

Hidden transcripts of flight attendant resistance

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This work builds on past research through a critical discussion of individuals' resistant actions, that is, their ability to enact change within their social systems. Although employees may appear to comply fully with constraining organizational policies and meanings in public discourse, alternative meanings may be constructed in private. Using examples of flight attendant resistance, the author analyzes hidden transcripts—the interactions, stories, myths, and rituals in which employees participate beyond the direct observation of power holders—to provide an avenue to identify resistance and change in the organizing process. Such an understanding challenges the outdated ideal of transmissional meaning, questions organizational power by including the potential for resistance and change, and surfaces hidden constraints and resistances in employee discourse.

HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS OF FLIGHT ATTENDANT RESISTANCE

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I don't worry about all the changes they are talking about. I just do what they want me to do, and when they aren't looking, I do what I want.

Terry, a flight attendant for a major U.S. carrier, made this comment to a coworker while I was working with her flight crew. She was referring to recent changes in appearance codes that define the "proper" flight attendant look. Her supervisor had recently told Terry that she could no longer wear the Santa earrings she had worn every holiday season for 15 years. To get around the policy, she took off her earrings when she was in the main lounge (in the presence of supervisors) and then promptly and proudly put them back on once she stepped on board the airplane (outside the presence of supervisors). Terry's comment reveals the ever-present potential for employee resistance and reflects the central question

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of this article—how do those who are seemingly powerless effectively carve out discursive spaces for influences and control?

To explore this question, I present an empirical study of flight attendants' resistance at a major U.S. airline. I assume a critical perspective that recognizes that organizations are not neutral sites of meaning formation but, rather, contested fields where meaning is produced, reproduced, negotiated, and resisted (Mumby, 1993a). In recent years, critical theory has done much to reveal this contested nature of organizational life. However, it has also been criticized for an overemphasis on theory building and a lack of empirical support (Mumby, 1993a, p. 19). Those critical studies that are empirically based challenge the automatic naturalization of managerial forms of control (e.g., Barker, 1993; Deetz, 1995, in press; Light, 1979; Rosen, 1985; Taylor, 1990; Trujillo, 1993), but they have done so somewhat to the exclusion of worker resistance. Some important exceptions have focused on resistance (e.g., Bell & Forbes, 1994; Gottfried, 1994; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996), and this study continues this line of work by offering an empirical study of power relations focusing on worker resistance rather than domination.

To do this, first I combine elements of interpretive and critical theory to understand how power is exercised as a discursive process through which meaning is not only reproduced but produced, negotiated, and resisted. Second, I discuss how most organizational studies focus on observations of public discourse and performances. Such a focus misses possible backstage reproductions of subversive meanings in organizational communication. Like Terry (in the above example), employees may appear to be aligned with or buy into the organizational party line, but such appearances may be little more than a strategic pose. Alternate meanings may be constructed in private. One way to think about private discourse is in "hidden transcripts," the interactions, stories, myths, and rituals in which employees participate beyond the direct surveillance of power holders (Scott, 1990). Careful consideration of such discourse is important to understanding organizational communication because it maintains the open, partial, and temporary nature of even dominant meanings. Toward this end, I provide an analysis of

flight attendant hidden resistance to reified constructions of reality at a major U.S. airline.

**(RE)INTERPRETING CRITICAL THEORY:
POWER AND RESISTANCE**

In the last decade, there has been much discussion of the "interpretive turn" in social science (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987) and particularly in organizational studies (Mumby, 1993a; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). This turn reflects a continued interest in understanding social reality and the relationship of the observer to the objects that are under study, claiming there are no truths "out there" separate from human interpretive frameworks. In other words, "the world [may] be out there, but descriptions of the world are not" (Rorty, 1989, p. 5).

From such an interpretive stance, organizational realities appear as partial, inconsistent, fragmented, and complex. Furthermore, from a critical stance, not all descriptions of the world have equal value. In this way, an interpretive approach (assuming multiple perspectives) can be blended with a critical approach (revealing the exercise and abuse of power from participants' points of view) to study organizations as contested sites of meaning.

A critical-interpretive perspective frames our understanding of organizational communication in three specific ways. First, reality is socially constructed in that no single right or true reality can be found. Moreover, oppressive or contradictory realities may be coconstructed and reproduced. Indeed, critical interpretation "attends to the skilled and contingent social construction and negotiation of intersubjective meanings," while at the same time recognizing that these meanings are constrained by the "historical stage on which social actors meet, speak, conflict, listen, or engage with one another" (Forester, 1983, p. 235). Accordingly, a critical-interpretive approach addresses both the "world we are born into" and the "world which we create" (Mead, 1923). Eisenberg and Goodall (1997) describe this as the tension between creativity and constraint. We create the world through interactions but at the same

time, we are rooted in the historical context of the world into which we are born. In other words, persons both are shaped by and shape their worlds through interaction (Banks & Riley, 1993; Forester, 1983; McPhee, 1985; Poole, 1985; Poole & McPhee, 1983).

Second, communication is central to understanding how organizational realities are created. We make sense and create reality through the language we use. Simultaneously, our language choices and constructs confine us. Accordingly, organizational reality consists of "discursive formations" that enable and constrain organizational sense making (Deetz, 1992; Foucault, 1977; Mumby, 1988). The creation and repetition of discursive formations constitutes organizational culture (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). Because culture is dependent on the language that constitutes it, it is not self-sustaining; it is the product of members' discourse. Hall (1989) recognizes this process, claiming

Meaning is polysemic in its intrinsic nature; it remains inextricably context bound. It is caught in and constituted by the struggle to "prefer" one among many meanings as the dominant. That dominance is not already inscribed in structures and events but is constructed through the continuous struggle over a specific type of practice—representational practice. (Deetz, 1992, p. 173)

Within organizations, a dominant or "preferred" meaning is produced through members' interactions and reproduced through their representational practices. Representational practices include the acknowledged rites and rituals, goals, and objectives reproduced through socialization in an organization. Much organizational literature focuses on the reproduction of these representational practices (e.g., socialization research that argues individuals are aligned with or buy into organizational practices and critical research that reveals these practices as dominating or constraining). However, the reproduction of representational practices is never complete and hence not a given. It is a continuous struggle enacted by the organizational members.

Third, power relations are reproduced through discursive formations. "Consequently," according to Foucault (1977), "it does not matter who exercises power" (p. 202). Power is not the tool of any

particular agent; it is produced in everyday practices of gestures, actions, and discourse. It is reproduced due to historical context, thereby creating discursive power structures within which individuals operate. From this view, it is not helpful to define the powerful and the powerless. Discursive formations are reified by individuals and treated as objective positions through their repetitive discourse. Consequently, although any particular group does not own language, managerial discourse becomes identified with the powerful, whereas subordinate discourse becomes that of the powerless.

Historically, "fixed" organizational meanings have resulted in the hegemony of a patriarchal network of power relations. As noted earlier, "in the last 10 years critical organizational studies have done much to increase our understanding of these processes and, in particular, have been instrumental in focusing considerable attention on the relationship between communication and relations of domination" (Mumby, 1993a, p. 21). As a result, conversations about organizational life include important discussions about the co-optation of worker's identification (e.g., Barker, 1993; Cheney, 1983; Deetz, 1995; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), the dominance of capitalistic structures as legitimate forms of organizing (e.g., Deetz, 1992, 1995; Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Mumby, 1987, 1988; Rosen, 1985), and the exclusion of minority voices, in particular the feminine voice in dominant organizational meanings (e.g., Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Bullis, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994, 1995; Calás & Smircich, 1989, 1992; Ferguson, 1984; Marshall, 1993; Martin, 1990; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Pringle, 1988).

However, wherever there is domination, there is also resistance (e.g., Ferguson, 1984; Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985; Foucault, 1977; Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994). In her discussion of bureaucratic power, Ferguson (1984) explains that "bureaucratization is a process, a moment in a dialectic of domination and resistance that must be constantly reproduced" (p. 19). An emphasis on the production of meaning features the capacity for change (Forester, 1983). The capacity to change creates the ability to both enact and resist the (re)production of dominant (relatively fixed) discursive patterns.

Indeed, "communication occurs between particular actors, but in historical contexts that they inherit, yet may also seek to change" (Forester, 1983, p. 235). As already noted, critical studies in organizational communication have emphasized domination in the "historical contexts that individuals inherit." What is less evident is how employees can and do seek to change organizational meanings.

Several important exceptions focus empirically on organizational resistance and reveal organizations as contested sites of meaning. For example, Gottfried (1994) challenges traditional theories of control and accommodation through a case study of temporary worker resistance. Bell and Forbes (1994) reveal the everyday forms of resistance produced through office folklore such as cartoons, sayings, and pictures posted in work space. Holmer-Nadesan (1996) challenges notions of social determinism by showing how women service workers reflect and resist hegemonic articulations of their identities. In an analysis of women store clerks between 1890 and 1960, Benson (1992) shows that the female clerks would develop informal work groups that deflected management interventions. Hochschild (1983) devotes a small portion of her landmark text to flight attendants' everyday practices of resistance against managerial control.

My study builds on past research by offering an empirically grounded discussion of individuals' resistant actions—their ability to enact change within their social systems. Resistance is central to critical-interpretive organizational theory because it is through resistance that reality retains a dynamic, negotiated quality. Resistance is a process through which meanings are prevented from becoming fully fixed; meanings remain open, partial, and contingent. To gain a more complete understanding of the dynamics of power relations, it is necessary to account for change that may be enabled by resistance.

Overt resistance in public may not be possible due to bureaucratic resistance. Ferguson (1984) argues that although some resistance may be overt, more often people resist individually and covertly. The organization's powerful can control only the public acceptance of the representational practices. Because employees

constitute organizational realities through sense-making processes, they are free to privately construct (and enact) alternative meanings to the party line through hidden transcripts.

HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS

In his extensive review of research on resistance, Scott (1990) argues that when compliance is observed in public, critics may assume that the individuals are "duped" or trapped in their own "false consciousness." Yet, this is not the only possibility. Many individuals know what they must appear to do to survive in constraining situations (Scott, 1990). Therefore, instead of focusing solely on the public discourse, there also is a need to understand the private discourse or the hidden transcripts. The term *public transcript* is a "shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (p. 2). The term *hidden transcript* is used "to characterize discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation of power holders" (p. 4).

The public transcript is always questionable.

The greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast. In other words, the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask. (Scott, 1990, p. 3)

In this respect, if a researcher relies solely on public transcripts, she or he receives only one version of organizational reality: "Without a privileged peek backstage or a rupture in the performance we have no way of calling into question the status of what might be a convincing but feigned performance" (Scott, 1990, p. 4). Therefore, using Scott's framework, it becomes premature to assume that organizational members are duped—ignorant of the very constraints they (re)enact (e.g., Shorris, 1981).

Having said this, there is considerable debate over what constitutes real resistance. To the critical neo-Marxist, only large-scale changes in material conditions count. Consequently, these critics

see what looks like resistance as a psychic coping mechanism that in fact allows individuals to reproduce dominant systems. Contrary to these approaches, I side with Mumby (1997), who argues that hidden transcripts show that each discursive moment opens possibilities for resistance and change. Hidden transcripts demonstrate "how low-profile forms of resistance can lead to the systematic undermining of the dominant hegemony" (Mumby, 1997, p. 17). As people slowly begin to interact with each other differently, they are able to conceive of new possibilities for being together.

It is certainly not my intent to argue that all organizational employees participate in private resistance or that employees are only complicit with dominating organizational policies when under public surveillance. There are enough studies to suggest otherwise, such as Tompkins and Cheney's (1985) unobtrusive forms of identification control, Barker's (1993) concertive control in team-based organizations, or Deetz's (in press) analysis of university knowledge workers. Paradoxically, active complicity in subordination may open possibilities for resistance. For example, Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) argue compellingly that because women are active in their domination, they are not passive victims in a plot of men against women. If organizational members are agents in their own domination, they can also be agents in their own resistance. When such resistance is not possible in the public organizational structure, it may be produced privately as hidden transcripts. Rather than seeing how power is constructed and can be "undone," researchers, according to Krippendorf (1995), assist in the reification of power. This leads to the research question central to this work: How do those who are seemingly powerless effectively carve out discursive spaces for influences and control?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The focus of this study is on resistant practices of flight attendants. Over 60 flight attendants participated in the research, 9 of

whom were men and the rest women. They ranged in experience from new trainees to those with more than 26 years' seniority. The participants were randomly chosen according to the flights I was assigned to work.

I had several reasons for studying flight attendants. I was working as a flight attendant and trainer for the airline at the time and had a personal interest in flight crew interaction. In addition, flight attendants provide a wonderful opportunity for studying organizational resistance as they meet the two conditions that, when present, foster the development of hidden transcripts:

first, when it is voiced in a sequestered social site where the control, surveillance, and repression of the dominant are least able to reach, and second, when this sequestered social milieu is composed entirely of close confidants who share similar experiences of domination. (Scott, 1990, p. 120)

The majority of work a flight crew performs is on an aircraft, away from any direct supervision (supporting the first condition). Further, the flight crews are together for up to 3 days at a time—they are able to share their experiences and develop a sense of camaraderie (supporting the second condition).

Finally, domination has already been well documented in previous studies revealing how flight attendants manage their public presentation of self (Ferguson, 1984; Hochschild, 1983). As a service-oriented profession, they avoid expressing their emotions in public, offering a fake smile in place of a genuine one. Hochschild (1983) provides sound empirical research to support her claim that corporate legitimized emotion management, such as the flight attendant smile, is a form of organizational control and domination. However, she spends little time describing how flight attendants actively resist these organizational forms of emotional control.

PROCEDURES

Research was conducted through participant observation of flight crews at Flying World Airlines (FWA).¹ Taking this approach, the goal is "to arrive at an understanding of lived experience that is

both rigorous—based on systematic observation—and imaginative—based on expressive insight” (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p. 5). With participant observation, the researcher is immersed in the experience, collapsing the traditional separation between the subject and object of study. As with any methodology, certain choices and trade-offs are made. For example, as a working flight attendant, I was challenged to balance the tension between my participative and reflective stances—between *doing* and *thinking*. Fortunately, with the increase in popularity of qualitative methods, a number of sources offer useful guidelines for participant observation (e.g., Conquergood, 1991; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Reinharz, 1992).

A good first step in participant observation is to “start where you are” (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). At the time of this study, I was a flight attendant and had worked in that capacity for 3 years and as a flight attendant trainer for 2 years. I was in a unique position to gain access to private, backstage interaction through participant observation. As a flight attendant, I shared the fate of those I was studying and therefore was totally immersed in the process. “Feminist ethnographers who emphasize closeness rather than distance in fieldwork relations believe that understanding based on participant observation is enhanced by total immersion in the world one is studying,” states Reinharz (1992, p. 69), who adds, “total immersion comes about when the researcher begins to share the fate of those she is studying” (p. 69).

Data gathering. The data included in this work were drawn from a 3-month period in which I engaged, observed, and interacted with flight crews in a variety of contexts: in flight, during layovers, during training, and in a public meeting with management. At the beginning of each encounter, flight attendants were told that I was conducting a research study on FWA.² The exact nature of the study was not explained at the outset to avoid demand characteristics, such as when employees were asked permission to observe their interactions and were assured confidentiality. Confidentiality was a serious concern of mine in conducting this research. The data include stories, actions, or reflections by employees that indicate dissatisfaction with or resistance to company policies. To assure

that confidentiality was maintained, each flight attendant was given a code name, which I used in all field notes and write-ups. After the encounters, flight attendants were told the exact nature of the study and were asked permission for inclusion. Every flight attendant I asked agreed to participate.

Although intense interviewing is usually a component of participant observation, I did not want to encourage the construction of resistant discourse that might not occur if I did not solicit it. Therefore, in an effort to remain as unobtrusive as possible, I chose not to conduct formal interviews. Instead, I worked as a flight attendant alongside the respondents. I listened carefully to conversations around me, took extensive field notes, and immediately transcribed notes into journal entries after each trip (Anderson, 1984; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). At the end of the 3-month period, I had produced more than 100 single-spaced pages of field notes and had identified 62 incidents of hidden transcripts.

Hidden transcripts were defined as social practices, including speech acts, facial expressions, and gestures, that resist management control but do so out of management's view. Some strong indicators of hidden transcripts were found in the following: anonymity (when the source of stories, rumors, or gossip remains unknown and the content is aggressive); the use of euphemisms to alter the interpretation of dominating or resistant actions; grumbling or complaining about dominant situations among peers; and more complex forms of resistant behavior such as folktales, symbolic inversions, and rituals of reversals (an exchange of the dominant and subordinate positions) such as Bakhtin's notion of carnival (Scott, 1990).

Data analysis. To make sense of the data, I used an emergent coding scheme to extract from and order "the chaotic flux of reality" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 133; Owen, 1984). I read and reread the transcripts looking for repetitive acts or issues. One theme that clearly emerged was gender. I did not go into the field looking for hidden transcripts that focused specifically on gender resistance. As the study continued, however, gender issues clearly dominated my data. Although a wide variety of subjects were

