Performing and agential selves: employees as targets of control, and how we, as academics, theorise about them

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Keywords
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Performing and agential selves: Employees as producers and targets of control, and how we, as academics, theorise about them

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Keywords: control, identity, self, agency, multiple identities

Introduction
According to many management theorists, attempts by organisations to elicit greater commitment from employees by re-engineering their work values and work-related emotions have deleterious effects on employees’ sense of self. Earlier theorists in this critical vein depicted normative change programs as totalitarian and capable of brainwashing employees into a passive acceptance of organisational norms (Willmott 1993). Later theorists painted a more complex picture. Basing their analyses on the results of empirical research, theorists such as Catherine Casey (1995) and Gideon Kunda (1992) noted that while some employees did indeed uncritically accept new forms of emotional expression and self-management, others distanced themselves, adopting postures that were self-consciously fake, ambivalent and ironic. Although these latter employees were not presented as being passive dupes, the effects of culture change programs on them was also deleterious. Caught up in the play-acting, they were unable to pursue their working lives in an authentic manner. Those who resisted or attempted to distance themselves through cynicism and irony did not escape. While creating the illusion that they were ‘free’ from control, they merely reproduced the power structures in which they were enmeshed (Ezzy 2001, Fleming & Spicer 2003).

These critiques of normative change programs raise interesting questions about the nature of the organisational self and its relationships to organisational power. In this paper, we aim to address some of these questions. Rather than focussing on the nature of the power that impinges on employees’ sense of self, we focus on the intra and interpersonal dynamics that make it possible for them to adopt multiple positions or identities within and against regimes of organisational control. Given that
‘normal’ adults are expected to exhibit some flexibility of self-presentation across different social situations, when does it become morally reprehensible for organisations to incite or require employees to alter their beliefs and behaviours? The paper takes the form of a literature review, drawing together ideas that we believe are useful for theorising links between regimes of control on one hand, and employee positions, whether they be superficial play-acting, compliance, resistance, or capitulation, on the other. More specifically, we explore two realms of theorising about the self – the much-discussed multiplicity of identities that organisational actors deploy (or are forced to deploy), and the forms of agency that they can effect. Our aim is to open up these phenomena for closer scrutiny, and to link them with regimes of organisational control in a way that facilitates more finely nuanced evaluations of their political and moral ramifications.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, with reference to a well established stream of theorising in social psychology, we consider the self-dynamics that are involved in the production and maintenance of multiple identities, and relate these dynamics to some different forms of multiplicity that can be found in the literature in management and other fields. Next, we consider how agency can take different forms, and how a consideration of these forms can inform our understanding of the positions that organisational actors adopt.

Multiple selves

An image of organisational selves as multiple and fragmented often appears in the critical management literature (Kondo 1990, Knights & Willmott 1989, Collinson 2003). Multiplicity is frequently depicted as arising out of, and contributing to, insecurities and anxieties that are by-products of normative regimes of organisational control. But what does it mean to have a multiple self? Does it mean that employees present different ‘faces’ to different people as part of their daily work, or does it imply something more sinister and pathological, such as the complete loss of a coherent sense of self? To explore these different possibilities, we turn to a long tradition of theorising in social psychology that has sought to grasp the nature of the intra and interpersonal processes through which selves are constructed and maintained.

To posit the self as multiple and/or fragmented implies that the self is not a single, homogeneous entity but conceptually separable into components that can interact (or fail to interact) with each other. The idea that selves are constituted out of interacting sub-entities has a long history in psychology. In the late nineteenth century, William James made a distinction between the self as subject (or self-as-knower) and the self as object (or self-as-known) (Leary & Tangney 2003, 7). By turning the consciousness in on one’s self and treating it as an object, the self can reflect on its attributes and actions, and alter them in response to prevailing social norms. Charles Cooley’s (1902) term ‘the looking-glass self’ encapsulated those aspects of self that are developed in response to perceptions of how we think others see us (Jenkins 2004, 39-40). George Herbert Mead developed these ideas further with his concepts of the ‘I’, the ‘me’, and the ‘generalised other’. The ‘I’ is the self-as-knower, the site of a more-or-less on-going consciousness. The ‘me’ is the self as an object of consciousness. In Mead’s model, the I and the me are in frequent dialogue, as a person initiates planned actions, responds to situations, and adapts him/herself to them (Mead 1934, 200-222). Following on from Cooley, Mead also incorporated social norms into the reflexive processes through which people create and maintain a sense of self. Norms enter and permeate the self through the concept of the ‘generalised other’ – an internalised representation of other people’s attitudes that is used to monitor and censor the self’s thoughts, actions and speech (Burkitt 1991, 40-43; Mead 1934, 154-155).

In complex societies, people typically belong to different work, family, leisure and friendship groups whose norms are not necessarily consistent. Some multiplicity in self presentation is therefore considered normal, and even a sign of successful adaptation (Burkitt 1991, 53, Harter 1999). In Mead’s view, ‘a multiple personality is in a certain sense normal’, as ‘we divide our selves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances’ (1934, 142). Only people who are ‘somewhat unstable nervously’ experience a fragmentation of self (143). While Mead provides a
useful starting point for a consideration of the dynamics through which multiple selves are produced, his emphasis on successful adaptation inhibits its use for understanding how power can distort those dynamics. To create some space for the potentially troubling aspects of multiple identities, even among those who are supposedly ‘normal’, we need a more complex model.

In his discursive psychology, Rom Harré extended the work of Mead and others in ways that are useful for exploring the dynamics through which employees produce multiple selves (Burkitt 1991, 61-68, Harré 1998). Harré (1998) distinguished three interacting aspects of self, which he designated selves 1, 2 and 3. These are not separate entities as such, but linguistic devices through which humans create, alter and sustain the complex phenomena that can be grouped into the concept of ‘self’. Self 1 is similar to Mead’s ‘I’ (Harré 1998, 74-5). It is the standpoint from which we experience and act upon the world, the embodied ‘self’ that we carry through time and space. Selves 2 and 3 are both objects of consciousness, reflecting different, but related, aspects of Mead’s ‘me’. Self 2 is a person’s own ‘self-concept’, a ‘loose knit cluster’ (70) of beliefs about oneself, ‘expressed, however inaccurately, in the content of confessions, self-descriptions, autobiographies and other reflexive discourses’ (76). Harré’s third self is implicit in Mead, but more fully developed in the work of Erving Goffman (1959). This is the self as it is presented to the world. This self may be a direct and unmediated expression of self 2, or a consciously manipulated image, in which a person presents a self that is different to the self 2 as it is privately known and selectively revealed. Harré’s scheme thus opens up a more complex conceptual landscape in which to explore issues associated with the multiplicity of selves that organisational actors are capable of experiencing and producing.

When discussing multiplicities of selves, clarifying which selves are implicated helps to refine our critique of the conditions that produce them. Multiplicity of self 1, as occurs in amnesia and multiple personality disorders, is rare and pathological. Discussions of these phenomena belong more properly in the disciplines of psychiatry and neuroscience, and will not concern us further here. The aspects of self that are interesting for examining regimes of organisational and self-control are those found in selves 2 and 3, and in particular, in the relationship between them. If multiplicity in self 1 is rare and pathological, multiplicity in self 3 is common, ‘normal’ and even expected. People who fail to exhibit any adaptability in behaviour in response to different social situations risk being viewed as simple and naive, or rigid and socially inept. On the other hand, individuals who exhibit too much multiplicity, who fail to demonstrate any continuity of self-presentation at all, also provoke disapproval, as do those who deliberately adopt ‘false’ personae in order to manipulate others (Harré 1998, 150). Psychologically healthy and morally responsible adults are expected to portray a certain consistency and genuineness in their self-presentations, and sufficient social skill to adapt their selves 3 to different situations and roles (Lewis 2003, Taylor 1989). This involves maintenance of a relatively robust and coherent self 2 that can accommodate and weather the social and organisational pressures that incite the production of multiple selves 3, some of which do not sit comfortably with the dearly held private preferences and beliefs that reside within the ‘true’ self.

When does the pressure to produce multiple selves become morally reprehensible? Which selves are implicated? Should we deplore regimes of organisational control that compel employees to display different, and sometimes contradictory selves 3? Or does the moral reprehensibility lie elsewhere – in the invasion of self 2, or in the skewing of the relationship that people try to effect between their private and public personae?

First of all, we should recognise that a certain amount of inauthenticity in the presentation of self 3 helps to oil the wheels of social interaction. In a paper examining how the ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ rhetorical strategies of organisational actors are linked to different aspects of the self, Sillince et al. (2003, 7) suggest that ‘if human communication were completely “authentic”, social interaction would often be hugely awkward as the conflict between values would constantly come to the surface’. On the other hand, ‘a society that consisted solely of social game playing would be a nightmarish scenario – like being condemned to live a continual episode of Sex in the City’. In the pursuit of personal and organisational goals, and in the interests of avoiding conflict, actors switch between authentic and inauthentic rhetoric. According to Sillince et al, authentic rhetoric emerges out
of a person’s ‘biographical identity’, a version of self that is akin to Harré’s self 2. These are acts of communication in which a person transmits what s/he believes to be his/her ‘true’ beliefs, values and preferences, at least those that are ‘true enough’ at that particular point in time. The biographical self, though shifting and multi-faceted, is an enduring one – an identity that is experienced and developed over a lifetime. Strategically deployed inauthentic rhetoric is linked to a more situationally variable and transient ‘social self’ that is concerned with saving face, avoiding conflict and managing impressions. This self is akin to Harré’s self 3. Sillince et al. claim that the use of rhetorical strategies in this way enables organisational actors to flexibly enact multiple selves while maintaining a sense that somewhere behind the performances lies a relatively coherent and continuous self that endures through the transience.

Inauthentic rhetoric can clearly play a benign and even beneficial role in social interaction. It does not necessarily have a corrosive effect on an employee’s sense of self. The social self that is tactful and playful is superficial, and does not penetrate far, if at all, into the biographical self that is the home of a person’s ‘true’ feelings, attitudes and beliefs. In her classic study of emotional labor, Arlie Hochschild (1983) depicted a different sort of relationship between selves 2 and 3, one that is more costly to the employees that are required to enact it. Hochschild focuses on jobs that require employees to ‘induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (1983, 7). Although she does not use the same terms as Mead, Goffman and Harré, much of her discussion is compatible with the framework outlined above. In Hochschild’s terminology, workers in service or other jobs that require frequent smiles and the performance of a pleasant demeanour may adopt a ‘surface act’, in which ‘the expression on my face or the posture of my body feels “put on”. It is not “part of me”’ (36). In other words, the emotional display is confined to self 3 – the presented self. Workers who do emotional labor may also engage in ‘deep acting’, in which they consciously manipulate their feelings so that they can put on a more convincing display. This ‘sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality’ (7) – a self that is akin to Harré’s self 2.

We all engage in deep acting in the course of our daily lives. We try to get into a ‘party mood’ to please our hosts, we try to pull ourselves out of depression or transform our feelings for a lover who has left us. However, Hochschild warns that constant manipulation of emotions in response to organisational demands can be harmful, especially for those who ‘identify[ ] too wholeheartedly with the job’ (187). This type of worker, who ‘has little or no awareness of a “false self”’ is liable to become stressed and burnt out as s/he loses the capacity to differentiate between the real and performed self. Hochschild advocates instead a ‘healthy estrangement, a clear separation of self from role’ (188). Workers who can achieve this differentiation ‘clearly define for themselves when they are acting and when they are not; they know when their deep or surface acting is “their own” and when it is part of the commercial show’ (188). The search for authenticity, for the ‘unmanaged heart’ is a romantic quest, writes Hochschild, and a naïve and self-defeating one in our complex society.

In contrast to Sillince et al. and Hochschild, many writers on the contemporary nature of organisational selfhood do not distinguish between the different aspects of self that are mobilised and/or affected by regimes of organisational control. Indeed, attempts to pick apart and analyse these aspects of self are sometimes explicitly rejected as humanist and essentialist (Fleming & Spicer 2003, Knights 2000, Rose 1996). With the investigation of self-dynamics off-limits, concentration within the critical perspective is often focussed on the disciplinary mechanisms of normative control from which there is no escape. A good example of this type of analysis is found in Fleming and Spicer’s (2003) paper on worker cynicism. Within this framework, claims that workers adopt cynical attitudes to defend themselves against power are questioned because they ‘rest upon an implicit humanism [in which] the identity being protected is treated almost as if it is outside of power’ (160). Because selves in all their manifestations are products of power, it makes little sense to differentiate between those who adopt cynical stances and those who don’t. What matters is the performance of the organisationally prescribed tasks. Fleming and Spicer give an example of a McDonalds worker who wears a ‘McShit’ T-shirt under her uniform, and state that:
even though our cynical McDonalds employee has transgressive tastes in clothing that dis-identify with her employer, she acts as if she believes in the prescribed values of the organisation and it is at this level that cultural power is operating in its most potent form (166).

This focus on action rather than belief is valuable because it forces us to question our common sense assumptions about the self and its relationship to power. However, by focussing on action, we can lose a sense of what work means to employees. An employee who adopts a cynical posture experiences his/her job differently to an employee who whole-heartedly and emotionally identifies with the prescribed company norms. The differences in experience may have consequences for the maintenance of a viable sense of self within the power structures of organisations. These are humanist notions to be sure, but notions which still have salience for many of us who work in organisations.

Not all critical scholars consider worker interiority to be completely off-limits as a topic of analysis. Indeed, Fleming and Spicer find it difficult to sustain their own sceptical position, noting that ‘we often do experience a sense of interiority, a phenomenological space that we feel to be our very own’ (169). Nevertheless, a reluctance to enter into and explore (rather than just assert) what Eliot (2001, 147) has called ‘the internal instabilities and fissures of the self’ means that the question of when and how multiplicity stops being a fairly ‘normal’ and even advantageous aspect of social interaction in a complex society, and begins to be something harmful and pathological is not really addressed. Thus, as well as the different positions adopted by Sillince et al, Hochschild and Fleming and Spicer, described above, we can find the following in discussions of ‘multiple identities’:

a) Robertson and Swan (2003, 847) claim that highly educated workers in a knowledge intensive firm make creative use of multiple identities. They ‘rely upon switching between identities in order to reduce the dissonance generated by the ambiguous environment’.

b) Thomas and Davies (2005) argue that employees in the UK public services use their capacity to construct multiple identities as a form of resistance. That is, they ‘draw on alternative subject positions in asserting their identities in the organization, motivated by the difference between the subject positions offered with New Public Management and individual interest’ (690).

c) Collinson (2003, 534) notes that many people experience ‘discomfort and awkwardness when previously discrete “life worlds” come together, say when friends meet parents, or when work meets home’.

d) Casey (1995, 150) claims that regimes of normative control in organisations, that play on deep-seated desires for emotional connection, foster the development of a ‘fragile corporate self’ that is ‘acutely ambivalent and conflicted’.

e) Psychologists West and Martin (1994, 2/14) claim that people who are subjected to intense stressors, such hostage situations, physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, or who are enticed into cults, can develop ‘pseudo-identities’ in which they are ‘induced to express beliefs and exhibit behaviours far different from what their lives up to then would have logically or reasonably predicted’.

f) Girodo (1985, 1991) has studied undercover police operators, whose work requires an intense and demanding form of ‘deep acting’, as they assume fake criminal identities. He found that a large minority of those who do this type of work experience ‘personality disturbances’, ‘role confusion’ and ‘depersonalisation’, as they lose track of who they ‘really’ are.

Clearly, these six examples give markedly different portrayals of the experience of multiplicity. In examples (a) and (b), employees used the multiple identities available to them in a creative way. There is a sense of robustness in the accounts of identity from which these examples are drawn.
Robertson and Swan (2003, 853) noted, for example, that the subjects in their study ‘have rare expertise and skills that had developed over time such that their sense of self or model of self-knowledge is firmly grounded in their scientific or technological expertise’. This grounding enabled the creative deployment of surface performances that did not seriously erode the integrity of the ‘real’ self, as it was perceived.

With example (c), we see discomfort entering the picture. Collinson’s example is a familiar one, but the impact of friends meeting family or work meeting home on one’s sense of self, though sometimes embarrassing and unsettling, is fairly benign and mundane compared to the situations depicted in examples (d) to (f). Harré (1998, 152) castigates writers in the post-modern vein who depict these common multiplicities in roles (wife, mother, daughter, worker, friend) as somehow ‘unsatisfactory, as if relative to some unspecified level of the tidy life, the ordinary lives of women... and men … ought to be remedied’. He sees no way of remedying the situation, as it is a necessary aspect of the complex but interesting lives many of us lead. Like Hochschild, he views the hankering after perfectly unified identities as unrealistic and romantic.

Examples (d) to (f) depict circumstances in which the integrity of the self is more seriously compromised. We have included examples from outside the field of management to broaden the range of situations that call for, or impose, the enactment of multiple selves, and to provide maximum contrast between situations in which multiplicity may be seen to be beneficial, and those in which it is associated with psychological harm. Multiplicity of identities is clearly not a homogeneous phenomenon, but one which can be enacted and experienced in diverse ways. Rather than producing blanket condemnations or celebrations of the phenomenon, we argue that analysts should pay closer attention to nature of the multiplicity, and the degree to which it impinges on the integrity of self 2 – that part of the self that we construe as the home of our ‘real’ selves. As Anthony Giddens noted, our ontological security, that is, our sense that we have a reliable grasp of the ‘reality’ of ourselves and others, is tightly coupled to our capacity to produce a more-or-less continuous narrative in which we tell ourselves who we ‘really’ are (Giddens 1991, 47 - 63).

Forms of Agency

By exploring self dynamics in terms of selves 1, 2 and 3, we can appreciate how identities are simultaneously produced, experienced and enacted. So far, we have concentrated on how organisational power relations facilitate and require employees to adopt and enact multiple identities, sometimes in a surface manner and sometimes more deeply. As was evident in the discussion above, however, identities are produced within organisational contexts. The multiplicity, fragmentation, compliance, resistance, cynicism and irony that management scholars detect among their research subjects are not just properties of the self, but enactments within the complex social milieus of the organisations in which those subjects work. To explore how these properties of organisational selfhood are linked to action, we need to examine the forms of agency that organisational subjects can effect. That is, we need to investigate employees as producers of control and well as its targets (Gabriel 1999).

Like ‘the self’, agency is a complex concept that has been the subject of much debate, especially in relation to its dualistic partner, structure (Dawe 1978, Sewell 1992). As Alan Dawe (1978, 365) points out, tensions between agency and structure are a part of our everyday experience:

While we never cease to experience ourselves as acting, choosing, purposeful, aspiring human beings, we also never cease to be aware of the factory gates closing behind us, the office days that are not our own, the sense of oppression by organizations nobody runs, the ‘not-enough world’ we are forced to inhabit most of the time.
In other words, the agency that we experience and are capable of effecting is almost always constrained. To imagine that it could be otherwise is to fall into another romantic trap, similar to that which entices those who hanker after a completely authentic self.

Like the self, agency has multiple facets which can be analytically ‘disaggregated’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998). Just as disaggregating the self into selves 1, 2 and 3 enabled us to explore some diverse meanings and implications of ‘multiple selves’, a consideration of different forms of agency can help us build a more complex picture of organisational action and how it can contribute to and produce multiplicity, fragmentation, compliance, resistance, cynicism and irony.

Attempts to define different forms of agency date back at least to Max Weber, who identified four types – instrumentally rational, value-rational, affectual and traditional (quoted in Dawe 1978, 392). Although there is much less consensus regarding forms of agency among social theorists than there is among theorists exploring different aspects of self (see above), some common themes do emerge. Weber’s scheme focuses on individual actions, as does Emirbayer and Mische’s much more recent attempt to delineate different forms of agency. The latter identifies three ‘elements’ of agency that can be differentiated along a temporal dimension: (a) The iterational element, found in habits and routines. This form of agency is informed by the past, and is similar to Weber’s traditional action. (b) The projective element, which is ‘the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action’ (971) and (c) the practical evaluative element, which is ‘the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action in response to the emerging demands’ of the situation (971). All the forms of agency identified by Weber, Emirbayer and Mische can be found in organisations, and provide strategies through which actors produce, reproduce, subvert and challenge mechanisms of control. However, to get a more useful handle on how conflicting and cross-cutting forms of agency might variously produce compliance, resistance, ambivalence and so on, it helps to have a scheme that focuses more strongly on the interactive and projective dimensions of agency.

If we accept the three-fold view of the self presented above, then we can locate an aspect of ourselves that we identify as the home of our personal and idiosyncratic abilities, preferences and beliefs. This aspect of self effects an agency in its immediate environment which seeks firstly to express this self, and secondly to shape the environment as far as possible to suit the self’s personal preferences. A person’s capacity to do so is obviously influenced by his/her social location. We can illustrate and expand on these points by returning to the example of the McShit T-shirt wearing employee. Donning the T-shirt can be viewed as a conscious act of defiance, an expression of ‘true’ beliefs. It is, first and foremost, a form of agency effected within the realm of the close and personal. Following the terminology of Laurent Thévenot (2001) who disaggregated agency along a dimension of micro to macro social engagement, we can call this personal realm a ‘regime of familiarity’. Within this regime, our actions are primarily oriented towards producing comfort and convenience among the objects and routines that are the closest to us in our home and work environments.

Wearing a subversive T-shirt is not just a matter of personal expression and preference, however. It is, potentially at least, a form of communication, and with this mode of agency we enter an interactive realm, which Thévenot identified as a ‘regime of regular planned action’. This is a zone of more or less mutually comprehensible and coordinated collective action and interaction. As actors engage in this regime, they must choose how to present themselves. Do they present a self 3 that is more-or-less a direct reflection of self 2 (that is, show the T-shirt) or do they present a ‘false’ self (hide the T-shirt) in order to avoid undesirable consequences or to pursue particular goals that are more obtainable with the presentation of a false self? In this regime, the projective and practical evaluative elements of agency identified by Emirbayer and Mische come into play, as actors imagine and evaluate possible futures and shape their actions and reactions accordingly. Unlike Emirbayer and Mische’s individualistic scheme, however, Thévenot’s regime of regular planned action acknowledges the presence of other actors, whose intentions and actions may support or thwart whatever purposes a single actor might work towards.
As well pursuing actions within the close and personal and the interactive realm of situated collective action, actors in organisations also frequently effect, and are affected by, a third form of agency that is geared towards the construction of social arrangements that transcend time and space. This is a ‘public regime of justification’ (Thévenot 2001) where broader organisational and community rights and responsibilities are negotiated. Here we find policies, laws and regulations, and bodies of professional and lay knowledge that legislate what is normal, proper and good. These are the results of an increasingly prevalent form of agency, in which actors speak not for themselves, but on behalf of others and their perceptions of the ‘greater good’. As Meyer & Jepperson (2001, 107) note:

a striking feature of the modern system is the extreme readiness with which its actor participants can act as agents for other actors. They can do this, with rapidity and facility, as employees and consultants, as friends and advisors, as voters and citizens. [...] And they do it much more often and more easily than do participants in less rationalised cultural systems. Ready opining, on the widest range of issues is a notable feature of modern individuals and is distinctive to them.

This propensity and incitement to act on behalf of others is an outcome of the historical processes that have produced western liberal democracies. Citizens today are held responsible for themselves and others. In a way, moves within organisations to encourage greater commitment from workers are a manifestation of this same trend (Meyer & Jepperson 2000). Responsibility for performance is devolved downwards from chief executives to all employees, and service workers who interact with the public are expected to take upon themselves the task of presenting a favourable impression of the whole company.

Organisational actors inhabit all three of Thévenot’s regimes simultaneously, and mobilise different aspects of self across them. Compliance, resistance, ambivalence, cynicism and irony emerge where regimes interpenetrate. Expressing one self in the regime of familiarity (‘I hate McDonalds’) while enacting another self in the regime of planned regular action (being a compliant employee) invokes an attribution of cynicism. If our employee were to wear her T-shirt openly, we could call her resistant, and the regime of regular planned action would be disrupted. Her boss may then draw on a regime of public justification, that is, trans-situational rules about ‘proper’ behaviour among McDonalds employees, to censure her, this censure again being carried out within the regime of regular planned action. If the employee loses her job, her regime of familiarity may be disrupted, as the flow of money that she needs to maintain her home and bodily comforts is interrupted. If she joins an anti-globalisation movement that demonises McDonalds and all it stands for (www.mcspotlight.org), she herself engages in a regime of public justification, but in quite a different way to her boss, who used company policy to dismiss her.

The story of the cynical but compliant McDonalds worker can be used to argue that cynicism functions as an ideology because the illusion of freedom that it provides allows the power structures of capitalism to continue unabated. This is a convincing and valid argument, but it an analysts’ interpretation. It exists within an academic regime of public justification in which those of us who attend conferences and write for critical management journals debate the moral and political ramifications of organisational control. As we engage in this activity, however, we can lose an appreciation of the lives that our research subjects lead. The theoretical frameworks discussed in this paper provide tools for dissecting subjects’ experiences and modes of being, so that we can examine how different organisational contexts produce compliance, resistance, multiplicity and cynicism. These are not (just) aspects of ideology visible to analysts, but modes of being and acting that emerge somewhat inevitably out of the tensions produced by organisational actions that span regimes of pragmatic engagement – from the close and personal to the public and contested.
Summary

In this paper, we have taken as our starting point the observation that employees respond to normative culture change in a variety of ways, many of which are claimed to be deleterious. Rather than using these responses as a springboard to criticise the programs, we have focused our attention on two related aspects of employee selfhood that are mobilised and implicated in normative control – identity and agency. We have disaggregated these concepts into component parts in order to delve more deeply into the variety of ways that organisational actors may experience and effect their identities and their agency within and against the power relations in which they are enmeshed. With respect to identities, we have drawn on work in social psychology to present a framework for thinking about the variable effects and implications of the multiplicity of identities that many organisational actors adopt. Such a framework can be used to refine our critiques of situations that facilitate or require the development and display of multiple selves.

Agency, like identity, is not a unitary phenomenon. We draw on recent theorising about agency to show how a consideration of the different regimes within which actors attempt to effect agency can help account for multiplicity, ambivalence, cynicism, compliance, change and so on. Mechanisms of organisational control do not exist in some abstract space from which they flow directly into employees’ psyches, producing the variable effects that critical management scholars have observed. Instead, employees, going about their daily business, produce these effects as they juggle identities and actions – their own and others’ – across a range of situations.

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