Resisting change from within and without the organization

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute further to the understanding of why and how employees resist workplace change. Building on previous studies exploring the link between worker subjectivity and workplace change, the paper highlights both the spatial and temporal dimensions of tactics of resistance.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on case study evidence from an Australian credit union that had implemented significant changes to its service strategy, and identifies employee responses to these changes.

Findings – The case study identifies the way in which tradition and place can be discursive resources with which employees resist changes to work practices and roles which threaten to disrupt workplace and gender identities.

Originality/value – To date, the literature has focused on tactics of resistance that draw on temporal and spatial narratives from inside the organization. This paper extends the understanding by showing how individuals also draw on narratives from outside the organization to resist workplace change.

Keywords Gender, Organizational change, Work identity, Narratives

Paper type Case study

Preamble

People are consciously and unconsciously “made up” through a complex grid of experiences across time and space (Hacking, 1986; Giddens, 1991; Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998). Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 626) describe the ongoing nature of these processes as “identity work” wherein individuals are “continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions” that provide them with a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. Much of this “identity work” takes place in the workplace and it is here that individuals very often face attempts to reshape their identity in line with an organizationally prescribed set of meanings and values. Changing work practices can either confirm or challenge an individual’s “narrative of the self” (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998, p. 382). A number of studies have highlighted how attempts by management to reshape worker identity often meet with resistance (Eilam and Shamir, 2005; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Jermier et al., 1994; Willmott, 1993). Recognising the importance of worker subjectivity in resistance has led to the identification of the more subtle, routine and covert forms that resistance can take, including; restriction of output and rule violation (Gottfried, 1994), cynicism and dis-identification (Fleming, 2005; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Ford et al., 2002), irony and guile (Fleming and Sewell, 2002), “othered” subject positions (Thomas and Davies, 2005a), internalised stress-based...
reactions (Sturdy and Fineman, 2001) and alternative interpretative repertoires (Knights and McCabe, 2000). There has also been recognition of the temporal (Strangleman, 2004; Ford et al., 2002; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Wolfram-Cox, 2001) and spatial (Halford and Leonard, 2006; Brown and Humphreys, 2006) dimensions of these more covert and subtle forms of resistance. These studies have highlighted the way in which employees drew on temporal and spatial narratives located in the workplace to resist change. However, given that an individual’s self-identity is assembled across the life cycle from a raft of messages consciously and unconsciously received in a variety of interactions and experiences (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), then we can expect that workplace resistance may also draw on narratives from outside the workplace. Feminist scholars have long recognised the need to explore the connections between the private and public spheres and the impact on gender-based identities (Westwood, 1984; Gottfried, 1994). This is because the changes being asked of employees at work will invariably flow across the “inside/outside” organizational divide (Fleming and Spicer, 2004) and impact on aspects of non-work identity. This paper contributes to our understanding of the spatio-temporal aspects of resistance by highlighting the way that one group of employees drew on spatio-temporal discourses from both within and without the organization to protect threatened workplace and gender identities. By highlighting the temporal and spatial dimensions of resistance, this paper extends our appreciation of not only who resists and how they do so, but also why they resist (Jermier et al., 1994, p. 11).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 sets out the conceptual framework of the paper. The subsequent section introduces the case study organization and discusses the research methods used. The empirical material that follows is structured into two sections. The first section outlines the nature of the changes to customer service strategy at the case study organization, while the second section shows how employees responded to those changes. The final section of the paper draws the discussion together by highlighting how the front-line service employees’ “tactics” of resistance reinforced and reshaped both workplace and gender identities that had been constructed across time and space.

**Resistance across time and space**

May (1999) argues that the contradictions in, and unintended consequences of, managerial strategy create spaces in which practices and identities emerge at odds with strategies that seek to stabilise and intensify the effort bargain. He argues that in order to fully understand what is occurring in organizations we need to not only focus on strategy, but tactics – what workers do in those spaces. Wray-Bliss and Willmott’s (1999) study of call centre operators provides a good example of the way in which tactics of resistance can take place in the spaces created by strategic ambiguities. The employees in their study turned the discursive ambiguities and contradictions in the call centre’s new customer service strategy into a tactic of resistance by drawing on a discourse of customer service as a counter-argument to the pressures of meeting sales targets. Similarly, in their study of a large supermarket chain, Rosenthal et al. (1997) uncovered evidence that employees used the language and concepts of the recently instigated “Service Excellence” program to resist changes in management strategy.

In both these cases, the employees’ ideal of customer service offered workers both a source of job satisfaction and a discursive tool with which to resist changes to their service role. Indeed, Wray-Bliss (2001, p. 53) has suggested that it is possible to view
the call centre clerks’ use of an oppositional “discourse of customer service” as a result of being “emotionally involved and feeling the need to resist” and that this moral/political discourse is potentially radically unsettling for organizations. Korczynski (2002) also argues that employees’ own conceptualisations of “good customer service” offer them both the possibility of satisfaction from their work and an ethical position from which to resist changes to their role. He argues that front-line service employees often resist the shift from a service- to a sales-oriented strategy because of their “preference for a relationship of empathy and identification, rather than instrumentalism, with customers” (Korczynski, 2002, p. 116). This preference arises in part because the emotional labour involved in service work enables employees engaged in that labour to project a sense of “who one is, a sense of what one values and wants, and a sense of how one is connected to others” (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993, p. 91). As such, this labour forms part of the ongoing process of identity work.

Such identity work takes place in the very active details of the places, spaces and times in which lives are lived (Halford and Leonard, 2006). It follows then that organizational change that renders insecure previously secure sites of identity formation (Hancock, 2006), and/or threatens to disrupt a sense of self-continuity, will meet with resistance (Eilam and Shamir, 2005). It is widely recognised that resistance is intertwined with subjectivity (Jermier et al., 1994). Individuals will resist when “there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest” (Thomas and Davies, 2005b, p. 687). Resistance to change that aims to threaten a sense of continuity is never only about what is happening now but is also about what has happened before (Ford et al., 2002; Wolfram-Cox, 2001). As Strangleman (2004) found in his study of culture change in British Rail, those who looked back to earlier times were seen as nostalgic failures and established workers were seen as the embodiment of that failure. Yet, it was precise because of their collective experience over time and the meaning invested in their work that the railway workers resisted arbitrary change (Strangleman, 2004). The moral ownership they showed over work was a result of their collective and sedimneted experiences over time (Strangleman, 2004, p. 176).

This idea that employee responses and reactions are sedimented over time not only highlights the temporal dimensions of identity, it also alludes to the spatial aspects of identity formation and sustenance. Brown and Humphreys (2006) have shown how distinct cohorts of workers in a newly merged organization drew on shared understandings of “place” to inform, defend, contest and promote preferred versions of themselves and their organization. They found that individuals drew on understandings of different buildings to engage in nostalgic reminiscences and bittersweet memories of the pre-merged college, while others drew on “place” as a discursive resource with which to fantasize about their preferred futures for the college. Their research shows that place, like time, saturates social life (Brown and Humphreys, 2006, p. 252). Others have shown that space, like time, is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. For example, Herod et al. (2007) draw on Agnew (1987) to outline how place incorporates three aspects: place as “location” (a distinct spot on Earth’s surface); place as “locale” (a physical arena for everyday life); and place as a “locus of identity.” They define this third aspect of place “as a focus for personal and collective loyalty, affect and commitment” (Herod et al., 2007, p. 254). This third aspect of “place” as a “locus of identity” is somewhat narrow, and needs to be broadened to incorporate the many ways that an individual’s identity is spatially made up through a sense of place. Of course, it is impossible, as Halford and
Leonard (2006) argue, to separate aspects of time and space, as they are interwoven. For example, spatial narratives invariably draw on past experiences, contemporary lifestyles and preferred futures (Brown and Humphreys, 2006).

The studies outlined above have shown how employees draw on temporal resources (discourses of the past and future) to resist change that threatens a sense of self-continuity. More recently, there has been a focus on the ways that employees construct spatial narratives of resistance. However, all these studies focus on the way in which workers draw on organizationally based spatio-temporal narratives to resist workplace change. Fleming and Spicer (2004) suggest further research is required to understand not only time and identity boundaries, but also spatial dimensions of work and non-work places. Feminist studies have long recognised the need to focus attention on more situated and contingent forms of resistance and shown that women often engage in tactics of resistance that are rooted in everyday life (Westwood, 1984; Gottfried, 1994; Thomas and Davies, 2005a). These everyday forms of resistance are likely to be small-scale, covert and subtle, and centre on “destabilizing truths, challenging subjectivities and normalising discourse” (Thomas and Davies, 2005a, p. 727). This paper makes a contribution to our understanding of such tactics of resistance by highlighting the way in which one group of employees drew on spatio-temporal narratives from both inside and outside the workplace to resist organizational change and to reinforce both workplace and gender-based identities.

Case and methods
In order to explore the temporal and spatial dimensions of resistance, this paper adopts a case study method that draws on close observations of informal practices at the local level, within a historically embedded context (Sturdy and Fleming, 2003; Greene et al., 2002). The empirical material presented in this paper derives from a larger study exploring the changing relationship between banks and their customers conducted in eight Australian retail banking organizations. This paper focuses on the findings in relation to one of those case study organizations, Coast[1], a medium-sized credit union servicing rural and regional communities in New South Wales in Australia. The focus of this paper is how front-line service workers resisted the changes being introduced at the local level. The changes introduced by Coast management were in large part the result of consequences of deregulation of the financial services sector that began in Australia in the 1980s and continued throughout the 1990s. During this period of deregulation credit unions faced more regulatory change than their for-profit counterparts because the government’s focus on “creating a level playing field” for all deposit-taking institutions. This saw the removal of special provisions for credit unions, including the loss of tax-exempt status. In the face of this more competitive environment, credit unions such as Coast adopted many of the strategies of their large for-profit competitors. In many respects, they embraced a “discourse of enterprise” with its emphasis on “market forces” and “entrepreneurial principles” (du Gay and Salaman, 1992). Encompassed within this “discourse of enterprise” is an emphasis on self-reliance and individual responsibility (Doolin, 2002). In credit unions, the “discourse of enterprise” privileges ideas of competitiveness and individuality over the traditional credit union values of co-operativeness and mutuality.

Originally, Coast serviced the staff and suppliers of a large dairy co-operative but deregulation of that industry saw Coast’s customer base disappear and it needed to
extend its membership from the confines of the coastal hinterland out to the more prosperous towns located along the coastline. At the time of the research, Coast employed approximately 100 people located in 15 branches. The branch network is divided into three regions – Northern, Central and Southern. The Southern region is the focus of the research for this paper, as it was these branches the general manager was prepared to provide access to because, as he explained, he was keen to discover why the staff in these branches were having so much trouble adapting to the organization’s new sales strategy. Despite this concern, there was no requirement for the researcher to report back on her findings and the responses of the employees interviewed were never disclosed to management.

There are four branches in the southern region and branch managers and front-line service employees from each of these branches were interviewed. While all employees in the four branches participated in the project, their participation was entirely voluntary. In total, 20 respondents were interviewed from Coast including managers (five), all of whom were male, and front-line service employees (15), all of whom were female. This reflects the gendered division of labour in retail banking generally and an assumption in the minds of some managers that women, by virtue of their gender, are more suited to service roles (Tyler and Taylor, 2001). The interviews were carried out at the four branch sites and were “semi-structured” in that there was a list of questions (see the Appendix) used to guide the research, but the question script was not strictly followed and interview respondents brought other issues into the discussion and were encouraged to talk freely about whatever seemed important to them. The interviews ranged in time from 45 to 90 minutes, were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed as close to the interview time as practical so that it was possible to recall and reflect on the meaning constructed at the time (Hodgson, 2000). “Resistance” per se was not a focus of the original larger research project, but it emerged as a common theme in this case following a process of open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Other sub-themes under the theme “service” included “change”, “sales”, “mutuality” and “community”. The coding process involved reviewing the text and apportioning an appropriate theme and sub-theme to segments of the text. This process was facilitated with the use of the qualitative software package NVivo. For example, the sub-theme of “resistance” was broken down into further categories: “resistance to”, “resistance by”, “resistance how” and “resistance for”. Coding the data in this way allowed for the identification of the properties and dimensions of the category “resistance” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and facilitated the investigation of the meaning that the research subjects themselves attributed to their actions or behaviour (Jermier et al., 1994). This method of analysis allowed the researcher to fully appreciate Knights and Vurdubakis (1994) claim that resistance is best understood when examined in specific sites and with recognition that each site has definite socio-historical conditions of existence. In order to appreciate the specifics of this particular research site, a range of documentary material, including official company literature, a branch strategy report commissioned by the Coast, employee performance appraisals, customer surveys and newsletters was also examined. This organizationally specific information was supplemented by media reports and published and unpublished reports produced by government departments, industry bodies and consumer associations. Examination of this supplementary material helped to ensure that the close coding of interview data was informed by the broader social-economic context in which the interview respondents lived their lives.
As Halford and Leonard (2005, p. 664) remind us, “managerialist discourses of change are not received in isolated or abstracted space, but embedded in the vivid and sometimes dramatic particularities of spaces and times”. It is important then that the reader have an understanding of the context in which change was taking place at Coast. While Coast has adopted a “discourse of enterprise” and chosen to emulate strategies of the large retail banks, the places into which they provide their services are very different to those predominately serviced by the large retail banks. In fact, Coast is the only financial institution offering a branch facility to the residents of these towns. The large retail banks had shut their doors during the raft of bank closures that took place in Australia in the 1990s when more than 7,000 branches were closed across Australia (Wade, 2002). Coast’s southern branches are all small shop-front offices located on the shopping strip of rural towns. Stepping inside these branches is like stepping back in time with the large teller counter dominating the front of the office space and the majority of the floor space being given over to behind-the-counter transactions. This contrasts with the spatial layout of most retail banks where the space has been turned around and tellers are located at the back of the building and the majority of the space is given over to modular spaces in which staff meet with customers. While the large retail banks have extended their opening hours in recent years, none of Coast’s branches opened all day everyday. In one case, the branch only opened in the mornings.

Coast’s senior management are all located in the head office 300 kilometres north of the southern branches. Coast’s general manager, while labelling the southern branches the “problem branches”, was also aware of their sense of isolation from the rest of the organization – an issue raised in a number of interviews with employees (but not branch managers). The general manager also acknowledged that the towns serviced by these southern branches were also less affluent than those located further north. This is in large part why the large retail banks had left years before. Coast has been able to continue to offer a branch facility because, as a not-for-profit credit union, they are not beholden to shareholders and were able to return any surpluses back into service provision for members. In this respect, Coast is demonstrating its ongoing commitment to the Credit Union principles of “open and voluntary membership, democratic control, non-discrimination, service to members, and equitable distribution of surpluses” (see www.woccu.org, World Council of Credit Unions (2007)), while at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, introducing a service strategy that contradict these principles. Coast’s new service strategy not only places a requirement on members to be autonomous, profitable customers, it requires employees within a refrain of competitiveness to place an emphasis on sales and profits, despite the “not-for-profit” status of these organizations. Coast has moved from an emphasis on service to sales and in doing this have reconceptualised the concept of “customer as member”.

The credit union adopted practices of the large retail banks with little thought about how strategies based on sales targets and customer segmentation might contradict the principles of a “not-for-profit” organization whose philosophy of mutuality was said to emphasize co-operation between members for the common good. Managerial prescriptions that require employees to adopt an enterprise approach in their relationship with customers are potentially more problematic in “not-for-profit” organizations such as credit unions. The new strategy not only sought to change the relationship between the credit union and its members, it also shifted the role of the
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front-line employees from an emphasis on providing customer service to selling financial products. New remuneration practices mandated that employee performance was to be measured predominately on achieving individual sales targets and increments in pay linked to an overall performance rating, 80 per cent of which was determined by sales results. The sales strategy also failed to take account of the different people and places serviced by Coast. Employees in the southern branches were expected to meet the same sales targets as those working in towns in the more affluent central and northern regions.

The branch managers interviewed were extremely frank in expressing their impatience with employees who could not make the changes required by the new sales strategy. John was emphatic: “If their performance doesn’t improve they won’t be staying here for very much longer. It is either improve and we give them all the resources and all the help, or go.” It appears that a significant proportion of Coast’s staff took the option to leave. In 2002, 25 per cent of Coast’s employees left the organization. For those who stayed, the changes resulted in considerable stress. Several interviewees reported having to take sick leave and feeling very uncomfortable about this. Ruth explained how the new sales strategy had affected her:

There is the stress from the sales; we have to be thinking, thinking. Then we get stressed if we get sick. Who can cover us? No-one. It really scared me and I haven’t been right and I kept getting sick all the time. I feel like I need to go to the toilet all the time. I would think about work and almost start crying.

When Ruth reported to her supervisor how she was feeling he organized for her to see a psychologist. However, as Sturdy and Fineman (2001, p. 143) argue, the provision of leave and counselling services in effect “aims to re-manufacture consent and reproduce the extant organizational order”. In this case, it aimed to push the problems associated with the shift from service to sales back onto the employees themselves. They were the “problem branches”. The general manager and branch managers assumed that the employees’ unwillingness to change was underpinned by a discomfort with selling and had labelled their behaviour “non-coping”. While it may have been comforting for management to blame the problems experienced in implementing the new sales strategy on the intransigence of a group of employees, this comfort hid a failure to recognise the contradictions within their sales strategy and the complexity of the responses felt by these employees to the changes being introduced. It was not that the employees could not make the shift from service to sales; they would not make the shift. The next section of the paper sets out how and why they used the spaces created by the contradictions in management strategy to resist the changes being introduced.

Resisting change – tactics based in time and place

Traditionally, credit unions as mutual organizations have rejected the concept of “customer” and insisted on the use of the word “member” to reflect the fact that they are mutuals and their members are owners of the credit union. At Coast, the changing strategy had also been accompanied by a shift in discourse. In the interviews, the general manager and branch managers used the words “member” and “customer” interchangeably. In contrast, in the interviews the front-line service employees never referred to their members as customers and reiterated the importance of distinguishing between the notion of “customers” and “members”. Anne explained:

Well, it is interesting because we have always said members, always, always, and our General Manager released some articles sometime ago and said, “Our customers”. And we
brought it up in a meeting and asked our manager why is he calling them customers? And he said, “Well everyone is a customer”. And I was like that is totally changing the whole philosophy that I joined a credit union for.

The southern branch employees were aware that the shift in language by management from “member” to “customer” was significant because it represented a move away from the traditional philosophy of the Credit Union Movement that had informed their work practice and around which they had developed their service ethic.

Not only did the employees appreciate the importance of changing discourse in relation to “customer”, but they also appreciated the significance of their own changing job titles. Their titles had been changed to “Sales Consultants”, however the employees resisted this initiative by continuing to refer to themselves as “Member Service Officers”. As Karen explained:

Basically I still think of myself as a Member Service Officer because I would rather service members than sell them products. I think it is a much nicer title. By saying “Sales Consultant” it is more along the bank’s imagery. I don’t think of myself in that way so I refuse to. I am a little rebel (laughs!).

At the time of the interviews, these changes had been in operation for more than two years, however all interview respondents continued to refer to themselves, and each other, as Member Service Officers.

Employees were keen to highlight the contradictions they saw between the principles of the Credit Union Movement as a whole and the move by their credit union towards a sales culture. Ruth argued:

I always thought credit unions were there for their members. I would never sell or push a product onto somebody that wouldn’t help them and if that means I don’t meet sales targets then I don’t meet sales targets.

The Member Service Officers’ reluctance to embrace the new sales culture arose in large part because it required them to conceptualise the credit union members differently. As Sue explained:

You think in a different way. You don’t want to hassle with the little tiny things when you know the next person is standing there with an insurance policy and your target is to try and get that person. I want to treat the person in front of me like I normally would and not think, oh God the next one is really important; I want to get it before the other [Member Service Officer]. I am feeling that the next person is more important than the person in front of me. I don’t like that!

Employees resisted the new sales strategy because it not only required them to think about their “members” in more instrumental ways, it also threatened the continuity of their self-identity as helping, caring individuals. All the branch employees indicated that it was the contact with the members that was the most rewarding aspect of their work. As Joy remarked, “It is the people that come in. You know them all on a name basis. You know all about their life stories and everything”. Mary commented that the most rewarding aspect of the work was “to have people be happy, smile at you and call you by your name and you the same. To know that they are satisfied”.

This capacity for caring had previously been nurtured and valued by credit union management and was extended to all members of the organization. Now, this capacity for caring was to be limited to only those members who could bring value to the organization. In resisting the changes introduced to their organization, the credit union
employees emphasized their attachment to their service roles. Their self-identification
as service workers became more important because it allowed them to project an
alternative identity to that promoted by management. They drew on a “discourse of
mutuality” previously promoted by management, and used it to reinforce a “preferred
self”. Anne summed it up when she said, “We do anything for anybody, help anybody
out. That’s who we are”. In the interviews, the women drew on the notion of family to explain their
motivations in working for the credit union. They talked about the benefits of working
locally and part-time for their own families:

Marian: “I have three children so I don’t want to work full time. It is really the ideal working
environment for me”.

Anne: “I have a three-year-old son. I am really happy working the hours that I am. My family
is just as important to me as my job”.

They also drew on the concept of family to describe their relationships with each other
and with the credit union members:

Joy: “Here I try and treat the members like a family because I think that’s what it is.
The branch is a family and all our members are family members”.

All the female employees interviewed had been born in, or were long-time residents of,
the towns in which they worked. The members of their credit union were members of
their local community. As Marian commented, “They know us. We were born and bred
here and they know us. They know that they can trust us.”

These notions of trust and belonging also extended to relations between staff. Anne
and Clare had gone to school with each other, they had been each other’s bridesmaids
and, as Anne explained, she was going to be the godmother to Clare’s baby due in three
months time. Not surprisingly, they resisted attempts by the branch manager to have
them compete with each other over sales targets. As Clare said, “We don’t want to
compete against each other; we grew up together.” She explained how they were
“constantly in trouble” with their manager for entering the daily sales figures so that
the rewards were shared evenly rather than the rewards going to Anne who made most
of the sales. As Anne explained:

Clare finds it difficult to ask people things, but I don’t have a problem. So I will ask. So we
work as a team. Regardless of what happens it is a team effort and you are not going to split
us regardless of what way it is going.

Clare expressed similar sentiments: “We just didn’t want to see that [targets]
happening. We know each other too well. We didn’t want that coming between us.”

This same dynamic operated at another branch where Marian explained:

In a team of two people, well Rose and I get on well so it doesn’t bother me who gets what sale
or who does what. I mean it is really good when we get a good target sale. So we go yer! I got
it or you got it and we get really happy about that, so it doesn’t really matter as long as our
branch performance is good.

Unlike the other women, Sharon runs Coast’s smallest branch single-handedly. The
interview which was conducted at the front counter was interrupted several times
while she served members who came into the branch which was only open in the
mornings. Sharon explained how being in the branch on her own made it impossible to meet the requirements of the new sales strategy:

The thing with doing any outbound calls, like trying to drum up business with phone calls, it is really hard for me to do on my own because I have got to help the person that comes through the door. It makes it very hard here because every month I don’t meet targets.

The new sales strategy had been implemented across all Coast’s branches with no regard for differences – social and spatial – between the towns serviced by these branches. There was a contradiction between the credit union’s ongoing commitment to providing branch services to these communities and their adoption of the sales and segmentation strategies of the large retail banks. Employees in Coast’s southern branches resisted the new sales strategy in large part because they had grown up or lived for a long time in the towns where the branches were located and related to the credit union’s members as “friends” or “family”. Further, as Sallie Westwood (1984) found in her study of life on the factory floor, the women’s friendships at Coast were an essential and vital part of their work life. It is not surprising that they resisted a management strategy that required them to think of members of their “community” as sales opportunities with varying levels of worth, and each other as workplace competitors. The tactics of resistance they employed drew on a solidarity forged with each other both inside and outside the workplace. They were friends, they lived in the same communities, and their resistance was aimed at protecting those friendships and a sense of belonging to a community.

Discussion
This paper has set out to show why a group of front-line service officers in one particular local context resisted changes to their organization’s service strategy, and how they resisted the consequences of those changes (Jermier et al., 1994). Coast’s employees used the spaces created by the contradictions in the organization’s sales strategy to construct discursive tactics of resistance (May, 1999). These spaces were created by the contradictions in a strategy that upheld the credit union tradition of financial inclusion, by maintaining an admirable and costly commitment to providing branch services in rural towns abandoned by the large retail banks, while at the same time introducing sales and segmentation strategies that ran counter to credit union philosophy. The new sales strategy not only contradicted many of the tenants of the Credit Union Movement, it also failed to take account of the different places serviced by the credit union. They expected their front-line service employees to engage with “members” in much more instrumental ways (Korczynski, 2002). However, the new emphasis on selling conflicted with the employees’ ideal of “good service” that had developed over years of working for a not-for-profit organization where the customer was traditionally said to be the owner of the organization. The moral ownership they showed over their work came as a result of these sedimented experiences over time, and it was because of the meaning that they had invested in their work that there was resistance (Strangleman, 2004). This is because the new sales strategy threatened not only a work-based identity but also their gender-based identities as good friends, mothers, and caring members of their local communities.

They resisted this threat by drawing on counter-discourses of the past (mutuality and member) and place (community and belonging). These counter-discourses gave
their resistance a moral authority (Strangleman, 2004; Wray-Bliss, 2001). Continuing to hold onto the concept of “member not customer” gave them a counter-discourse with which to resist management’s attempts to replace a “discourse of mutuality” with a “discourse of enterprise” (du Gay and Salaman, 1992). By dis-identifying with the new culture, they were refusing to become the kind of people the company wanted them to be (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Their refusal to adopt their new job titles of “Sales Consultant” was because these new labels “limited the sphere of their possible selves” (Hacking, 1986, p. 236).

The long-established relationships they had developed with each other through growing up in the same place led them to treat the new sales targeting system as “a hollow game” (Sturdy and Fineman, 2001). In playing the game, their way they were privileging their relationships with each other as friends over any individual monetary benefits that playing the game management’s way might have brought them. Their friendships were forged through solidarity and sisterhood (Westwood, 1984) that extended beyond the workplace and into the private sphere. As Gottfried (1994, p. 108) argues, “it is the work/family nexus that offers clues to understanding practices performed in, or absent from, the workplace”. The case highlights the way in which gender identities intertwine with workplace identities to produce acts of resistance that are rooted in everyday lives.

In resisting the disruption to their “narratives of the self” (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998) the front-line service employees not only drew on competing discourses from within the organization; they also used oppositional discourses from beyond the organization (Halford and Leonard, 2006). They not only worked for organizations that serviced small, rural towns, they were also members of these communities and their self-identity was shaped by their lived experiences in these places. In the small regional centres serviced by Coast face-to-face contact, personal recommendation and informal word-of-mouth are central to the conduct of financial business and transactions – “geography matters” (Martin, 1999, p. 11). Coast’s front-line employees certainly understood this, but it was not clear that management did. Coast’s sales strategy failed to recognise the deep connections their employees had with each other and with the members of the credit union because they were part of each other’s life history. This resulted in them rejecting management’s attempts to segment “customers” by continuing to provide the same level of service to all “members” regardless of their “worth” to the organization, and by refusing to sell products even when this impacted negatively on their own remuneration. The new sales strategy not only sought to change the way employees perceived themselves, but “also their lived experiences of space” (Fleming and Spicer, 2004, p. 87). In response, the employees distanced themselves from the company’s strategy by drawing on non-work sources of self-identification. Their use of spatial discourses of belonging and community gave this resistance a greater moral authority. To understand both the how and the why of the women’s resistance, we need to appreciate that their resistance is more than “observable acts and behaviours” and that it is part of the ongoing work of the everyday identity construction that the women were engaged in (Thomas and Davies, 2005a, p. 726). In particular, the why of their resistance needs to be understood as part of the process of ongoing construction of their identities as mothers, friends, and members of a specific local community.
Conclusion
This paper has shown that resistance carried out in the spaces created by contradictions in management strategy is not simply constituted by that strategy (May, 1999; Knights and McCabe, 1998), but is drawn from a well-spring of experiences and beliefs laid down across the employee’s lifetime. Coast’s front-line service officers drew on historically established meanings (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003) of mutuality and a spatially based discourse of community to resist their organization’s sales strategy. They also drew on gender-based identities to resist practices which they saw had the potential to undermine their friendships and family relationships (Westwood, 1984). Given that self-identity is constituted across time and space (Giddens, 1991), it follows that employees wishing to maintain that continuity would draw on both temporal and spatial discourses both from inside and outside the organization in developing tactics of resistance. This paper has highlighted the ways in which tradition and place can be discursive resources with which employees resist changes that seek to undermine both work-based and gender identities. The paper contributes to our understanding of the way in which employees’ maintain a continuity of self-identity across time and space by drawing on the complex grid of their life experiences (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

A limitation of this research is the fact that interviews were only conducted with employees in the southern branches of the organization. It would have made for a richer analysis if interviews could have been conducted with employees in the northern and central branches in order to explore the extent to which the actual context impacts on the way in which discourse and strategy are received and renegotiated (Halford and Leonard, 2006).

Furthermore, because the research was conducted at a particular point in time and space it is hard to generalize about the long-term effects of the changes, or to determine the likely effectiveness of these counter discourses of the past and place in resisting change. It may be that they do result in a number of “small wins” and provide a sense of emancipation for the women (Thomas and Davies, 2005a, p. 733). Yet, as Collinson (2005) argues, resistance practices that are primarily designed to secure a sense of self often seem to generate opposing and contradictory outcomes. It may be that drawing on “counter-discourses” in effect increases the stress that can arise when employees seek to resist managerial attempts to disrupt the continuity of their self-identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Knights and McCabe, 1998). However, the fact that the women continued to resist the changes being introduced, despite the increasing managerial denigration, reduced earnings, and continuing negative health effects, tells us much about the continuous processes of identity construction that we all engage in, as we seek to find dignity and meaning through our work.

Note
1. A pseudonym has been given to the case study organization and to the interviewees in order to maintain their anonymity.

References


Appendix. The interview script

(1) Could you please outline for me your role within the organization?
(2) Do you work full time or part time?
(3) How long have you held that position?
(4) Where you employed in another area of the financial service sector before coming to the credit union?
(5) If so, how different is it working in a credit union?
(6) What would you identify as the most rewarding aspect of your work?
(7) Credit unions talk about members not customers. How significant do you think this difference in language is?
(8) In what ways do you think members’ influence your credit union?
(9) In what ways does your organization place an emphasis on member service?
(10) Have your perceptions of the members you service changed overtime?
(11) Pressures on the credit union industry have seen the need for a shift from service to sales. How have you experienced this shift?
(12) What training have you received from your organization?
(13) Is customer abuse ever an issue for you?
(14) Are there mechanisms in place for members to give feedback about the service they receive?
(15) In what ways is reward linked to performance in your job?
(16) Do you belong to a union?
(17) If not, would you ever consider joining a union?

About the author
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