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Chapter 9
Power, discourse and the self

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Objectives

At the end of this chapter you should be able to:

1. differentiate between mainstream, structuralist and post-structuralist understandings of power
2. explain the relationship between discourse and disciplinary power
3. understand how identities, events, objects and activities are interpreted through discourse
4. use the concept of resistance to illustrate the multiplicity of discourse
5. evaluate the explanatory value of post-structuralist accounts of power.

9.1 Introduction

In Chapters 7 and 8 we examined a variety of metaphors that can be used to understand organizations: structures, systems and cultures. As we have seen, changes in organizational environments and in the demands confronting contemporary organizations have meant that methods of analysing them have increasingly had to account for the complexity of the processes involved. We also introduced some of the tensions and debates that characterize organizational analysis, in particular, problematizing functionalist approaches on the grounds that they privilege managerial perspectives on organizations and organizing. In addition to the criticism of functionalism, there are also ongoing debates about *ontology*: what is the nature of an organization? Mainstream accounts of organizations, such as structure, systems and culture, promote the idea that these dimensions are real: that they are concrete, observable and, more importantly, measurable. However, as we have pointed out in the last two chapters, there are problems with these 'realist' assumptions. In this chapter, we introduce a different perspective on organizations, one that challenges the idea of 'realism', instead arguing that organizations are *social constructions*.

There are very many approaches to organizational analysis that fall under the rubric of social constructionism, and these have generally been grouped together under the label 'post-structuralism'. Post-structuralist approaches are so called not only because they challenge the 'realism' of the idea of structure, but because they see organizations as *products* of the way individuals make sense of their social worlds. From this perspective, the structure of an organization does not exist in any material sense, it is manifested or realized in the way that people think and in their behaviour. So, for example, an organization chart may show different hierarchical positions, from chief executive down to grass-roots operatives, but these positions are realized because of the behaviour of individuals in those roles. Grass-roots operatives, for example, would generally not park their car in the space designated 'chief executive' and go into meetings and attempt to chair them. But, in principle, they could if they wished to (though they may well be sacked as a consequence). Of course, positions in hierarchies also carry with them certain material realities, such as a car parking space (or not), a salary commensurate with the position occupied, a space to work in that is likely to vary in accordance with status, and so forth. However, these materialities do not in themselves produce hierarchies, rather they are *signifiers* (see Reflection Box 9.1) or *symbolic* of hierarchical positions.

From a post-structuralist perspective, the task in organizational analysis is not so much to identify features of organizations, such as structure or culture, but rather to understand how people *make sense* of their organizational lives. One of the corollaries of this type of analysis is that features of organizations that we take for granted as common sense, like structure or culture, are *deconstructed* in order to identify their underlying assumptions and to examine the ways that they have achieved common-sense status. Post-structuralism in effect argues that there are likely to be multiple methods of understanding and analysing organizations, but that those that come to dominate our thinking are likely to be those that serve the interests of powerful groups. To this extent, post-structuralism represents a radically pluralistic view of organizations (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of pluralism vs unitarism in organizational analysis), which requires a different set of concepts and analytic techniques to those that we have discussed throughout this textbook. In this chapter we are going to focus on three analytical concepts that are central to post-structuralist analysis: power, discourse and self. In the first

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section, on power, we examine mainstream and structural approaches to understanding power before we turn to the post-structuralist view. In doing so, we illustrate the different assumptions that are made about power and what these imply about behaviour in organizations. We conclude the chapter by examining the implications of post-structuralist analysis for organizational behaviour and its management.

REFLECTION BOX 9.1 Semiotics

Semiotics is central to post-structuralist analyses of organizations and is the study of symbols. Language is the primary focus because this is what humans use to make sense of the world, themselves and each other, and it is essentially symbolic. Words correspond to objects or events in the world, but the words that we use to make this correspondence are largely arbitrary. There is no particular reason, for example, why the word 'tree' should correspond to, or symbolize, trees that we can see, feel or touch growing in gardens or forests. In semiotics, this correspondence is referred to as a relationship between *signifier* and *signified*. The signifier is the word or symbol that we use to indicate a particular object or event, and the signified is the object or event itself.

In semiotics signifiers may well be words, but they can also be objects or events themselves. So, for instance, as we pointed out above, a large office with a maple desk and a big leather chair will generally, in our culture, signify status. A march on 11 November signifies the tragedy and courageous acts that took place in the two world wars, of the twentieth century.

Because the relationship between signifier and signified is seen to be arbitrary in post-structuralism, this means that signifiers can have a potentially infinite array of meanings, but equally, especially in the semiotics of the social world, there is no particular reason why a certain signified should have a fixed meaning. What becomes central to the analysis is understanding why some signifiers and signifieds succeed in securing the meaning of certain events, objects or persons. So, for instance, most people in organizations are satisfied if they are expected to perform their tasks in certain ways on the grounds of *efficiency.* From a semiotic point of view we could say that the task and the method of its execution comprises the signifier, and the efficiency gained through these activities is the signified. However, we could start to ask questions such as 'What does efficiency actually mean?' One interpretation could be that it means doing the task in a way that enables the organization to maximize the value for money that it gets out of its staff so that it can make money. But this meaning is a product of capitalist ideology: the notion that organizations *should* make profits.

Stop and think

1. **What other meanings of efficiency might there be and in what contexts might these 'make sense'?**

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9.2 Power

Mainstream approaches to power

In mainstream organizational behaviour, power has traditionally been understood as a personal attribute or a product of one or more relationships (see Reflection Box 9.2).

> **REFLECTION BOX 9.2 Defining power**
>
> Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance. (Weber, 1947)
>
> A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. (Dahl, 1957)
>
> Power is defined as the capacity to effect (or affect) organisational outcomes. (Mintzberg, 1983)
>
> What do these definitions imply about the nature of power? First, each assumes that power is a commodity or resource in the possession of some or other person. Second, there is an idea that power can be used to influence people or outcomes in some way or, more simply, that power can be used to bring about changes in behaviour. Third, each definition shows us that power works within a relationship between two or more people. So although we might, for instance, describe the president of the United States as a powerful man, the effects of his power can be shown only within specific relationships he has – for instance, between himself and the staff of the Oval Office.
>
> **Stop and think**
> **If power is a commodity, as implied in these definitions, how do we account for the fact that that some groups in society are more likely than others to be able to acquire or mobilize power? For instance, the boards of directors in very many blue-chip companies in the UK are comprised of white men who attended public school.**

Pfeffer's approach

In understanding power, mainstream approaches have tended to focus on how power is acquired and mobilized. One such approach comes from the work of Pfeffer (1978), who has identified several ways in which groups in organizations can acquire power. These organizational power bases are:

- providing resources
- coping with uncertainty
- being irreplaceable
- affecting decision processes
- being central.

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Providing resources

Groups in organizations can acquire power if they are able to provide an important resource that creates dependency on the part of other groups. Resources can be any expendable commodity such as money, time, expertise, technology, skills, knowledge or authority. Looked at in this way, every group in every organization has some power, though clearly some groups have resources that are more highly valued than others. Managers are often the most powerful groups in organizations because they possess money in the form of budgets, and the authority to determine how those budgets should be allocated.

Coping with uncertainty

As we saw in the previous chapter, many organizations operate in conditions of high uncertainty, and find it difficult to predict what is going to happen or interpret what is going on. Groups that are able to reduce any of the uncertainties an organization might face are likely to acquire power. For example, in organizations planning downsizing (redundancies), the human resources department may acquire power because it will have knowledge about where redundancies are likely to occur.

Being irreplaceable

Groups and departments that have knowledge and expertise that are exclusive to them can often be powerful. Departments that possess complex technical skills fit into this category. One can think of engineers, computer technicians and systems analysts, and, of course, accountants. The skills that these groups provide cannot be acquired readily by others, and working life can become difficult for everyone if these experts are not available. If something goes wrong with your computer or car, you may not have the expertise to put things right and thus become totally dependent on experts.

Affecting decision processes

People are also powerful if they have some say about what happens in an organization. Morgan (1986) suggests that there are three ways in which people can influence organizational decision-making: by controlling decision *premises*, *processes* or *issues*. Controlling decision premises involves influencing the issues that the organization perceives as important. One way of doing this is to direct attention away from the goal the group is trying to attain. For instance, a department campaigning for an increase in staff numbers might achieve this goal by default, by directing attention to an increase in customer complaints, for example.

Controlling decision processes is a more direct influence tactic, where a group will attempt to influence how the organization makes its decisions. For instance, a department might insist that it is invited to policy meetings from which it has hitherto been excluded.

Finally, controlling decision issues can be achieved by presenting information in specific ways. For instance, reports that will influence decision-making can be written in ways that emphasize some issues and gloss over others.

Being central

People at the operating core of an organization are also likely to be powerful. The operating core is that group of people responsible for conducting the organization's main business, be that the

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manufacture or production of goods and services. In times of industrial unrest, for instance, the power of core groups was used to improve conditions of employment. A study by Robinson and McIlwee (1991) showed that in US engineering companies, professional engineers were central when companies were structured organically, but not when they were structured bureaucratically (see Chapter 7 for explanations of these structural forms). They further found that when engineers were central, female engineers were far less likely to be promoted compared to their male counterparts. Robinson and McIlwee concluded that this was because the power base of the engineers enabled them to emphasize masculine aspects of the role, such as 'tinkering with machinery'.

Power bases and differences of interest

Many of the disagreements between groups in organizations stem from attempts to secure a power base or render an existing one more secure. These attempts cause groups and individuals to 'jockey for position' as they attempt to prove that they are central or irreplaceable. Some groups deliberately make themselves irreplaceable by not committing any of their expertise to paper but keeping it inside their heads. At other times conflicts occur because groups are fighting to protect their position and stop others moving in.

Of course, having a power base does not automatically mean that power can be exercised. Exercising power depends on a number of things, including the realization of power and its mobilization (Batstone *et al.*, 1978). For power to be exercised by any specific group, it needs first to recognize that it actually *possesses* power and, second, that it has the means to mobilize that power. Realizing power is one thing, but mobilizing it is quite another.

Rewards and sanctions

At least one important factor in the decline of strikes in the UK as a manifestation of industrial conflict was the legislation passed by the governments of 1979–97 that aimed to curb the power of the trades unions. This legislation rendered illegal certain types of strike-related behaviour, such as the practice of secondary picketing, which means carrying on a dispute at a place other than one's own place of work. It also enabled employers to take legal action against unions that were deemed to be breaking these new laws. Thus the mobilization of power is dependent upon what the group perceives to be the likely costs and benefits of mobilizing its power. A group that perceives it has more to lose than to gain is unlikely to be willing to take any action even if it believes its power base is very strong. Thus the mobilization of power is highly dependent on whether the rewards of taking action (say, gaining a pay rise) are more likely to be realized than potential sanctions (say, being sacked).

Structural bases of power

In Reflection Box 9.2 we asked you to consider why it is that some groups in society are seemingly more able than others to acquire and mobilize power. One answer to this question derives from structuralism: social structures, particularly class, result in power differences between different groups on the basis that people of a higher class have wealth and resources that enable them to promote and sustain their own interests. People of the lower classes, who do not have access to such resources, lack the means to realize their interests. This structuralist view of power is closely associated with the works of Karl Marx (1967). Among other things, Marx

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believed that the power inequalities created by class structures would eventually be challenged by the lower classes, who would come to realize that their interests were being severely compromised by the class relation embodied in capitalist modes of production. In very simple terms, Marx believed that the capitalists (owners of factories and wealthy entrepreneurs) had one primary goal: to make as much profit as possible by buying and using labour at the cheapest possible price. Labourers, on the other hand, wanted to make as much in the way of wages as they could, without working too hard. This fundamental contradiction between the interests of capital and labour, was, Marx believed, the kernel for the generation of class conflict and, ultimately, the collapse of capitalism.

Clearly, Marx's prediction has not (as yet) come to be realized. A central preoccupation for those taking a structural view of power has therefore been to understand why it is that people appear to consent to social systems that apparently compromise their interests. One central construct within this field has been that of 'false consciousness'. This is the idea that people simply do not realize that they are acting in ways that compromise their own interests, due to the effects of ideology. Ideology refers to ideas that are systematically underpinned by logic (Jackson and Carter, 2000). For example, I might believe that all men with brown hair are aggressive. I meet a man, Dave, who has brown hair, so by my logic he must be aggressive. This simple (but silly) example, illustrates ideology. However, other ideologies that operate in society are far less easy to recognize. For example, capitalist ideology contains the idea that the raison d'être of firms should be to make a profit. Most of us believe it to be logical if we hear that a firm has shut down because it is no longer profitable. Likewise, scientific ideology contains the idea that facts are those events or objects that are empirical (i.e. can be experienced). Thus, most of us will believe something to be true if it can be 'proven' through experience, but will be sceptical if it cannot. These are both examples of dominant taken-for-granted ideologies that have a huge impact on the way we live our lives, but few of us question the ideas that are central to these ideologies, even though there are other ideas that run counter to them (see Reflection Box 9.3).

REFLECTION BOX 9.3 Ideology: Einstein's theory of relativity

All of us living on this planet know that if we drop something it will eventually fall to the ground if left to its natural devices. During the Enlightenment period, which started at around the end of the sixteenth century, and heralded the birth of modern science, this 'fact' came to be of massive interest to scholars and thinking men (and probably women as well). Eventually, in 1666 Isaac Newton developed his theory of gravity. The reason why things drop to the ground when they are released from being held is because there is a force, gravity, that acts on them, causing their descent. Gravity is a commonly accepted 'fact', backed up by scientific ideology – we all experience it, so we believe it.

Einstein, in wanting to understand why planets in the solar system behave in the way they do, became dissatisfied with the idea of gravity as expressed in Newton's mathematics, because this did not fully explain how planets moved in relation to each other. He developed his theory of relativity to better account for these movements, which also produced an alternative view of gravity. The simple explanation of (general) relativity theory runs something like this, and beautifully illustrates ideology:

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Imagine a race of people who have been born and brought up in a lift that is situated in a building of infinite height. The lift is continually accelerating upwards. The people in the lift can't see outside it, so they don't know they are in a lift, they believe they are living on a planet. When they drop things in the lift, these fall to the floor of the lift. We observers know that this is because the lift is accelerating upwards. However, the lift-dwellers, unable to have the benefit of our perspective, invent a force that accounts for this phenomenon: they call it gravity.

Einstein's general theory of relativity states, in simple terms, that gravity is the effect of the earth's acceleration through space-time.

Stop and think

A dominant ideology that affects many of us in work organizations is that our personalities and abilities render us suitable for some roles and less suitable for others. However, the Channel 4 programme *Faking It* illustrates how, with enough support, we can come to be good at, and even enjoy, roles that apparently run counter to our predispositions. What else might account for the jobs and roles to which we are attracted other than our own dispositions?

It is the operation of ideology that is seen, in structuralism, as the primary mechanism through which false consciousness emerges, preventing the working classes from seeing, or even comprehending, the 'real' state of affairs engendered through capitalism. Capitalist ideology 'works' because it persuades us that it is logical that firms make profits and that people who work in firms receive wages rather than a good-sized share of the profits. This logic distorts our view of the structural reality – the exploitation of the workforce by capitalists.

Structuralist conceptions of power take us beyond the rather descriptive approaches that have dominated mainstream organizational behaviour. Nonetheless, while they offer much in enabling us to understand how inequalities in society (and organizations) are products of structures and systems that are, in some senses, outside of the control of individuals, they are in danger of neglecting the role of individuals altogether (Jermier *et al*., 1994). For instance, in structuralist conceptions of power, resistance tends to be understood as a once-and-for-all phenomenon that will be produced only when and if workers are able to become 'class conscious', to appreciate the extent of their own subordination within class-based modes of production, and to engage in organized acts of rebellion. Such a conception, however, limits our understanding of how individuals do actually experience and make sense of their own 'structural' positions in organizations and society more generally. Post-structuralist conceptions of power have embraced this problem, examining in some depth how individuals are involved in power dynamics, and it is to these ideas that we now turn.

Post-structuralist views of power

In contrast to mainstream approaches to power, such as that outlined above, post-structuralist accounts of power focus on *how* power yields its effects. From this perspective, power is not

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something that can be acquired and then used, or not, based on the types of rational calculations implied in mainstream approaches. Power exists wherever there is a relationship between two or more people or groups. While mainstream approaches do capture the relational bases of power to some extent, as we have already discussed, they also tend to conflate power with authority (Jackson and Carter, 2000). For instance, in organizations, we very often do what our boss tells us to because we accept his or her authority to direct us. Power, in post-structuralist approaches, is less concerned with types of relationship, such as authority relationships, and more with how power is implicated in the production of relationships themselves (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994).

For example, the fact that bosses in organizations tend to have authority over people lower in the hierarchy is a product of broader relations of power that have rendered the very existence of managers and subordinates as a common-sense feature of organizations – in other words, as an ideology. The study of *governance* examines how such organizational features emerge and develop. A central focus is on processes of regulation. How is it that some ideas (such as the idea that hierarchies are necessary) become taken for granted as normal and appropriate? Disciplinary power, a concept associated with the French social historian Michael Foucault (1977), has been used to explain such processes.

Disciplinary power

Disciplinary power is that which renders people docile, willing to be regulated, to accept that certain practices and modes of conduct are appropriate and correct. As societies become more complex and sophisticated, the population requires regulation if the social system is to survive. Regulating the population becomes the concern of a variety of groups that, in any given epoch, have been vested with the authority to make value judgements about the population and its activities. Prior to the Enlightenment period, for example, most people saw the Church as the most relevant and important authority. The increasing complexity of society since that time has seen the proliferation of domains in which society caries out its formal and informal activities: work organizations, medicine, the family, sexual relationships and many more are examples of these domains, each producing its own particular 'problems' that require regulation. For example, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, the development of organizational behaviour as an area of study was partly a consequence of the problems that grew out of mass industrialization. You should note that 'problems' are not universal or objective features of any given domain, they are defined as such by power holders within that domain, who determine what counts as appropriate behaviour according to their particular interests.

Disciplinary power arises as a consequence of the attempts of any given authority to regulate the population in its various domains of activities, and operates through two principal techniques: normalizing judgements and surveillance.

Normalizing judgements

Within any given social domain, individual activities will be scrutinized and subjected to judgements aimed at normalizing some activities and suppressing or pathologizing others. So, for example, in work organizations, certain activities, such as those related to efficiency and productivity, are deemed normal and appropriate, whereas others, particularly those that run counter to the goals of efficiency and productivity, will be pathologized, quite possibly rendered punishable.

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Surveillance

In order to make normalizing judgements, the population in any given social domain must be rendered visible, such that their activities are open to scrutiny. In schools and organizations, this can be achieved in a variety of ways, from the way that desks are positioned in classrooms so that they are observable by teachers, to the layout of factories so that the activities of workers are visible to bosses. Eventually, surveillance becomes an activity that is not just carried out by those with authority but by most people who constitute the domain. In this sense, individuals can never escape being 'watched' and this gives rise to self-regulation (see Reflection Box 9.4).

REFLECTION BOX 9.4 The Panopticon

To illustrate the pervasiveness of surveillance in modern institutions (which include formal and informal organizations), Foucault borrowed the concept of the Panopticon, invented by nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham conceived of a prison that was designed so that each cell was observable from a central watchtower. The watchtower and cells were constructed in such a way that the observer could look into any individual cell at any time he or she wanted, but the cell occupants could never know whether or not they were the ones being observed. This inherent indeterminacy would, Bentham proposed, give rise to self-policing: individual cell occupants would ensure they were behaving appropriately because they never knew whether or not they were being watched.

A/W to come!

Bentham's Panopticon

Stop and think

1 In what ways do processes in organizations that encourage conformity resemble the operation of the Panopticon?

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Disciplinary power, then, operates by rendering people visible, and their personal characteristics highly salient. To understand how and why people then come to self-regulate, however, requires an understanding of *discourse*, and its relationship to power and identity (or self).

9.3 Discourse

Discourse is the outcome of power relations and is defined as 'systems of statements which construct an object' (Parker, 1992). Power relations in any society exist because of the differential distribution of, chiefly, material resources, so in this sense Marxist conceptions of structural power are incorporated into the post-structuralist account. However, whereas Marx saw these structures as relatively enduring, in post-structuralism they are seen as contingent and precarious, always open to challenge and renegotiation.

As discussed above, in any social domain, the activities of the population will give rise to concerns and 'problems' for different authorities. As these problems are articulated and scrutinized, knowledge about them is produced. In short, any given 'problem' becomes an object, which is constructed (understood) through a system of statements (i.e. discourse). For example, following the Industrial Revolution, the factory became established as the normal and most appropriate site for the bringing together and organization of labour, because it enabled capitalists to have more control over what was being produced, and the means and mode of its production. Prior to the establishment of factories, goods were manufactured in a variety of sites, including the home, over which none but the individual worker had ultimate control. Both the factory as a place of production and the methods of production themselves are products of capitalist ideology (see Reflection Box 9.5), which, as we have already discussed above, constructs the pursuit of profit as the primary and central concern of organizations that make or sell goods and services. As factories proliferated, they brought with them their own sets of 'problems'. In particular, owners and managers were faced with the problem of controlling the workforce, to ensure that the maximum utility was extracted from labour. It was this specific problem and its manifestation in various 'undesirable' behaviours that gave rise to the concepts of motivation, job satisfaction, person–job fit, and others, that have been the focus of our earlier chapters. These concepts can be understood as discourses that have emerged in response to the problems of capitalist modes of production, where problems are defined from the perspective of capitalist ideology.

REFLECTION BOX 9.5 Discourse and Ideology

Ideology, as we have already discussed, can be defined as ideas, systematically underpinned by logic. From the post-structuralist viewpoint, ideology can be understood as a particular form of discourse, one that has become so dominant as to be accepted as 'true' or as reflecting 'reality'. In Reflection Box 9.3 we saw how even apparently hard scientific facts can emanate from ideologies that can, nevertheless, be challenged.

Capitalist ideology is an example of a discourse that has become so taken for granted that few of us question its logic. However, there are many other ideologies subsumed under capitalism that have achieved equally taken-for-granted status. For example, the notion that work should be performed on a full-time basis is essentially ideological. There

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is actually nothing about the nature of tasks in organizations that requires them to be conducted five days a week over a period of 40 hours. However, the ideology of full-time working is so deeply embedded in our culture that we seldom question its logic; instead, organizations problematize individuals who do not conform with this norm, such as women who have opted to reduce their working hours following childbirth. Research shows that such women are often marginalized, their access to training and career opportunities hampered following their decision to reduce their hours (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2003). This problem is seldom located in the practice of full-time working, but is instead attributed to the part-time worker's decision to reduce his or her hours (Hyde, 2004).

Stop and think

1 What does the practice of full-time working achieve within the terms of capitalist ideology? Think about this in relation to identity and power.

Discourses not only produce and reflect ideologies, they also produce practices (routine ways of behaving or organizing activities) and identities. In factories, for instance, capitalist ideology has produced the notion of efficiency. Efficiency has, in turn, produced practices that enable organizations to pursue this goal (such as the use of information technologies, for example) and identities that enable individuals to judge themselves and others within its terms. The whole notion of competence is a product of capitalist ideology in which certain attributes (speed, intelligence, social acumen) are highly valued because they contribute (or are said to contribute) to organizational efficiency. Normalizing judgements, therefore, are products of discourse.

Within any social domain, nonetheless, discourses are not produced in any systematic or controlled way. While in most organizations there are norms that relate to efficiency, which ostensibly govern the behaviour of workers, there will be a whole variety of discourses regarding the ways that efficiency is to be achieved. These discourses are themselves products of the *micro* operation of power (see Reflection Box 9.6) that takes place between individuals. For example, Collinson (1994) studied the behaviour of workers in a car plant. To achieve maximum efficiency, management introduced a work-study project, designed to establish an appropriate production rate. The workers, wise to what was going on, established a 'rate' that they demonstrated to the work-study engineer, which was actually lower than that which they could realistically achieve in the specified time period. 'Fixing' the rate in this way not only enabled them to achieve acceptable productivity rates without too much effort, but also enabled them to revel in their superiority over management, whom they had succeeded in 'duping'.

This brief example illustrates the contingent nature of power relations. While, in many organizations, management has access to resources that provide it with power bases, its actual power over workers depends upon its relationship with that group, which in turn is produced through the discourses that constitute the organization and its practices. This example also illustrates how power is *resisted* through discourse. In the case above, for example, the discourse of efficiency is subverted by the activity of rate-fixing. However, the actual conditions that enable management to attempt to control the activities of workers are effectively reproduced. While the workers have asserted their own definition of what counts as efficient production, they have not actually questioned the dominant order in which management's right to determine their

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output is taken for granted. However, resistance to discourse may not simply subvert or challenge the norms that are produced through it: new or alternative discourses may be produced, and existing power relations challenged and changed (see Reflection Box 9.6).

REFLECTION BOX 9.6 Discourse, power and resistance

In the post-structuralist account, we can understand power operating at a macro and a micro level, which are dialectically related (mutually influential). Before the two world wars, there was a dominant discourse that promoted the idea that 'a woman's place is in the home', a discourse that was the product of a patriarchal society in which women were far less powerful than men (in general terms) and, indeed, were economically dependent on them. During the world wars, 'problems' arose in our factories and businesses due to the shortage of men, caused because many were away fighting the war. Women were encouraged by the authorities of the time (principally the government and factory owners) to take up the jobs that the men had done in order to serve the country in its time of need. As more and more women did so, a new discourse emerged, in which women were constructed as 'workers', able to contribute to society economically as well as domestically. After the world wars, capitalist economies became more and more advanced and wealthy. In order to enjoy the fruits of this social system, families required more income, and increasing numbers of women began to work. This is power operating at the macro level.

We are now at a point in history where the discourse that constructs women as entitled to work and a career is more dominant than that which positions women as 'homemakers'. In fact this discourse is now used to resist patriarchal power relations, constructing women as having the same rights and entitlements as men, and resulting in a shift in power relations in organizations. We see evidence of this every day as women continue to advance into senior managerial positions and succeed in industrial tribunals brought against organizations that operate 'sexist' practices. Instances of this sort illustrate the micro operation of power and how it can influence the macro level.

Stop and think

1 If we challenge one established set of power relations that apparently oppress certain groups (such as men vs women) are we simply going to create a different set of power relations and the oppression of other groups?

Resistance

Discourse is the means through which power produces its regulatory effects. Discourse targets individuals, emphasizing and highlighting the desirability of some attributes and qualities and the undesirability of others. It is also productive of social practices, giving rise to dominant modes of organizing and acting. Discourse operates within domains and, due to the relational or interactional dynamic of power, is seldom unitary. In other words, there will generally be many discourses targeted at any given domain of activity, efficiency being one example here that we have already illustrated. Resistance to the power that is wielded through discourse occurs when discourses are either subverted (as in the example of the car plant above), or when new

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discourses are produced (as in Reflection Box 9.6). Resistance, from this perspective, is always present whenever power is exercised. It is not a separate and distinct entity, nor even a response to the exercise of power (see Reflection Box 9.7). Both power and resistance can be understood as the *effects* of discourse.

REFLECTION BOX 9.7 Resistance: what is it?

We all seem to have an intuitive grasp of what resistance means: it is about refusing to go along with something, and as such can be concerned with what we do (or refuse to do) or with what we say (or refuse to say). However, what we go along with or refuse to go along with depends on what we understand compliance or resistance to mean, which in turn is related to discourse. For example, as discussed in Reflection Box 9.6, women are increasingly 'resisting' male power in organizations. In turn, we can understand this resistance as a consequence of an ideological discourse that promotes upward mobility on the basis of merit as both desirable and logical. Women who believe that their own opportunities for upward mobility are being constrained by systems that favour gender rather than merit are 'resisting' such systems, through industrial tribunals and other means. But it is the overarching discourse of upward mobility that is productive of this resistance (Dick, 2004).

Stop and think

1 How can we account for the fact that not every woman will 'resist' promotion systems that could be seen as 'biased' in favour of men?

9.4 Self

As already discussed, discourse constructs identities as well as objects in social domains. This view of self or identity runs counter to mainstream accounts of the person that have dominated organizational behaviour, typical of which are theories of 'personality', which we discussed in Chapter 2. Post-structuralism understands identity as derived from the outer domain of discourse rather than the inner domain of the individual psyche. Personality, from the post-structuralist perspective, is a discourse that we use to make sense of ourselves (see Reflection Box 9.8).

REFLECTION BOX 9.8 Extreme and moderate constructionism

The idea that identity is a product of discourse has been the subject of intense critique by those who argue that this view is overly deterministic, seeing individuals as passive products of social processes (see, for example, Reed, 1998). Layder (1997) argues that understanding identity as determined by discourse is a form of extreme social constructionism. He, along with many other writers who draw on post-structuralist ideas, prefers a moderate social constructionism. Here, it is accepted that individuals possess attributes that in some sense 'characterize' them. However, the content and meaning of these attributes are products of discourse. Thus, for example, what it means to be a woman cannot

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be determined from the biological characteristics of women (though these are clearly important), nor can it be 'read off' from discourses that construct the social category 'woman'. There are many discourses that construct 'women', including those that contain stereotypical ideas such as those that suggest women are 'good at' relationships or are 'passive'. Any individual woman, however, can draw on very many discourses to construct or make sense of herself, and this creative capacity is what gives rise to individual agency.

Stop and think

Can you think of a situation in which you have rejected another person's or other people's view of your personality? This represents a situation in which you have resisted an identity that has been conferred on you by others, using your creative capacities to construct yourself within alternative discourses.

Positioning

Individuals are said to occupy *positions* in discourses (Burr, 2003). Identity is therefore understood as far more fluid, temporary and partial than in more traditional approaches, where identity is seen as relatively fixed and stable. The concept of positioning means that people can take up or reject identities, depending on the particular context. Context is, in fact, seen as critical to identity construction, understood as 'motivating' individuals to perform an identity. For example, going for an interview represents an entirely different situation (or context) from going to the pub with some friends. In each situation, the individual is likely to demonstrate a different identity, because each will contain different constraints and opportunities. In the interview situation, for instance, the individual has agreed to be accountable to the interviewers, often needing to persuade them that he or she is suitable for a post and to justify the reasons for his or her application. In the social situation at the pub, a different identity may be performed, because the individual is more relaxed and may feel that he or she can be 'more like' him or herself. In each situation, nonetheless, when the individual does 'identity work' s/he draws upon discourses to promote a particular version of him/herself. Positioning, therefore, ultimately sees identity as an *achievement* not as a pre-given, already existing and underlying 'state'.

Self, power and resistance

Discourse, as we have said, is the product of power relations and is, fundamentally, regulatory in its effects. So while people can creatively draw on discourses to understand themselves, in doing so they either reproduce or resist existing relations of power operating in both the specific context in which they perform their identities and the broader social context from which discourses are produced. For instance, in an interview situation, many individuals will seek to represent themselves as competent and reliable. In doing so, they not only reproduce the power relationships represented within the interview, which generally construct the interviewers as the power holders, but also broader relations of power in capitalist economies that construct the seeking of employment as 'normal' and desirable.

Conversely, people can also reject or resist positions that are offered through discourse. The workers in Collinson's (1994) study, discussed in Section 9.3, can be understood as 'resisting'

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being positioned as subordinate within discourses of hierarchy, through their 'rate-fixing' activities and, in doing so, they resist the power relations produced through that hierarchy. On the other hand, their engagement with the discourse of efficiency, demonstrated by the very act of rate-fixing itself, reproduces capitalist regimes of power, which constructs efficiency as normal and desirable in organizations. Agency, or self, in post-structuralism is both the outcome and medium of discourse.

9.5 Post-structuralism in organizational analysis

The ideas that we have discussed in this chapter are being used increasingly in organization studies to perform analyses of power, resistance and identities (Kondo, 1990; Collinson, 1994; Ball and Wilson, 2000; Dick and Cassell, 2004). One of the key contributions of these ideas is in rethinking the Marxist concept of consent or false consciousness, which we discussed above. Rather than seeing individuals as judgemental dopes (Garfinkel, 1967), post-structuralist studies have closely examined how individuals make sense of their own positions in organizations, especially in positions that would be characterized as relatively subordinate or oppressed.

As we saw in Chapter 3, Kondo (1990) performed an ethnography in a small sweet factory in Tokyo, focusing specifically on the experiences of the female part-time employees. These women not only worked relatively long hours (usually more than 40 hours per week), they were also low paid, and their employment conditions and status were far inferior to those of their full-time male counterparts. Kondo argues that the discourse of *uchi*, roughly translated as 'home life', dominates the Japanese female identity. Within this discourse, the woman is positioned, by herself and others, as placing the needs of her home and family in front of any other consideration. Work itself is understood chiefly as something that contributes to *uchi*, not, as some women in the West might understand it, as a means for self-actualization and personal achievement. This commitment to the discourse of *uchi* explains why these women apparently consent to their 'oppressive' working conditions. Nonetheless, resistance was expressed by these women. For example, Japanese workers are expected to show extremely high levels of commitment and loyalty to their employers, manifested in very low sickness-absence rates. However, the women in Kondo's study would think nothing of taking a few days' absence, which they would justify (and which, moreover, would be accepted as justifiable by their bosses) through the discourse of *uchi*: 'my family comes first'.

Dick and Cassell (2004) explored why policewomen do not resist the idea that police work is incompatible with having children, an idea that has historically caused a high turnover of female police officers. They argue that police work is constructed primarily through a discourse that incorporates the idea that policing is fundamentally concerned with crime-fighting. In turn this discourse promotes the idea that police officers should be prepared to be available virtually all the time in case an 'incident' occurs that requires an immediate police response. To be seen as a good and competent officer, therefore, individuals need to be prepared to show high levels of flexibility, being prepared to work not only a very harsh rotating shift system, but extra hours if and when deemed necessary. It is unsurprising, then, that, following the birth of children, few women remained in operational policing.

Dick and Cassell argue that policing is a very varied occupation and that while crime-fighting may well constitute some of its activities, it by no means characterizes policing as a whole. Indeed what counts as crime-fighting is open to negotiation and is by no means unambiguous: some activi-

ties that could be argued to signify crime-fighting could just as easily be interpreted as signifying a social service (Waddington, 1999). Thus, if we understand policing as socially constructed, we can not only contest dominant discourses about what it involves, but also the practices that are justified through them. Further, if we reinterpret some policing activities as involving 'service' rather than 'conflict', then we can start to think about enacting and resourcing policing in different ways. In their study, Dick and Cassell found that many policewomen interpreted policing (and their identities) through the crime-fighting discourse, and this raises the question of why women consent to this version of policing, which, as just discussed, clearly compromises their own career interests. They argue that the crime-fighting discourse not only justifies and enables officers to make sense of the core, morally ambiguous characteristic of policing – the potential to use coercive force against fellow citizens – it also enables them to accommodate their own subordination in the organization's power hierarchy. For women, additionally, the take-up of this discourse, enables them to feel more accepted in an organization where their commitment to the job tends to be questioned.

Other studies have examined the extent to which 'newer' managerial strategies apparently aimed at controlling workers through such techniques as computer-based surveillance and culture change produce worker resistance (e.g. Ball and Wilson, 2000; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Ball, 2004). These studies suggest that while worker resistance may be mundane, in the sense that it cannot be characterized as overt acts of rebellion or sabotage, it is nevertheless 'alive and kicking' (Thomas *et al*., 2004).

Criticisms of post-structuralism

Post-structuralist approaches are gaining ground in management and organization studies but are far from being considered mainstream. In fact, there are many critics of post-strucuralism who argue that its utility for understanding organizations and organizational behaviour is very limited. Here we present three core criticisms, though it is possible to find many more.

One common criticism of post-structuralism is that, because it refutes the notion that organizations contain objective features, it leads us to a situation of *relativism*, where there is no way of analysing anything because each 'thing' we might wish to analyse, like structure or culture, will differ according to the perspective of the observer. This relativism means that we can never succeed in 'pinning an organization down' so that we can understand it in any depth (Feldman, 1997). Post-structuralists, in contrast, tend not to see relativism as a problem, but rather a product of dissolving the notion of objective organizational dimensions. Other writers, such as Layder (1997), argue that there are objective structures in society and organizations – such as, for example, gender and class – but that these are always open to renegotiation and transformation due to the creative abilities of individuals who occupy these structural positions.

Another criticism of post-structuralism is that it denies the existence of reality: everything is 'in the text', so that the tangible experiences of humans are denied or rendered irrelevant (Reed, 1992). Burr (1998) presents a useful distinction between different understandings of 'reality':

1 truth vs falsehood
2 materiality vs illusion
3 essence vs construction.

While many post-structuralists most certainly contest what counts as 'truth' (distinction 1), and what is understood to be the actual nature of a person or an event (distinction 3), few would

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deny that experiences in organizations and society generally lack materiality (distinction 2). What interests post-structuralists is how certain materialities come to be interpreted in 'common-sense, taken-for-granted' ways. For example, as Dick and Nadin (in press) argue, there is nothing more material (real) that someone operating a lathe to cut pieces of metal. But the actions used to operate the lathe, and the output and quality produced, do not stem from 'essential' attributes of the lathe itself, nor of the lathe operator. The lathe will have been designed, for example, to be used by an able-bodied male. Output will have been decided by a group of organizational power holders, who will have defined what counts as acceptable output or quality. In turn, all of these design and output judgements are derived from discourses that construct, for example, able-bodied men as the 'normal' skilled lathe operator, and the ability to generate profit from capital equipment as the 'normal' use of a lathe.

Finally, post-structuralism is criticized for neglecting the role of agency. How, ask critics, can we explain the role of humans in shaping their own destinies, when post-structuralists argue that everything is connected to discourse? According to Reed, 'social actors become the products, rather than the creators, of the discursive formations in which they are trapped' (1998: 209). In fact, much recent work has attempted to address this issue, arguing that post-structuralism can and does incorporate the role of agency in its understanding of discourse dynamics (Lazar, 2000; Dick and Nadin, in press; Hyde and Dick, forthcoming) (see Reflection Box 9.6).

9.6 Summary

In this chapter we have examined power from mainstream, structuralist and post- strucuralist perspectives, focusing particularly on the latter. Mainstream approaches tend to understand power as an essence, a 'thing', that resides within a person or group, operating to produce behavioural changes in others, though the extent to which power can be used to change people's behaviour depends upon various characteristics of the power holder and the circumstances in which power is mobilized. Structuralist accounts of power challenge this rather rational, apolitical view, arguing that structures in society, particularly class, tip the balance in favour of certain groups. Those who possess the lion's share of material (and valued) resources in society tend to be those that have the most power, which they then use both to protect their own interests and to keep other people in their subordinate positions. Here, power is also seen as a possession, but one that is acquired on a structural, rather than functional, basis.

Post-structuralism challenges the essentialist view of power (i.e in which power is seen as a 'real' entity), focusing not on what power is, but how it operates and with what effects. Discourse or knowledge is seen as the primary agent of power, operating to construct objects and identities in ways that regulate how we understand the world, each other and ourselves. Disciplinary power describes this operation, focusing on how discourse produces self-regulating individuals who accept that certain attributes, practices and modes of conduct are normal and appropriate. Discourse itself is produced through relations of power that exist in society. Unlike structuralism, however, these relations are seen as temporary, unstable and challengeable. It is the inherent instability of these relations that give rise to multiple discourses targeted at regulating the behaviour of individuals in any given domain. In turn, this multiplicity means that there are always several ways of understanding any given object, event

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or person, and some of these understandings will contradict or undermine each other. It is through such 'counter' discourses that resistance is produced. We completed the chapter by providing some examples of how post-structuralism has been applied to analyse power, consent and resistance in organizational behaviour, as well as examining some of the criticisms that have been levelled at this approach.

9.7 Questions

Q

Self-test questions

1 List three characteristics of mainstream accounts of power.
2 Describe three of Pfeffer's bases of organizational power.
3 How is social structure related to the acquisition and mobilization of power?
4 What is false consciousness?
5 What are the key differences between structuralist and post-structuralist conceptions of power?
6 How does discourse 'construct' objects and identities?
7 Where does discourse come from?
8 What differentiates disciplinary power from, say, organizational power, as described by Pfeffer?
9 Illustrate the relationship between discourse, power and resistance.

Discussion questions

1 Is it useful to think of power as being something that one or more persons possess(es)? Why or why not?
2 Does the concept of discourse leave any room for understanding the idiosyncratic 'nature' of human beings?
3 In what ways do post-structuralist accounts of resistance differ from more mainstream and structuralist views? Which of these is most useful for understanding 'resistant' behaviour in organizations?

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Case Study

resistant identities in professional part-time working

As the number of women in professional roles and occupations has increased, organizations have come increasingly under pressure, from both a legislative and financial standpoint, to attempt to retain them once they have children. The past 10 years have seen a significant increase in the numbers of professional women working part-time, as organizations attempt to respond to these pressures. This has been viewed within academic literature as extremely positive, heralding an improvement in status for part-time work, which has generally been seen as low paid and low skilled.

When employees in professional roles work part-time, they generally reduce their hours within their existing role. Research suggests that this creates particular management problems because it is difficult to accommodate part-time workers within systems designed for full-time employees. Managers, for example, may not communicate as fully with the part-timer, simply because they are not present as often as other employees. Likewise, training events usually occur within full-time hours, starting at 9 am and finishing at 5 pm, often the very times that a part-timer will not be at work if she is dropping off or picking up children from school. One consequence of this is that the part-time professional can experience marginalization, with their opportunities for developmental training and career advancement hampered relative to those of their full-time colleagues. Part-time professionals can also be seen as lacking commitment relative to their full-time counterparts.

Interestingly, research suggests that part-time professionals do not necessarily perceive their marginalization *as* marginalization, rather they believe that in choosing to put their child or children first, they have also to accept that their work achievements now come second; 'you can't have it all' is a frequent response of these women to their organizational situation.

Additionally, many women working part-time report increases in job satisfaction, reductions in stress and feelings of enhanced control as they are better able to manage the work–family interface. This has been read by some researchers as a sign that part-time professional women simply readjust their priorities, and that we ought not to be worried about their marginal status: if they are happy, so be it. Hyde (2004) argues that we ought to understand this acceptance as both consent and resistance: consent in the sense that these women accept the status quo in which career progression is seen to be a core aspect of professional identity, achieved through working excessive hours and showing 'commitment' to work; resistance in the sense that these women are challenging this core aspect of professional identity, showing instead that work need not be central to the life of a 'good' professional.

Source: adapted from Hyde, 2004

Questions

1. Could we understand the consent of the part-time professional to their 'marginal' status as an example of false consciousness? Why or why not?
2. What discourses can you identify that 'construct' the identity of professional workers? Whose interests do these discourses serve?
3. Do you agree with Hyde's reading of the situation? If consent is also resistance, what might change?

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9.8 Further reading

Etzioni, A. (1975) *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations: On Power, Involvement and Their Correlates*. London: Free Press. Although a relatively 'old' book, this provides a very comprehensive account of power in organizations, focusing specifically on the relationship between power, control and compliance. These influential ideas can be seen reflected in many mainstream accounts of power in organizations.

Tietze, S., Cohen, L. and Musson, G. (2003) *Understanding Organizations Through Language*. London: Sage. An excellent and highly accessible introduction to some of the central ideas of post-structuralism.

Jackson, N. and Carter, P. (2000) *Rethinking Organisational Behaviour.* Essex: Prentice Hall. Another excellent account of post-structuralist ideas. See especially the chapters on power, knowledge and efficiency.

Thomas, R., Mills, A. and Helms Mills, J. (eds) (2004) *Identity Politics at Work: Resisting Gender, Gendering Resistance*. London: Routledge. Offers examples of empirical work utilising post-structuralist views of power and resistance.

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