent, trips taken by the aging parent, or visits between the aging parent and their grandchildren (“I’ll yack about that all day long about how wonderful it’s been for my kids and stuff like that”, Tony, lines 484 to 486).

Selective silencing achieves many of the same outcomes as absolute silencing and revisionist silencing. As with other forms of silencing, selective silencing shields the organization from difficult, personal issues (“keep the personal grief around here to a minimum”, Ted, lines 819 to 820). Talk about these positive kinds of activities also allows managers to profile and bolster their own workplace identity as skilled at time management, planning and multitasking. Traits that, in a traditional organizational context are deemed as desirable and are associated with effective management (“they see the fact that we are in eldercare as being you know very heroic and my, exemplary and all that (unintelligible) sort of stuff...[laughs] HEROIC”, Tony, lines 686 to 688). Profiling activities like birthday parties and intergenerational visits allows managers to focus their talk on eldercare activities to those activities that do not typically occur during the workday. Also, these kinds of activities including trips and birthdays cast the aging parent as a vital, healthy, self-sufficient individual – not someone for whom the manager is going to need to provide care. Through these approaches, managers are able to provide support for their aging relatives without the organization being fully aware of their activities.

Discussion

By silencing, in various ways, their caregiving, managers are able to achieve at least three outcomes. First, these managers are able to construct and maintain the discursive, if not physical, separation of personal and professional. This is an approach that some managers indicate that they learned from mentors (“I, I was trained by a mentor, yeah, he was my mentor…to uh keep my personal/social life apart from my professional life, Tony, lines 841 to 842).

Second, managers perpetuate the façade of a singular, unproblematic commitment to the organization – a commitment that is not now, nor in the foreseeable future, affected by a personal commitment such as eldercare. Bridgit, for instance says that she would, “probably give advice that I don’t take myself…to you know set your priorities and work probably isn’t one of them. But you know, I
certainly don’t do that. I mean, work is a priority” (lines 1257 to 1259). According to Tony, “I would say to you if you ca-can't see yourself being able to rally, you know and to get innn...and, and do what your staff need you to do in order to you know make the place continue to work you shouldn't be in the management position” (lines 708 to 711).

Third, through absolute silencing these managers protect their organization from learning about and potentially having to develop responses to help their employees manage these difficult, personal problems. Ted, for instance, in describing his willingness to talk about his eldercare with his wife but not with those at work, ended his comments, “HOW I deal with my personal problems um and how they deal with theirs is pretty much up to them” (Ted, lines 820 to 821).

By not hearing about eldercare activities of employees, other organizational constituents such as superiors and human resource departments do not have to develop programs or policies to help employees manage this issue. Organizations do not have to expend either financial or time resources to address this issue. In many ways, silencing presents the organization with the ideal employee, one who (apparently) leaves personal concerns outside of the organization, does not let their private life get in the way of their work and who makes no demands on their organization for eldercare related programs and policies.

Silencing means that eldercare is no one’s problem in the organization– no one except for the employee with the aging relative (“I’ve kept the personal, the personal grief around here to a minimum because of it,” Ted, lines 819 to 820). There is an obvious drawback to this form of silencing. The work/eldercare balance does not become part of the discussion or agenda of the organization and any real opportunities for change either in the ways that employees manage the multiple demands or in organizational responses to the (unknown) situation are lost.

Finally, the caregiving needs of aging parents tend to increase with chronological age. In some cases, as with severe stroke or other rapid-onset illnesses those demands increase exponentially over a short period of time. In other cases, demands increase incrementally. In either case, the needs of the aging person typically, as noted in the comments of the managers who participated in this study, overlap in some way and at some level with the workday. Silencing, whether absolute, revisionist or selective, does not facilitate an understanding of the issues facing employees.

References
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