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## **Sounds of Silence: Graduate Trainees, Hegemony and Resistance**

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## **Sounds of Silence: Graduate Trainees, Hegemony and Resistance**

### **Abstract**

This paper analyses how graduate trainees in one UK-based private sector retail organization talked about being silenced. The paper illustrates how the trainees' constructions formed a set of discursive practices that were implicated in the constitution of the organization as a regime of power, and how they both accommodated and resisted these practices. Our case focuses on the trainees' discursive construction of normative pressures to conform, compliant and non-compliant types of worker, and explicit acts of silencing, together with their reflexive interrogation of the nexus of discursive constraints on their opportunities to be heard. Drawing on the analytical resources associated with the 'linguistic turn' in organization studies, our research is an exploration of the importance of language as a medium of social control and power, and means of self-authorship. It is also an attempt to locate 'silence' in putatively polyphonic organizations.

**Keywords:** silence, discourse, power, resistance, identity, impression management

*'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence'* (Wittgenstein, 1961 section 6.5).

## **Introduction**

Silence, including not just the silencing aspects of communication but the expressive aspects of silence, is a key but neglected topic in organization studies. This paper analyses how graduate trainees in one UK-based private sector retail organization talked about being silenced. We suggest that the trainees' linguistic constructions formed a set of discursive practices that were implicated in the constitution of the organization as a regime of power. We also argue that, as reflexive and creative organizational members subject to multiple discursive regimes, the trainees not only accommodated but resisted what they interpreted as attempts to silence them. Our analysis draws on literatures concerned with silence (Jaworski 1997; Thiesmeyer 2003), and the institutionalization of provinces of meaning in organizations (e.g. Foucault 1977; Mumby 1987) to illustrate how individual participants' talk is subject to the hegemony of prevailing discursive practices (Gramsci 1971; Clegg 1989) and how these practices may be resisted (Ezzamel et al 2001; Gabriel 1999).

Our argument is that silence may be theorised both as a power effect (Clegg 1989) and as an aspect of impression management (Goffman 1959), and that one approach to its study is to examine how people linguistically construct (Potter and Wetherell 1987) a perceived need to be silent. It is predicated on the suggestion that 'silencing clearly involves choices made by other people as well as by the potential speaker' (Thiesmeyer 2003: 2). Our research draws also from studies of silence, - literal (Jaworski 1993), epistemological (Polanyi 1958), and ontological (Bollnow 1982) - that feature across the arts and social sciences, especially in literary criticism,

philosophy, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and gender studies (Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985; Jaworski 1997). In particular, we are indebted to studies of organizations which have understood silence as governed by rules or norms that dissuade people from speaking out (Argyris 1977), and revealed the developmental dynamics of conspiracies (Hart and Hazelgrove 2001), cultures (Beamish 2000), spirals (Bowen and Blackmon 2003), and climates (Morrison and Milliken 2000) of silence. Yet our research also stands in marked contrast to this organization-based work, much of which has been positivist in conception, and focused on peoples' motivations for silence, such as fear (Morrison and Milliken 2003), altruism (Van Dyne et al 2003) and a desire to preserve social capital (Milliken et al 2003). Our study instead emphasises that silence needs to be considered both as an aspect of power and as implicated in peoples' efforts to impression manage.

Much less attention has been paid to the power that is embedded in the overall authoritative structure and design of organizations than to deviations from this order (Hardy and Clegg 1996). A conception of organizations that suggests they are socially constructed by participants (Berger and Luckmann 1966) through networks of conversations (Ford and Ford 1995), which draw on and contribute to prevailing discursive practices, is valuable in this respect. It permits an understanding of the term *organization* as a spatial metaphor referring to a domain of (apparently) legitimate authority that favours certain behavioural and linguistic practices at the expense of others. In particular, it allows us to focus on those discursive practices that constitute organizations as regimes of truth and which discipline action by privileging particular forms of language use (Foucault 1973). From this perspective, the most potent and insidious forms of control in the workplace are not those exercised by direct, often

coercive means, but through the discursive production of 'quasi-fixed' meanings which reify social orders (Clegg 1989). Much of this work has taken the form of explorations of organizational ideologies, where the term 'ideology' is understood to refer to a set of symbols and meanings that sustain relations of domination (e.g. Thompson 1990). This said, because organizations are not discursively monolithic, and reflexive beings possess some capacity for 'creative deviancy' (Worthington 1996: 102), individuals' scope for discretion in their self-authorship is not wholly constrained. In short, not only is control 'never total' (Clegg 1994: 163), but 'Silence is never complete' (Warren 1996: 22).

In this paper we combine an understanding that ideological forms of power operate through, for example, the availability of discourses, the frequency/intensity of their presence and the specific linking of discourse and subjectivity (Fairclough 1995; O'Doherty and Willmott 2001), with an interest in individuals' efforts to impression manage. The idea that people make choices, though not always consciously, regarding how to present themselves in social situations has long been recognized (Goffman 1959). This has led to a view of people as able to draw on a variety of discursive resources in order to construct versions of themselves that they believe to be appropriate in particular contexts (McCorkel 1998). While scant regard has been paid to silence as a strategy for the presentation of self, it has been noted that 'silence alone is not a self-evident sign of powerlessness, nor volubility a self-evident sign of domination' (Tannen 2001: 158). Complementarily, communication theorists have long recognised that silence is an aspect of effective communication (Grice 1989), while Dauenhauer's (1980: 138) analysis of the 'interpenetrating of discourse, silence, action and desire' suggests that silence can be an active performance. Our work is an

attempt to place silence centre-stage not through an analysis of the complexities of day-to-day interactions, but by using participants' interactional vignettes (Boden 1994) as sites which constitute both accounts of the self and processes of organization.

To summarise, predicated on an understanding that 'From interpersonal relationships to the structuring of organizations, silent practices are pervasive' (Clair 1998: 20), our paper is concerned with how some new graduate trainees in one organization used language to construct a perceived requirement for them to be silent, and to adjust how they expressed themselves. The next section provides an overview of our research design and methods. We then analyse how our participants invoked norms of silence, made reference to silent/non-silent 'types' of employee, gave accounts of how they were silenced, and revealed how they variously coped, resisted and conformed with 'apparent' pressures to be silent. Finally, we discuss the trainees' constructions of silence both as power effects and as impression management tactics with implications for our understanding of the dynamics of self-authorship, before drawing some brief conclusions regarding the importance of silence as a topic in organization studies.

### **Research Design**

The 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000: 136) has had a profound impact on organization studies (Grant et al 1998; Keenoy et al 1997). In particular, it has led to a recognition that language is 'perhaps the primary medium of social control and power' (Fairclough 1989: 3) and to a preoccupation with analysing how discursive practices contribute to the reproduction or transformation 'of existing social and power relations' (Fairclough 1995: 77). Our critically-informed



use of discourse analysis takes as its starting point that discourse – language use in speech and writing – is a form of social practice that both shapes and is shaped by social structures, i.e. ‘constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people’ (Wodak 2003: 187). These processes of discursive constitution are not ideologically neutral, though they are often naturalized, so that the unequal relations of power that they reproduce are characteristically opaque to participants (Van Dijk 1997). In analysing the ways that the graduate trainees talked about silence our aim is to render transparent the latent effects of their language use. At the same time, we recognise that research methods ‘are ideological in that they produce, not just re-produce meaning’, and that discourse-analytic methods themselves construct ‘a particular picture of humans’ (Tseelon 1991: 299, 313).

This research was conducted between April 1999 and October 2002 at the Midlands headquarters of one large UK high-street retail chain (here referred to by the pseudonym ‘Beta’). Access to the organization was granted by the senior management team, and those interviewed self-selected in response to an advertisement placed in an in-house newsletter. All 21 participants, 6 of whom were male and 15 female, were graduate entrants employed on a corporate training scheme. 10 of our interviewees had joined the training scheme in 1998 and 11 in 1999. At the time of the first round of interviews their ages ranged from 21 to 29, and their tenure with the organization varied from 3 months to 2 years. Each of our participants was contacted every six months and invited to participate in an interview, though not all were able to take part in every round of interviewing. Nevertheless, a total of 62 semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes duration were conducted, each of which was audio-taped

and fully transcribed using a simplified notation system (Silverman 1998). In addition, in 2000 one group discussion in which 6 of our participants took part, was video-recorded and transcribed.

The initial aim of the study was to investigate graduate trainees' accounts of their experiences as organizational newcomers, and silence emerged during the course of the project as a subject of particular interest. In most instances the result of each interview was a transcript of approximately 7000 words which we analysed using an eclectic mix of discursive approaches (Potter and Wetherell 1987). Once we had identified silence as a focal topic we began the process of detailed analysis by trawling through the transcripts identifying instances in which the participants talked about talk. We then sought to identify interpretative repertoires, i.e., 'lexicon[s] or register[s] of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 138), linked to silence. The extracts were then grouped into themes or categories, for example 'constructing silence as "normal"', 'constructing silence through exemplars' and 'accounting for not speaking up'. Once we had agreed an initial series of themes we returned to the data to search for further extracts using a method of constant comparison culled from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Our preliminary analyses were then presented to colleagues at a conference, and in the form of a widely-circulated draft manuscript, and the comments that we received inform this paper.

Graduate trainees were particularly interesting subjects for our study of constructions of silence because as newcomers discursive practices at Beta were not yet taken-for-granted by them, (and were therefore worthy of remark), and because their ambiguous

status, (being neither outsiders nor full insiders), made them more likely to be silenced (Jaworski 1993; Van Maanen and Schein 1979). While no individual carries a single subject position, being labelled as a ‘manager’ or a ‘graduate trainee’ evidently had material and practical implications. Established managers were more likely to create images of themselves which privileged their voices (as guides, mentors, advisors and informers), and the graduate trainees were complicit in their oppression believing that it was short-term only, and because it permitted them to ‘get away with’ counter-normative behaviour. This is interesting because it suggests that not only do language users actively construct and display identities (van Dijk 1997: 3), but that they are simultaneously named into subject positions which carry with them certain silent privileges and disprivileges which are rarely surfaced during ‘normal’ day-to-day organizational activities. Like the participants in Casey’s (1995: 141) study, the trainees felt that successful completion of the scheme meant learning ‘the difference between acceptable and unacceptable verbal commentary’, when to self-censor, and the subtle ‘difference between welcome speaking up and trouble making speaking out’.

## **Organizing Silence at Beta**

### **Case Context**

While official statements of senior managers suggested that Beta was a ‘blue chip’ company with an international reputation, a recent history of poor financial performance had created a perceived need for change that was manifested in statements of the kind: ‘We’re fostering a more creative and energetic culture’ (Beta Web page). One aspect of this initiative was a graduate-training scheme that was supposedly operated in order to select and develop potential future senior managers.

The company participated in the ‘milk round’ of UK universities to attract new talent and, typically, selected approximately 40 graduates from around 400 applicants each year. The scheme was administered by the ‘graduate development department’ which co-ordinated the assignment of mentors to the graduates, their placements and careers. Each trainee progressed through the organization as part of a cohort, and most (20 out of 21) said that they were in competition with each other for resources and recognition, requiring them to both fit-in, yet stand out, against rivals (Coupland 2001; Watson and Harris 1999). 19 of the graduate trainees’ described the graduate development department as more interested in surveillance and control than in developing them as managers, and said that they were often reluctant to initiate contact with personnel in this section. Consider, for example the statement by one graduate trainee that:

‘...if she tells [the] graduate development it’s a black mark on her record and that would be the end of her career / so she’s afraid’ (GT 12).

In addition, all of the participants in our study voiced scepticism regarding their supposed role, *qua* graduate trainees, in promoting better communication and introducing novel ideas into the organization. For instance, in response to a question about how to communicate new ideas our graduate trainees commented:

‘That’s something about some divisions in the Beta culture / so to speak / they do tend to crush a lot of ideas’ (GT 20).

‘if say for instance you know / you just go in challenge everybody and do everything against the norm and / I don’t think they recruit anybody like that’ (GT 17).

These preliminary statements are suggestive of the context in which our consideration of linguistically constructed norms, worker-types and acts that silence, together with evidence for both accommodation and resistance, need to be understood.

### **The Construction of Norms That Silence**

One set of discursive practices that seemed to us to have a silencing effect were what our participants articulated as normative pressures to conform. These norms or ‘behavioural blueprints’ (Ott 1989: 37) regulated peoples’ behaviour by encouraging them to act in patterned and predictable (often silent) ways. The graduate trainees’ invocation and reproduction of these linguistic practices had a dominating impact on them, serving as a third order control mechanism that influenced not just their cognitive and ethical but aesthetic and emotional responses (Wilkins 1978). A summary of these norms is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 about here please

We of course recognise that, at Beta, there was scope for ambiguity, inconsistency and misunderstanding of putative ‘norms’, and individuals’ understandings of what was shared may have been idiosyncratic. This said, our argument is that organization, in the sense of organised activity, is constructed in the day-to-day interactions between people in which normative practices are invoked, and presences and absences established (Boden 1994). This is what lends organizations the surface appearance of being structured, stable, and coherent (Schmuck 1971: 215-216). Much of the trainees’ talk about silence centred on the implications of working in what was, they said, notionally a ‘no-blame’ but actually highly politicised culture. Official documentation, and statements of senior executives, proclaimed that Beta had a no-blame ethos in which people were encouraged to be open, honest, and to admit mistakes. While some participants articulated that ‘there’s a culture of no blame here at the moment’ (GT6), comments such as ‘I think the organization is opening up a lot

more to honesty' (GT9) constructed Beta as being in transition, rather than having accomplished, this notional goal. These differences in interpretation aside, all our participants implicated rules or norms regarding what could and could not be said to different people in different ways and on different occasions. For example:

'[you] don't say things to certain people' (GT4).

'there are politics / there are things one says / and things one doesn't say' (GT18).

In addition, the trainees suggested that there were certain responses that 'you can't say...here' (GT4). For instance:

'rather than say 'I don't know how to do that' / 'I've got some ideas, can you coach me through it?' / would be more acceptable' (GT10).

Concomitantly, our participants suggested that not only was potentially valuable feedback from others often not voiced, because to provide it would be to contradict accepted institutional practices, but that sometimes ideas were not shared because they might be 'stolen':

'...certainly some of the work we've done in teams recently there's been lots of talk about feedback / I think that's still a big tool that Beta as a company is missing' (GT9).

'a lot of them tend not to listen / but if they do listen to your ideas / some of them will steal them / which is not very good' (GT20).

The graduate trainees constructed themselves as working in an organization that was not a 'pure meritocracy' (GT11) and in which they therefore had a need, and indeed were under a normative obligation, to project a positive image. As one participant described being informed by her boss:

'there are those who are good / there are those who look good / and there are those who are good and look good...you are in the are good category / what you need to be is in the are good and look good category' (GT3).

Thus, for our participants, survival at Beta was construed not simply as a matter of keeping quiet but of managing the complex, dilemmatic demand of speaking up but not speaking out of line (Coupland 2001). Further descriptions given by the trainees relating to having said too much or the ‘wrong’ thing are examined in subsequent extracts. Our participants expressed ‘fear that it [negative information] would get back to my manager’ (GT4) and suggested that ‘there’s a lot of people I should have spoken to but I wouldn’t have spoken to for fear that it wasn’t confidential’ (GT5). As one participant commenting on the company’s 360 degree feedback system said: ‘...there’s always the issue / well how honest can I be / is this going to affect my career’ (GT9). Relatedly, other participants constructed themselves as needing to be seen to be able to cope with their work, of not being associated with mistakes, and of needing to be careful in their communications with others:

‘...you don’t necessarily want to tell your boss because it might look as if you can’t cope... it doesn’t look good’ (GT2).

‘...if some people make a mistake they can’t help holding that against you / and also the politics of it all’ (GT7).

‘...occasionally...frustration leads me speaking my mind to the wrong person / I need to be a bit careful’ (GT5).

‘I think / you / you do have to be quite diplomatic sometimes / and / you know / you have to think about how you are actually going to phrase things before you say things’ (GT15).

Perhaps most clearly, the trainees’ talk about organizational norms illustrated one way in which behavioural commonalities are produced across complex organizations, and how communities assume ‘the power to torment and stifle their members’ (Isaacs 1993: 25). At the same time, however, our participants also constructed *knowing compliance* through reference to impression management activities, which suggested they were agentic. That is, that they were intentionally combining speech and silence

in sophisticated attempts to manipulate managers' perceptions of them. This is a point that we return to in our discussion.

### **The Construction of Worker-Types That Silence**

A further set of discursive practices that had a silencing effect on the graduate trainees centred on various supposed sorts of worker employed at Beta, including: 'self-starter', 'conformist', 'naïve', 'game player', and 'loose canon'. These ostensibly constituted short-hand labels for *exemplars* (Kuhn 1970) or *ideal types* (Weber 1947) of employee against which individuals could benchmark themselves. Like Kuhn's (1970) exemplars they seemed to have conceptual, observational and instrumental applications for people in their efforts to author 'appropriate' self-narratives (Ricoeur (1991) and give 'acceptable' behavioural performances (Goffman 1959). In Weick's (1995) terms, they were a way for our participants to make sense of what was expected of them, by framing and labelling clusters of behaviours in ways which enabled them 'to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate and predict' (Starbuck and Milliken 1988: 51). They were also one means by which silent compliance with the authority discourse of Beta was maintained, precluding some forms of expression merely by making known the social penalties for deviant behaviours.

Consonant with suggestions that humans are best regarded as *homo narrans* (Fisher 1984: 6), our participants tended to use each of these terms in the context of a story, often tersely expressed (Boje 1995), that indicated whether the exemplar in question was regarded positively or negatively. The ways in which our participants constructed



each category made it clear that one should be a *self-starter*, *conformist*, and a *game player*, but neither *naïve* nor a *loose canon* (see Table 2).

Table 2 about here please

The illustrative examples given in Table 2 help illumine some of the ways in which a need for silence was constructed by our participants. GT6, for example, argued that one should be a self-starter, and that such people are not reliant on others for information but instead do their own research. He constructed and tacitly accepted a *status quo* in which silent, personal information gathering was favoured over the questioning of others. GT7 suggested that there were pressures to conform at Beta, and that one *had* to defer to them. However, this comment was made in response to a question about finding things out, and perhaps illustrates how explicit questioning (of any kind) was constructed as inappropriate. Silence is preferred to doing (always remembering that speech is a form of action), something ‘out of the ordinary’, ‘really wacky’, or ‘over the top’. On another occasion, GT7 argued that being seen as wanting to ‘change things’ was likely to result in a person being labelled as ‘naïve’. Silence again seems to be the implied recommendation. GT1 asserted that while senior personnel ‘say they want people to challenge them’ it is that cadre of people ‘who play the game...who get on’. These people, he stated, ‘say the right things’, a phrase which seems to imply that there are certain things – subjects, issues, events and so forth – regarding which one should remain silent. Finally, GT5 suggested that being defined as someone who ‘doesn’t think the same way as we do’ is liable to attract the label ‘loose canon’, a description that she had heard applied to someone who had exited the organization. Again, the implication seems to be that certain forms

of vocalization are inherently risky, while, ‘...silence is often an adaptive strategy for survival’ (Lykes 1996: 163).

### **Talking About Being Silenced**

While graduate trainee silence seems generally to have been achieved subtly, by means of discursive practices that were, in part, of their own making, their silence was also enforced through coercion as well as hegemony (Clair 1998). In those instances when ‘spontaneous’ consent fails and individuals are neither actively nor passively compliant, a range of measures, including various forms of disciplinary action, may be taken against them. As Gramsci (1971: 80) explains in his discussion of parliamentary regimes, in social systems there is ‘the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, [though generally] without force predominating excessively over consent’. In organizations, the coercive apparatus includes formal organizational rules, and *ad hoc* dictats, that prescribe or proscribe certain forms of behaviour, often explicitly including linguistic expression. For example, some libraries openly post rules that create what Saville-Troike (1985: 14) has described as an ‘institutionally-determined silence’, while many different kinds of organization officially prohibit forms of talk which are deemed bullying, sexist, racist or otherwise discriminatory. Interestingly, our participants talked about themselves as being silenced not by written rules but by rules that were orally transmitted by senior personnel. 20 of the trainees invoked this practice on 53 occasions in our data. Some of these were evidently meant to apply organization-wide. For example:

‘you are told / “you / never / discuss your salary with anybody else”...it’s a very good way to shut everybody up’ (GT7).

Other rules were construed as applying only to an individual:

‘I have been told I can’t e-mail anybody above my level without / sending it to her [senior manager] first to check’ (GT4).

Rules are, however, only one means by which individuals may construct themselves as coerced into silence. Our participants also suggested that behaviours, especially those of more senior people, which they construed as derogatory, could also inhibit overt expression. 20 of the trainees invoked this practice on 86 occasions in our data. Of two particular acts of derogation that were described to us, one involved the use of laughter, the other the application of what was characterised by the participant as an extremely negative (and presumably embarrassing) label:

‘...especially somebody who says “well why don’t we do this” / you kind of get people sniggering behind their hand / so you just wait and see’ (GT7).

‘[At a presentation by an external consultant] I’m thinking well / bloody hell / I could have told you that in like 10 minutes / kind of thing / and I said / “well he [the consultant] hasn’t actually told us what he’s doing” / and he [a senior manager] just turned round and said “You are a fucking nightmare”’ (GT1).

While much attention has been focused on the role of humour in sustaining social stability (Radcliffe-Brown 1965) and, more recently, on the oppositional potential of subordinate humour (Rosen 1988), relatively few studies have focused on humour and laughter as means of facilitating managerial control (Powell 1988). Our suggestion is that the construction of a perceived threat of being laughed at is itself sufficient ‘to clarify status and power relations’ (Smeltzer and Leap 1988: 296) in a way which renders an authority structure less palpable (Dwyer 1991). Being sniggered at is a form of ridicule in which the act of laughter is generally meant to be insulting, and is often experienced by the subject as hostile and intimidating (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). Similarly, the description of an individual as ‘a fucking nightmare’, which may in some social settings evince laughter, is also overtly aggressive. The label acts as a

framing device for an audience that assigns a particular interpretation to the subject of the appellation. Such an act can be expected to embarrass the subject, confuse him/her by altering the rules for acceptable behaviour in the social situation, and to incapacitate the recipient of the message (Billig 1996). As Collinson (2002: 281) has argued, such ‘oppressive humour can have a silencing effect’.

### **Accommodating and Resisting Silence**

The trainees’ constructions of a need, on occasions, to be silent, illustrates that they had become ‘the principle of [their] own subjection’ (Foucault 1977: 203), and accommodative to the power inherent in organizationally located discursive practices. Yet, while communication as discursive action enacts and reproduces power structures that privilege and oppress, this is at best only a partial explanation for the extracts we have considered. It needs first to be complemented by an understanding that silence not only marginalizes but can also express protection, resistance and defiance, and even afford ‘opportunities for emancipation’ (Clair 1998: 20). Secondly, it should be noted that ‘accommodation’, like ‘resistance’, is a generic term for a variety of language work, observable behaviours and possible motivational states. What counts as accommodation and resistance is often ambiguous and contested. Both are ‘freighted with historical interpretation and nuance’ (Aptheker 1989: 169), and each, rather than being self-contained or stand-alone, may simultaneously envelop the other. Indeed, it seems to us that the participants’ constructed knowing compliance in their performance of accommodation, that is, resistance was implicitly constructed in the ‘distance’ created by the speaker between them and their organization. A summary of our findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 about here please

For the most part, our participants did not describe themselves as subject to the overt use of power. They instead normalised their experiences, preferring to describe themselves as quite consciously accommodating organizational demands by ‘learning the ropes’:

‘I’m probably only learning to challenge the right things / as I go along’ (GT3).

These constructions were apparently encouraged by established managers:

‘...if ever I said ‘oh I’ve done something wrong’/ she [manager] said “no, you’ve had a *learn*” (GT18).

Other respondents constructed themselves as personally responsible for silence. For example, GT3 suggested that:

‘I’m wondering now whether there were time[s] when I really shouldn’t have been asking them [questions] at all / I think that might be a Jody [the speaker] thing / rather than a / ermm / I dunno / a rule within the whole structure’.

By far the most common means of signalling compliance with perceived requirements for silence, however, was for participants to implicate the idea that their careers were at stake, and that they *had* to create the *right* impression:

‘There’s a / a lot of having to say the right things to the right people and having to make sure you / you don’t step out of line or it’s not stepping out of line its erm sort of towing the line’ (GT7).

‘I think it’s difficult as a graduate at the moment because I’m sort of creating an impression as well’ (GT9).

GT7 ‘you’ve / you’ve got to make your mark before you leave the scheme’.

GT10 ‘yeah’.

GT7 ‘you’ve got to have / really made an impression’ (Group Discussion).

Perhaps because the trainees desired and expected to become established managers at Beta, some of the more usual forms of resistance – such as returning insults,

withholding consent, questioning decisions, awkwardness, and exploiting hypocrisy – were not available to them (Fleming and Spicer 2002; Gabriel 1999). Even occasional humiliations such as being sworn at, were accepted by the trainees as legitimate aspects of their subordination. To engage in any obvious strategy of resistance would have been for them to jeopardise the organizationally-based rewards (remuneration, promotion, job security etc.) to which they aspired. Their lack of a collective sense of themselves as a discrete group with common interests may further have militated against most forms of active resistance. Indeed, subordination and the associated processes of silencing to which they were subject all appeared to be part of their understanding of what it meant to be a graduate trainee at Beta. Being appropriately silent was one integral aspect of the trainees’ self-narratives, and this, in part, explains their readiness to articulate and reproduce discursive practices that rendered them quiescent. Remaining silent allowed them to sustain their self-narratives as learning, developing, improving and most importantly *becoming* established and valued managers.

This said, the trainees were not mere subjects of the ‘panoptic dystopia of “total control”’ (Ezzamel et al 2001: 1059). Rather, they were overtly instrumental and careerist, preoccupied with their self presentation (Goffman 1959), and complicit seemingly ‘without internalizing their [senior managers’] values’ (Willmott 1993: 535). While they were not evidently cynical (Fleming and Spicer 2003) they were often sceptical (Fleming and Sewell 2002) and at times playfully ironic (Trethewey 1997). Far from being naively seduced by corporate injunctions to be good citizens, they were creatively resistant through linguistic expressions that distanced them from Beta, creating emotional and symbolic space for themselves (Collinson 1994). For

instance, one way in which the graduate trainees coped with what they perceived as demands for silence was to question them:

‘who do I speak to and how do I put it / will I get a black mark / will I get seen as a trouble maker / or something / they [other people in Beta] *don't* think ‘I’ll say what I mean and I mean what I bloody well say’ [laughter] as they say in Yorkshire’ (GT7).

Another way in which the trainees talked, arguably critically, about the restrictions to which they constructed themselves as subject was to describe corporate practices as rhetorical or mere jargon. Consider, for example:

‘...there’s a lot of rhetoric flying around about what Beta’s culture is like / we are a non-blame culture / and we are this / and we are that / and blah / blah / blah’ (GT9).

‘...there’s a difference between the rhetoric that comes from somewhere up there [indicates with hands] / which says that we should behave in this way / and the way in which we are actually managed’ (GT3).

‘I sometimes wonder how I got this job because I don’t believe all the business jargon and all that kind of thing / I think it’s rubbish’ (GT16).

Of course, such resistance was also, arguably, accommodative, because it implied some acceptance of organizationally imposed constraints. It was also largely non-disruptive, or in Ashforth and Mael’s (1998) terms, diffuse rather than targeted, facilitative not oppositional, and authorized rather than beyond the normative limits set by local discursive practices.

## **Discussion**

Predicated on the views of diverse theorists who, in different ways, have argued that ‘Exploring silence as a fundamental part of communication, culture, and conflict may illuminate the complex nature of social relations’ (Clair 1998: 4) we have sought to understand some of the ‘social and discursive boundaries among imposition, compliance, and self-silencing’ (Thiesmeyer 2003: 2). In particular, we have

illustrated how graduate trainees at Beta were silenced through their articulation of discursive practices in the form of normative pressures, ideal-types of worker, and accounts of overt attempts to quieten them through notional rules and embarrassment. Our findings have implications for the understanding of organizations as regimes of power, identity and resistance.

The trainees' talk about silence formed one aspect of the organization's ideology or rule system around which the graduate trainees oriented their behaviour. Silence was thus maintained by what Clegg (1975: 77) has referred to as a temporally and institutionally located 'substantive rationality'. Mumby (1987) has described such processes as deep structure rules instantiated in discursive practices and articulated by participants in their conversations about what could and could not be said. Except in rare instances, the processes by which the trainees were silenced were disguised or, rather, displaced by other discourses, particularly those focused on career advancement. This meant that the silencing processes, and hence the existence of excluded material, were also mostly concealed (cf. Bachrach and Baratz 1962). In part this reflected the extent to which the trainees' understandings of Beta had been effectively 'mobilized to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups' (Giddens 1979: 191), i.e. established managers. It also reflected the trainees' awareness of the range of social penalties, (such as ridicule and enforced departure), associated with non-compliance with the authority discourse at Beta.

One way of understanding why the trainees talked about silence as they did, and how they had come to do so, is by reference to Thompson's (1990) work on ideologies, i.e. 'meanings mobilized by symbolic forms' and which serve 'in specific contexts, to



establish and sustain relations of domination' (Thompson 1990: 7). For Thompson, ideologies are processes that constitute aspects of active sociohistorical conditions and which reproduce asymmetric social relations through five modes of operation - legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification - each of which is associated with a particular set of linguistic strategies. The discursive practices employed by trainees at Beta all fit into one or more of these categories. For example, the trainees' implicated norms that rationalized their silence in certain situations, told stories about worker types that established the 'appropriateness' of dominant practices, and put a 'positive spin' on occasions when they had been silenced. In these kinds of ways the trainees produced and reproduced dominant ideological formations that constituted their subjection (and their silence) as natural and appropriate. Our study thus illustrates how ideologies can constitute cognitive lenses that govern individuals' perceptions of organizational events and narrow their feasible constructions of reality (Meyer 1998).

This said, in drawing on silence as a resource in their accounts *qua* graduate trainees our participants constructed themselves as not only subject to the power of local discursive practices, but as active agents engaged in impression management activities. They were, thus, neither organizational dupes, nor prisoners of corporate-sponsored discursive practices, but reflexively able to create space for resistance even in the apparently accommodative performance of themselves as knowingly compliant employees. The fact that the trainees often talked about the normative constraints upon their ability to express themselves, and that they were encouraged to modify how they talked about their experiences at Beta, exposed the limits and fragility of the hegemonic impositions of managers. Our trainees, thus, are perhaps better represented

not simply as ‘designer employees’ (Casey 1995: 143) merely acting out scripted roles (Goffman 1959), but as co-authors of local discursive practices engaged in a responsive dialogue, and thus helping to define legitimate occasions and ways to talk (and remain silent). The broader point here is that hegemony ‘is never achieved more than partially and temporarily, as an “unstable equilibrium”... Hegemony is a focus of constant struggle around points of greatest instability...’ (Fairclough 1995: 76). Indeed, for the trainees the hegemonic assertions of the established authority discourse at Beta were still strange, - i.e. had not yet ‘become naturalized or automatized’ (Fairclough 1995: 76) - and thus there was still adequate discursive space for them to fashion ‘recalcitrant identities’ that were ‘outside of or in opposition to organizational controls’ (Gabriel 1999: 183).

Managerial identities are notoriously fragile, and conflicts between corporate rhetoric and people’s first-hand experience of work can result in a kind of ‘schizophrenia’ that in turn leads to emotional dissonance and stress. ‘Silence’ seemed, in part, to function as a resource for the graduate trainees that they drew on in elaborating the topic of themselves as newcomers, and which was, importantly, enabling. For example, their depiction of the culture of Beta as officially inviting, but in practice actually highly discouraging of new ideas from junior personnel, effectively relieved them from the responsibility to act. That is, their discursive construction of a need for silence permitted them to position themselves as legitimately able to refrain from certain communicative activity (e.g. not provide feedback), and to reasonably modify how they expressed themselves (e.g. as learning rather than making errors). This meant that they were able to secure and enhance their sense of self-identity without engaging in the ‘risky’ business of speaking up too often or when to do so might cause offence.

Such an interpretation also casts in relief the extent to which, in their ‘struggle for credibility’ (Turnbull 2001: 232), the trainees were able to skilfully ‘play-act’, temporarily internalising Beta’s ideological injunctions to behave in certain ways in order to be accepted by a community and as a defence against anxiety.

## **Conclusion**

Taking as our starting point Wittgenstein’s (1961) argument that what we know about the world is known only within language, and that we have no access to an extra-discursive ‘reality’ lying behind what is spoken, we have analysed one group of graduate trainees’ talk about silence. We have shown that, despite the power of corporate ideologies, hegemony is never absolute and ‘Resistance and change are not only possible but continuously happening’ (Fairclough 1989: 4). In so doing, we have outlined a view of organizations which contrasts with the prevailing orthodoxy that emphasises the extent to which they are pluralistic and polyphonic accomplishments, in which many different conversations take place simultaneously and sequentially (Hazen 1993). Our argument has been that while organizations are best regarded as fractured, contested and multi-layered, a focus on the resulting polyphony has meant that the silences in organizations have rarely been heard, and that by attending to who speaks, theorists and empirical researchers have all too frequently lost sight of those who remain quiet.

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**Table 1****Norms that Silence**

<b>Discursive Practice</b>	<b>No. Who Invoked it (N=21)</b>	<b>No. of Instances in Data</b>	<b>Example Question Prompt</b>
I experience pressures to conform	21	247	How has the organization changed since you joined?
I see the organization as a politicised environment	19	97	Is there something you would change about the organization?
I hear that there is a 'no blame' culture	20	43	Is this a fair place?
There are some things I cannot say	20	63	How do you communicate new ideas?
I can not always provide valuable feedback	16	30	Describe your feedback systems
I see promotion not always due to merit	19	19	Is promotion based on ability?
I must speak up but not out of line	21	47	Who would you tell if you had a problem?
I feel that negative information about me is damaging	21	74	Describe your line-manager relationships

**Table 2**  
**Worker-Types That Silence**

<b>Discursive Practice</b>	<b>No. Who Invoked it (N=21)</b>	<b>No. of Instances of Use</b>	<b>Example Question Prompt</b>	<b>Illustrative Example</b>
Self-Starter	19	25	Is it ok to say you don't know?	"I sometimes will think maybe I should do a little more research on this rather than asking someone / that's what Beta look[s] for when they are recruiting anyway / those people who are self starters / and / er not relying on others too much" (GT6).
Conformist	16	27	How do you find things out?	"...you have to kind of conform / I think / there's a definite stigma attached to doing something out of the ordinary or really wacky or over the top / you do have to conform, be conformist / and certainly that's probably driven by some of the people at the top" (GT7).
Game Player	21	48	Is promotion related to ability?	"...the people who get on are the people who say / yes / yes / yes...say the right things / not necessarily do the right things / and I find quite a few people and just think it's / it's false in a way and I think that I find really quite worrying / the people who play the games are the people who get on" (GT1).
Naïve	12	24	Tell me the worst thing that has happened to you since we last met.	"...you just get seen as being naïve rather than somebody whose got drive or / or wants to change things / it's just like / oh / she / she's a bit naïve about the business / and she'll soon learn / I think there's a bit of that" (GT7).
Loose Canon	20	50	Tell me about your expectations of your role.	"...and I have heard, oh, so-and-so is a loose canon, meaning ooh so-and-so doesn't think the same way as we do / erm in fact it turns out has since left" (GT5).

**Table 3**

**Accommodating and Resisting Silence**

<b>Discursive Practice</b>	<b>No. Who Invoked it (N=21)</b>	<b>No. of Instances in Data</b>	<b>Example Question Prompt</b>
I must project a positive image	16	30	Is there an ideal person for the organization?
I am never explicitly told to be silent	18	41	Are there social costs to asking questions?
I am responsible for my silence	16	36	How do you find things out?
I sometimes question the need for me to be silent	19	39	How do you challenge things?
I regard 'official' communications about Beta as just rhetoric	21	62	Is it okay to say 'I don't know how to do that'?