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Manufacturing Conformity : Leadership Through Coercive Persuasion in Business Organisations

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This paper critically examines the neglected importance of employee conformity in organisations. More specifically, it addresses the ways in which coercive persuasion can manufacture conformity through contemporary leadership processes and corporate culture practices. Drawing on the foundational work of Schein (1961), we illustrate how the nine techniques of coercive persuasion that he identified can serve as a framework for understanding the exercise of power and the manufacture of conformity in modern organisations. In particular, we discuss this framework in relation to the phenomenon of 'corporate culturalism' (in which powerful leaders determine constraining norms and values for others, in the form of compelling ideologies). We argue that ideology, when embraced with sufficient vigour, can function as an invisible internal eye, ensuring that subjects themselves become the instruments of their own subjugation. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of coercive persuasion in organisational discourse.

key words: Coercive persuasion; employee conformity; power and ideology

'Management has to unite the organisation around a strong idea, a shared vision, and then manage accordingly. That makes tough demands. In the company of the future there will only be space for believers. Dissenters must look elsewhere.' (Kunde and Cunningham, *Corporate Religion*, 2000)

INTRODUCTION

Today's organisations are marked by the steady accumulation of power on the part of corporations and senior executives (Guthey, 2005; Starbuck, 2003; Haigh, 2003), power that is often exercised through coercive control mechanisms (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts, 2006) designed to ensure conformity (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). Although we are confronted almost daily by examples of the negative consequences of coercion, we see a key contemporary concern lying with coercion's more subtle side. Coercive persuasion refers to the

ways in which we socially construct discursive systems of constraint that are difficult to challenge and resist as seen in such examples as Barker's (1993) tightly controlled teamwork environments, the tragically flawed decision-making on the part of Morton-Thiokol executives leading up to the Challenger disaster (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988; Tompkins, 1993) and the disciplinary processes within Enron that demonstrate how excessive levels of conformity and compliance can have dysfunctional and even dangerous consequences for organisations (Tourish and Vatcha 2005). While there has been some critical questioning of this growing coercive force of corporate power in our lives (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005, 2007), scholars have yet to explain fully the processes whereby unchallenged coercive persuasion becomes manifest in the daily lives of subordinates, followers and/or employees.

This paper explores the key dynamics of coercive persuasion and contextualizes these dynamics within modern corporate culturalism, one of its strongest manifestations. We begin by exploring coercive persuasion as a concept and situate its roots in contemporary theories of power, conformity, and leadership. The article draws on Schein's (1961) foundational work on coercive persuasion to develop a framework for describing and assessing the techniques of coercive persuasion that often shape conformity in organisational practice. We then discuss various effects and consequences of coercive persuasion from the standpoint of modern corporate culturalism and describe the implications of our analysis for future research.

Current Perspectives on Leadership, Power, and Conformity

The issue of conformity and its relationship to leadership is relatively under-examined in the literature. Some social psychological studies of leadership do address leaders' attempts to secure followers' conformity, but these tend to be rather uncritical, often taking for granted the desirability of followers' conformity. Typically, such studies argue that leaders influence followers' identity as an indirect means of increasing their commitment (Chemers, 2003). Scholars, informed by the transformational leadership literature in particular, suggest that leaders need to satisfy followers' needs, values, and goals and confirm their identities (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999), in order to effect a change of attitudes generally assumed to reflect a common interest (Shamir et al, 1993). Within such approaches, legitimacy derives from the assumption that management action is inherently rational, such that 'The interests of the organisation and those of management are seen to be largely coterminous' (Gordon et al., 2009: 16). Similarly, Lord and Brown (2001, 2004) define leadership as a social process through which leaders change the way followers envision themselves. They recommend that leaders should link motivation and reward to followers' identities, 'activating' the appropriate self rather than directly stressing specific goals.

Few studies in this tradition explicitly recognize that unquestioning conformity can have harmful consequences¹. Seeking to prescribe and im-

1. Hogg (2004) is one of the few writers in this tradition to problematize conformity in organisations.

prove leaders' control practices, these writers generally subscribe to a rather uncritical view of organisational power relations. They assume that power is always associated with coercion and differentiate this from leadership, which they typically define as an influence process that mobilises others towards the attainment of collective goals. Understanding leadership as a positive process of disproportionate social influence (e.g. Shamir, 1999), they distinguish between influence (in which followership is voluntary) and power (in which followers are coerced into compliance or obedience). Consequently such studies rarely examine follower conformity or the coercive and disciplinary aspects of leadership practices. Indeed, much of the leadership literature fails to address the issue of power at all, particularly at what is termed a 'deep structure' level (Gordon, 2002). Again, studies focusing on transformational leadership tend to under-theorise the role of dissent (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002), under-estimate the importance of followership (Grint, 2005) and encourage an environment in which narcissism rather than effective leadership thrives (Maccoby, 2003).

By contrast, more critical writers on organisations treat power as an embedded, structural and pervasive feature of organisations (Barker, 1993; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Drawing on Foucault's (1977, 1979) ideas in particular, they conceive of certain forms of power as also being positive, productive, and creative, since they are 'aimed at prohibiting undesirable behaviors and promoting desirable behaviors' (Sewell and Barker, 2006: 935). Accordingly, these writers question the separation between power and influence, and the assumption underpinning it according to which power is inherently negative and coercive. From this more critical perspective, influence is one form of (leaders') power. Accordingly, the foregoing recommendation that leaders should try to influence followers' identity illustrates the very disciplinary processes that more critical leadership writers seek to analyse (Collinson, 2005, 2006).

A questioning approach to workplace power relations has long been a central concern of critical organisation studies (Hardy and Clegg, 1999). Contemporary contributions have tended to focus specifically on the inter-relationships between control and resistance. A recent special issue of *Organisation*, for example, highlights the continued importance of the 'control-resistance dualism' within contemporary organisations, revealing how control strategies can produce forms of resistance designed to re-affirm employee identities (Delbridge and Ezzamel, 2005). Critical studies have demonstrated that employee resistance can take various forms, from output restriction and foot-dragging to sabotage, whistle blowing, and strikes (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). However, we see a tendency for this literature to focus too narrowly on the relationship between control and resistance². One effect is that important additional questions like employee commitment, conformity and compliance can be precluded from serious consideration. Equally, while identity is often associated with resistance (as Delbridge and Ezzamel assert), the concern to construct and protect self is frequently embedded in practices of conformity and compliance too, as we elaborate below.

2. In the same special issue of *Organisation*, Townley (2005) criticises the tendency to reduce organisational processes to the control-resistance dualism because this creates 'a totalitarian vision' in which 'not only is everything control, but also everything is resistance.' (2005: 645).

Hence, while the mainstream leadership literature is rather uncritical in its treatment of conformity in organisations, the more critical literature has tended to neglect conformity in favour of a recent focus on the inter-relationship between control and resistance. Against this background, we seek to develop a more critical analysis of both the ways in which conformity can be manufactured in organisations (through particular leadership practices) and the potentially detrimental consequences of such processes. The Nazi extermination of six million Jews and the explanation offered by those involved that they were simply 'obeying orders' serves as a stark reminder of the potential dangers of conformity. Accordingly, we draw inspiration from earlier classic works on conformity, especially that of Milgram (1974), whose experiments highlighted people's willingness to obey authority, and Fromm (1941), who pointed to 'the fear of freedom', whereby individuals try to shelter in the perceived security of being told what to do and think, viewing this apparent security as a less threatening alternative to the responsibility of making decisions for themselves.

Coercive Power and Coercive Persuasion

To develop further our conceptualisation of coercive persuasion within contemporary organisations, we draw on the renowned work of Schein (1961) to describe how corporate leaders may construct a social environment that coercively channels the physical, intellectual and emotional energies of employees towards conformity. We begin by differentiating between coercive persuasion and coercive power, the latter simply relying on the forced compliance of subjects to decreed organisational norms ('come to work on time tomorrow or you are sacked'). We assert that coercive persuasion, on the other hand, encourages subjects to internalise dominant cultural norms as their own, subsequently producing individuals deemed to be 'appropriate' by the ruling group (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) while disguising many of the elements of compulsion that are involved, even from those directly affected (Tompkins and Cheney, 1985).

Weber (1978) famously characterised rule based and rational control as an 'iron cage', tightly controlling forms of behaviour. Foucault (1977) discussed the notion of a Panopticon: a model for a prison in which the threat of constant and inescapable surveillance was sufficient to condition the behaviour of inmates in 'desirable' directions, replacing exclusive reliance on rules and bureaucracy³. As many have suggested, the notion of a perfect Panopticon is illusory: there is always some means of avoiding total surveillance. Resistance to control has been documented in many seemingly all powerful contexts (Simon, 2005). In addition, Foucault was most concerned by how the process of external observation compelled the adoption of centrally sanctioned behavioural norms, particularly since inmates could never be certain when they were being observed. This uncertainty required consistent conformity as observed 'deviancy' could attract punishment from the unseen observer.

From the perspective of coercive persuasion, Foucault's (1991) notion of 'governmentality' is also relevant. This expression, combining government and rationality, notes that government depends on ways of knowing. Vocabularies of knowledge are constructed by powerful

3. As Simon (2005) has pointed out, the notion of Panopticon has a dual focus. On the one hand, it depicts the story of a supervisor exerting control from a central tower. But it also depicts what happens to the prisoner, and in particular how self-discipline effects deep rooted internal change. Consistent with this perspective, our notion of coercive persuasion also has a dual focus, emphasising the direct impact of observation and punishment, but also the attitudinal and behavioural transformations wrought by the enthusiastic internalisation of an ideology sanctioned by powerful individuals.

groups to establish their legitimacy. Various regulatory systems, forms of administration and knowledge mechanisms are therefore also employed to this end (Townley, 1993). It follows that knowledge formation is not neutral; rather, it is the contested end product of attempts by more or less powerful actors to establish their version of the truth. Totalising managerial discourses are therefore common (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998).

Consistent with this suggestion of conflict, we see coercive persuasion as a means of linking surveillance with intense indoctrination. Coercive persuasion seeks to convince those at the receiving end that the sincere adoption of the designated belief systems is wholly consistent with their own self interest. Such coercive persuasion arises from the recognition by both the persuader and the person being persuaded that legitimacy involves the degree to which an elite's right to govern is recognised. Such recognition is more likely, as Courpasson (2000: 142) has argued, when 'existing legitimate authority perpetuates itself by incorporating soft practices and articulating these with hierarchical and formal bureaucratic practices.' When organisational members embrace, either partially or completely, an ideological orientation sanctioned by powerful leaders, it follows that the legitimacy of organisational structures, hierarchies and practices is more clearly established.

This perspective on coercive persuasion is also very much in line with traditional liberal conceptualisations of work (Sewell and Barker, 2006) that emphasize an employee's needs to act in ways that benefit the greater organisation and its members. Thus, adopting a designated belief system helps to stem the tendency, for example, toward slacking, as the employee would experience an intense internal, but discursively created, drive to act in ways consistent with the needs of the organisation.

While resistance certainly occurs, and doubts may be harboured, some will also find themselves 'convinced' by the type of coercive persuasion discussed in this paper. If this occurs, those concerned will be more likely to adopt a 'converted' mindset, and thus display zealous behaviours that are aligned with the belief system chosen for them by powerful others. Under these conditions, minimal external surveillance may be required to ensure that behaviours consistent with the belief system are enacted. As Townley (1993: 520) notes, following Foucault, 'power is not associated with a particular institution, but with practices, techniques and procedures'. Such a view avoids the widespread conception of coercion as a process aimed at getting people to do what they would otherwise not want to; if, by contrast, they can be 'coercively persuaded' by the deployment of various techniques into internalising a given ideology, they will be convinced that behaviours approved of by powerful organisational actors are actually undertaken of the subject's own volition, rather than by force of command. How might such outcomes be achieved? One answer begins with Schein's (1961) early analysis of coercive persuasion, which, we argue, still has much relevance for our thinking today.

4. His analysis is strikingly consistent with the contemporaneous work of Lifton (1961), who studied 'thought reform' programmes in China. Lifton also details similar mechanisms devoted to 're-education', through the use of emotional appeals and confession rituals.

5. Victims may also see rescue attempts as a threat, since the victims may be injured or killed during the attempt. This was precisely the fate of 344 civilians during the Beslan school siege in Russia in 2004.

Schein's Techniques of Coercive Persuasion

The notion of coercive persuasion grew out of Schein's study of US POWs detained in Korea in the 1950s⁴. Their Chinese captors successfully convinced many of the POWs to internalise Communist beliefs, adopt an appropriate Communist identity, and show intense commitment by adopting proselytising behaviours on behalf of the new belief system. Temporarily, many maintained their new belief system even after they were released from captivity (Taylor, 2004). On the basis of this quite remarkable outcome, Schein proposed that

if a prisoner was physically restrained from leaving a situation in which learning was the only alternative, they would eventually learn through a process of 'cognitive redefinition'. They would eventually come to understand the point of view of the captor and reframe their own thinking so that the judgment of having been guilty became logical and acceptable. In effect they had undergone what might be called a 'conversion' experience except it did not happen in the sudden way that religious conversions are often described. (Schein, 1961: 165)

This process is reminiscent of what has been dubbed 'the Stockholm syndrome' (Giebels et al., 2005) in which kidnap victims come to over-identify with their kidnapers, resist rescue, refuse to testify against them in court or, as with the heiress turned revolutionary Patty Hearst (Watkins, 1976), adopt a new identity in keeping with the kidnapers' value systems. Clearly, as with the POWs in Schein's study, kidnap victims are under intense physical and emotional stress. Some identify with their captors to minimise the omnipresent threat of violence. Since it is difficult to achieve any sense of perspective under these conditions, they may also invest the smallest act of kindness by their kidnapers with an importance out of proportion to the act itself⁵. Coercive persuasion can reinforce a new group identity that, paradoxically, is shared with people who may previously have appeared to be in a position of polar opposition to the victim.

Schein identifies a variety of conditions that facilitate such outcomes. We summarise these in Exhibit 1 and rearticulate the techniques to express how they can become manifest in today's organisations. We then discuss the techniques in detail, paying particular attention to how these conditions link to contemporary corporate practices.

Table 1 : The Key Techniques of Coercive Persuasion

Technique	Schein's Techniques from POW Experiences	Modern Organisational Translation of Technique
1. Reference Group Affiliation.	Prisoners faced an indeterminate sentence. This raised anxiety and created an impetus to affiliate with a new reference group as a means of reducing it.	Environmental changes, new entrants, and turnover create organisational anxiety. We seek alignment with reference groups to reduce the anxiety and increase conformance.
2. Role Modelling.	Prisoners were placed with others who were more advanced in the learning process, who role modelled 'successful' conformity and were rewarded for doing so. Prisoners were tempted to emulate their attitudes and behaviours to secure similar benefits.	Organisations develop systems of role modelling and mentoring so that members learn appropriate behaviour. We learn from and come to emulate those in positions of power over us as we seek to meet their expectations, which increases conformity.
3. Peer Pressures.	Rewards were given only on a group basis, and only if all members of the group embraced the new point of view. This intensified peer pressure to conform.	Focus on team working, shared rewards, and shared consequences intensifies peer pressure to conform.

Technique	Schein's Techniques from POW Experiences	Modern Organisational Translation of Technique
4. Alignment of Identity.	The new point of view was articulated repeatedly and in many forms. Repetition ensured that it eventually acquired a self-evident and eventually unchallengeable status.	Modern workers buy into the firm's strategic vision and shape their behaviours accordingly. Conformity to the vision and values becomes part of our identity.
5. Performance Assessment.	Written confession and self-criticism became a regular activity, so that prisoners assessed past actions from a new point of view. Problems with the new belief system were viewed as examples of individual rather than systemic weaknesses.	Employees are assessed based on their conformity with strategy and practice, including mechanisms such as 360-degree feedback. As individuals, we are expected to conform and the system is assumed to be correct.
6. Reward Systems.	Conformity attracted instant rewards. Signs of insincerity or limited understanding were punished. Conformist behaviours therefore increased while dissenting attitudes withered from lack of nourishment.	Conformists are rewarded. Dissent, such as whistle blowing or resistance, is sanctioned strongly.
7. Communication Systems.	Communications that in any way reinforced the old point of view or that reminded the prisoner of previous attachments were withheld or eliminated entirely. The past became ever more remote; the present acquired heightened power to shape attitudes, emotions and behaviours.	Management and control of communication becomes central to the organisation. Companies exert increased control of stakeholder information and management engagement with stakeholders.
8. Physical Pressure and Work Life Balance.	Physical pressures were constantly applied to weaken the prisoner's physical strength, with sleep deprivation being the most potent of these pressures; 'torture' was only used as a punishment for insincerity or lack of motivation to learn.	Members are expected to work longer hours and expend greater effort as a means of demonstrating conformity and commitment. Individuals are expected to demonstrate fortitude to overcome the physical demands of labour.
9. Psychological Safety.	Psychological safety was produced for prisoners by fellow prisoners who were further along in their 're-education' and could be supportive of the target prisoner's effort	Psychological contracts become invested in expectations of conformity. Mutual support of leaders creates both psychological safety and conformance.

1. Environmental changes, new entrants, and turnover create organisational anxiety.

In order to reduce anxiety, individuals may seek to align themselves with reference groups. The effect of this process is to increase conformity. In Schein's study, the POWs' only hope of redemption and release was when they made a confession that their captors judged to be sincere. This was a powerful incentive for conformity and an equally powerful punishment for dissent. Clearly, corporations are not POW camps. Nevertheless, employees frequently face management demands for conformity and the internalisation of belief systems sympathetic to corporate values. An example is Barker's (1993: 431-432) jarring account of forced confession and redemptive acceptance of conformity in peer work groups. Of course, like the POWs, we do have the option of concealed resistance such as by pretending towards a sincere, penitent and converted mindset. However, performances of this kind contain their own hazards. As Goffman (1959: 28) stresses, 'one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality.' In any event, coercive persuasion seeks to produce a genuine desire for conformity rather than its facsimile. Pressure alone is unlikely to have such an impact. Rather, a process of enculturation is also required. How is this likely to be achieved?

The key lies in the emulation of conformist rituals that are commonplace in organisations. For example, Kunda (1992) demonstrates, in

an ethnographic study of a hi-tech American corporation, how such rituals are developed by leaders to inculcate the 'right beliefs' and produce an 'acceptable' organisational identity. Employees may then play along with these rituals, rather than reveal what might be described as a 'bad attitude.' But this also renders employees liable to internalise the values behind the rituals, even if they have initially resisted them. In essence, like a method actor over preparing a part, the person internalises a role to such an extent that they become indistinguishable from their performance. It is likely that many of the POWs in Schein's study embarked on a similar course of action, only to find that their dissimulation gradually eroded pre-existing beliefs and helped install new values and codes of conduct in their place. Tourish and Vatcha (2005) have argued that this dynamic within Enron helps to explain the enthusiastic and seemingly genuine commitment by many of its employees to its internal rituals and to what ultimately proved to be its self-destructive beliefs.

2. Organisations develop systems of role modelling and mentoring so that members learn appropriate behaviour.

This provides the subjects of coercive persuasion with role models and socially legitimised identities to emulate. In Schein's study, prisoners could also see at first hand the rewards attached to adopting the prescribed organisational identity of 'the good Communist' and to demonstrating high levels of commitment through the enthusiastic display of behaviours consistent with their new identity. This dynamic is consistent with social identity theory, which asserts that individuals identify themselves with respect to various group memberships and tend to classify others into one or more categories (e.g. 'in-group' and 'out-group') in order to identify similarities and differences (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). It is also seen in Barker's (1993) description of placing new team members with longer-tenured members for 'proper' socialisation. Individuals establish a positive social identity and confirm association by showing preference to members of their own social category. As Jost and Elsbach (2001: 183) argued, 'we derive a great deal of personal value and meaning from our group memberships, so that our self-concepts depend in significant ways upon the ways in which our groups are regarded by ourselves and by others', a point echoed in the organisational identification literature (e.g. Tompkins and Cheney, 1983).

In the case of the POWs, more long standing members of the group would have appeared as experienced survivors and hence as positive role models. Following Tompkins and Cheney (1985), identifying with their behaviours, and subsequently internalising their attitudes would have been logical survival behaviour, helping to forge a new group identity of considerable value and strength.

More broadly, scholars have argued that the power of leaders in so-called 'high demand' groups increases as a result of the identity related benefits accruing from conformity that are provided by other group members (Baron et al., 2003). Acceptance by the members of such groups feels gratifying to those joining it, increasing the desire to affiliate. But affiliation is dependent on the acceptance and eventual internalisation of the norms within the group concerned, an acceptance that, in a punitive and disorienting environment, feels attractive because it

reduces uncertainty about what to think, feel and do (Hogg, 2001). Thus, if we accept that people are attracted by the idea of order, then the embrace of ideological commitment offers many attractions. A comprehensive belief system can appear to explain the world and the place of the individual within it. Under conditions of stress and uncertainty, ideological totalism of this kind may become more alluring, especially if people's need for security increases. Such dynamics reinforce leader power since the leaders define norms of behaviour and ideology, and thus set the parameters within which acceptance or exclusion from the valued group is likely to occur. In a similar way, new recruits to corporate organisations are typically predisposed to follow more established employees, whose longevity suggests they are familiar with organisational belief systems and their associated rituals of conformity.

3. Focus on team working, shared rewards, and shared consequences intensifies peer pressure to conform.

A number of general group theories point toward the potential impact of this technique. As the Milgram (1974) and Asch (1951) experiments demonstrated, we are strongly inclined to act on the basis of authority and to change our behaviours to be more consistent with those of other group members, particularly when members of the group have a higher status than we do. In the case of the POWs in Korea, rewards were dependent on compliance. Those already inclined toward compliance were thereby provided with a tremendous incentive to increase their pressure on the rest. Given their already strong tendency to conform to the emergent group norms, this additional pressure created an even more powerful context for conversion. It also provided an incentive for at least some group members to engage in the surveillance of their fellows in an expression of what Foucault (1977; 1982) regarded as disciplinary power. Such surveillance enforces norms of behaviour among all parties to a social interaction (Sewell and Barker, 2006), ensuring that alternative forms of being and doing are pushed to the margins of the group's tightly policed activities and consciousness (Lacombe, 1996).

Thus, in a parallel process, workplace surveillance systems increasingly seek to produce conformist (i.e. compliant and pliant) individuals in the workplace. The growing emphasis on teamwork is an important mechanism for unleashing similar dynamics in the form of peer pressure (Barker, 1993). Many such systems use group-based incentives and rewards, as well as other mechanisms, to create powerful systems of peer pressure. In Foucault's terms, these processes illustrate the disciplinary effects of power and identity and the barriers they can create for resistance (McKinlay and Taylor, 1996). Corporate culture initiatives (Kunda, 1992), performance assessment systems (Townley, 1994), and information gathering systems (Zuboff, 1988) have all been explored in ways consistent with our view of coercive persuasion. For example, Mehri's (2006) study of the lean production system at Toyota contrasted the official company rhetoric with a more coercive reality noting that 'Employees are expected to follow all rules and obey the prescribed code of behaviour that exists at the company' (Mehri, 2006: 26). Researchers have argued that such approaches seek to regu-

late, discipline and control employee selves, while camouflaging such intentions in the more benign rhetoric of family values and empowerment (Martin, 1999). Culture, in such contexts, becomes another form of social control (Willmott, 1993; 2003), regardless of the emancipatory rhetoric through which it may be expressed.

4. Modern workers buy into the firm's strategic vision and shape their behaviours accordingly.

Repeated presentations give any vision multiple advantages. Firstly, research into influence and persuasion suggests that we are inclined to believe that whatever is repeated is more likely to be true (Cialdini, 2001). Secondly, in the example of Korea, when presentations were offered by authority figures in whom the prisoners had some confidence (in particular, by fellow prisoners who were further along in the conversion process), they were even more inclined to give the message undue credence. The perceived expertise (Bohner et al., 2002) and trustworthiness (Di Blasi, 2003) of the person articulating the message added enormously to its potency. Moreover, the message itself was presented as if it articulated a set of self evident, scientific, and unchallengeable truths, much in the same manner as the reality of corporate power often cloaks itself in a rhetoric of personal liberation (e.g. Peters, 1992) and 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1993) today. Communist ideology was presented to the prisoners in highly selective generalities emphasising human liberation. Such an appeal to a wider social interest is a regularly used means of ensuring that domination acquires the trappings of legitimacy rendering the internalisation of a given ideology much more attractive (Miller, 1989).

Likewise, corporate ideology fixes on such questions as competitive success for the company, the notion of unitary interests between corporate owners and employees, and the blissful future which the success of the corporation will ensure for all those fortunate enough to affiliate with it. The internalisation of such messages, should it occur, confers advantages on those who have developed them, and whose interests they serve. As Townley (1993: 519) in applying a Foucauldian perspective to management issues, writes, 'what counts as truth depends on, or is determined by, the conceptual system in operation.' The repeated articulation of what may be viewed as contentious corporate ideologies seeks to reshape the conceptual systems of employees, thereby reinforcing their acceptance of and devotion to particular ideals.

5. Members are assessed based on their conformity with strategy and practice.

Criticism and self-criticism in a group context is a powerful tool of discipline and conversion (Baron, 2000) and was widely used in Korea. Such self-criticism has been extensively and more broadly documented as an approach used by leaders of organisations that emphasise extreme forms of conformity and compliance (Lalich, 2004). Group members are bombarded with monotonous and simplified messages, shorn of all ambiguity and uncertainty. Criticism and self-criticism sessions establish that any difficulties perceived with the message, or in its implementation, arise from followers' insufficient compliance and devotion rather than from weaknesses in either the message or the overall social system.

This in turn erodes people's confidence in whatever critical perceptions they hold prior to joining the group, and increases their dependence on the group and its leader for 'guidance, interpretation, explanation and normative control over activity and choices' (Baron et al., 2003: 173). Approval from such leaders depends on ever greater levels of conformity. Even if the belief is not fully internalised, a person hearing nothing but a one-note message is eventually likely to be compelled to draw from it when expressing their own opinions (Tourish, 1998). The more public people's statements in support of a new belief become, the more likely it is that their internal views will shift to be consistent with their external behaviours (Cialdini, 2001). When our views shift far enough from their starting position, the outcome can be defined as conversion. Moreover, once enough people internalise an 'appropriate' attitude, this may produce organisational contexts reminiscent of what Aldous Huxley described in *Brave New World* as a 'really efficient totalitarian state'; that is, one 'in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers controls a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude' (Huxley, 2004: xxxv).

We find plentiful corporate parallels. Appraisal systems are commonly used not just to monitor performance, but also 'to foster identification with corporate goals and objectives and inculcate organisational standards' (Fairhurst, 2007: 83). Individuals are permanently on show, and their performance and attitudes are subject to examination. Some appraisal systems go much further, and seek to identify 'poor' performers for dismissal (so-called 'rank and yank' systems), thereby activating internal dynamics very similar to the criticism and self criticism processes identified by Schein (Tourish and Vatcha, 2005). Managers are required to identify lots of problems with behaviours, levels of commitment and attitudes. Employees are then required to 'confess' their weaknesses and agree action plans to resolve them in order to survive the culling process. The focus here also tends to be on individual failings rather than systemic weaknesses, an emphasis which creates further pressure towards conformity and conversion, while minimising the scope for productive dissent.

6. Conformists are rewarded, dissent, such as whistle blowing or resistance, is sanctioned strongly.

Again, reinforcement theory demonstrates that rewards have a potent effect in shaping behaviour (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). When people experience rewards for conformity and punishment for resistance, the volume of dissent will likely diminish while the clamour of conformist opinion will increase (Kassing, 2001). There is abundant evidence that the penalising of dissent has become an organisational norm, with a consequent increase in ingratiating behaviours on the part of employees (principally overt, enthusiastic and excessive agreement with the ideas propounded by leaders and managers) utilised as a means of both surviving and trying to acquire influence over managers (Tourish and Robson, 2006). In short, it is increasingly normal within the corporate milieu for people to find their dissenting options significantly restricted while their ingratiating/conformist behaviours are rewarded.

7. Management and control of communication becomes central to the organisation.

In Korea, the captors' intention was to cut people adrift from previously influential sources of information and to ensure that only information consistent with the new world view penetrated their social environment. By heightening interaction within the prisoner's new reference group, the potential influence of those within the group on shaping new attitudes was also significantly strengthened.

In the business world today, the issue of identity construction is generally 'closely tied up with the ways organisations organise their "world" in terms of communication' (Cheney and Christensen, 2001: 241). This emphasis on identity heightens concern with the management of internal and external communication and with controlling the boundaries between them. The management and control of communication is central to the building of organisational culture through the creation of symbols and the performances by which they are transmitted to and then internalised by employees (Weeks and Galunic, 2003). Communication, rather than merely 'carrying' information, can thus come to be viewed as a process which has a power to constitute organisations, rather than merely represent them (Kuhn, 2008). It follows that some discourses are typically more privileged than others. Recognising this, and the opportunities it affords to constrain and define reality for others, leaders and managers can place restrictions on the communicative activities of employees (e.g. by monitoring personal email traffic/internet access), insist on residential training courses during which communication with families and others is discouraged, and prohibit attendees from travelling home until the training has been completed.

8. Members are expected to work longer hours and expend greater effort as a means of demonstrating conformity and commitment.

In the Korean context, this technique deprived POWs of the physical and emotional reserves required for effective resistance. It also heightened tension, thus rendering them more susceptible to messages or a new ideology that promised to relieve them of their growing sense of vulnerability. Such pressure rendered non-compliance costly, a major means by which coercion can shape behaviours, attitudes and emotions (Haugard, 1997). Of course, most employees never face anything quite so dramatic. But they do face the intensification of work brought to an extreme in organisations such as GE, Microsoft, and the late, lamented example of Enron, in which 70-hour work weeks and above were common. Although unlikely to be as intense as those felt by the POWs, the psychological effects may nevertheless be similar in kind.

9. Psychological contracts become invested in expectations of conformity.

Ultimately, 'redemption' was depicted to the POWs in Korea as an easy choice. It was rendered all the more attractive by the existence of ready made role models who offered support and rewards to those former recalcitrants now embarking on a journey similar to their own. Above all, surrender was depicted as a capitulation to bliss. This process recalls the climax of George Orwell's novel, 1984, in which a tearful Winston Smith finally 'wins' the battle over himself: he now really loves Big Brother.

Again, there are many organisational parallels. Teams are commonly constructed with a mixture of experienced and inexperienced members. One of their key tasks is the socialisation and acculturation of new team members (Katzenbach and Smith, 1992). Mentoring is also used to achieve the same effect. Employees with mentors have been found to 'learn the ropes' faster than those without (Wilson and Elman, 1990). Of course, in a non-coercive environment this may be entirely benign. But in organisations in which leaders and managers are seeking to impose an all-encompassing ideology and constricting behavioural norms on others, mentoring and team-work may simply become another means of exercising concertive control.

The nine techniques derived from Schein's famous study provide a useful mechanism for engaging and assessing the force of coercive persuasion in modern organisations, as we can readily see how the techniques strongly encourage conformity. Below, we will apply this framework to explore the manifestation of these techniques in the growth of corporate culturalism.

Coercive Persuasion, Organisations and Corporate Culturalism

As we have been careful to note, the imprisonment of US POWs in Korea clearly does not exactly parallel the context of most contemporary organisations. Their detention is closer to the experience of being confined within what Foucault (1977) termed 'carceral institutions' and Goffman (1968) named 'total institutions', forms of organisation such as prisons or asylums that exist in partitioned space and time separated off from the rest of the world. Problematising Foucault's generalisation of the very tight control of incarcerating institutions to other forms of organisation, Giddens (1984, 1987) argues that discipline in contemporary capitalist organisations is not entirely analogous to carceral institutions. He suggests that in capitalist society, the separation of the home from work is a key characteristic of the time-space zoning of modernity. Emphasising the importance to employees of 'free time' from capitalist organisations, Giddens contends that individuals will conform at work, 'usually as a trade-off for rewards that derive from being freed from such discipline at other times' (1984: 154). Giddens insisted that control in less all-embracing organisations is more subtle, utilising methods to produce collaboration and compliance rather than the coercive control of the 'total institution'⁶.

However, other researchers question this view, highlighting the considerable influence of organisations even on our 'personal' time and space. Burrell (1988) contends that 'as individuals, we are incarcerated within an organisational world. Thus, whilst we may not live in total institutions, the institutional organisation of our lives is total' (1988: 232; see also Tompkins and Cheney's, 1985, discussion of unobtrusive control). Exploring the impact of career projects on the lives of UK accountants, Grey (1994) reveals how aspiring and conformist individuals tend to treat all organisational and even personal relations as a means to the end of career progress. As he suggests, the concern with career 'links home and work, leisure, and past, present and future through

6. Goffman (1968) did recognise the importance of organisational surveillance, the oppositional nature of inmates' responses and its close connections to identity. He argued that within the 'underlife' of TIs, inmates resisted the organisational definition of what they should be doing and who they should be by engaging in 'secondary adjustments'. These forbidden ways of 'working the system' demonstrated 'to the practitioner if no one else- that he (sic) has some selfhood and personal autonomy beyond the grasp of the organisation' (Goffman 1968: 275-6).

7. These debates about time-space relations and whether the home can be considered an area of 'free' time and space have also tended to neglect or underestimate a central contribution of feminist analysis over the past twenty years, namely that domestic work often constitutes unfree time and space for women and a source of power for men (e.g. Zaretsky 1976).

the vector of the self'. Non-work lives become totally subordinated to the pursuit of a career with friends, who are gradually re-defined as 'contacts,' while the social life is reduced to the instrumental activity of 'networking'. Suggesting that career projects construct individuals as highly disciplined subjects, Grey concludes that 'the project of self-management might be said to consist of the construction of our lives as total institutions' (1994: 481)⁷.

Suffice it to say here that, while we acknowledge significant differences between the case of the POWs in Korea and the experience of working in capitalist organisations, we also highlight interesting overlaps between these contexts. Many contemporary organisations now encourage their employees to think of their work as a way of life, a cause, a movement, even a 'religion' and, ultimately, a crusade instead of being merely a job. For leaders and managers who seek to generate employee commitment rather than formal compliance, thought reform (realised by means of coercive persuasion) may seem a highly desirable process. The outcome is likely to be an environment dominated by what has been described as 'bounded choice' (Lalich, 2004); that is, one in which the expression of only a limited and tightly regulated repertoire of beliefs, behaviours, and emotions is permissible. Paradoxically, employees may embrace such environments in an attempt to reduce uncertainty and anxiety and in pursuit of a heightened sense of greater purpose. In the process, however, they are required to engage in ever more extreme acts of self-renunciation, involving the subordination of important personal norms to those of the group.

Connecting this issue once again to organisational surveillance and the work of Foucault, it is worth recalling his description of the intended effects of the Panopticon:

...to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary...in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers. (Foucault, 1977: 201).

We argue that the techniques of coercive persuasion are likely to produce a similar effect through creating an environment in which an officially sanctioned ideology is internalised by subjects. In such contexts, ideology serves as a source of conscious and permanent scrutiny, functioning as an invisible internal eye, which holds the behaviour of the subject to the ideology's exacting standards and ensures that subjects themselves become the instruments through which their own subordination is exercised.

Thus, efforts at coercive persuasion start with the articulation of an ideology which people are required to endorse enthusiastically, publicly, and often. Ideology in corporate organisations is increasingly 'rooted in [a] sense of mission associated with charismatic leadership, developed through traditions and sagas and then reinforced through identifications' (Mintzberg, 1989: 223). Cheerleading rituals are crucial to a mission's internalisation by organisational members, as is the threat of isolation for defiance. In particular, the increasing interest in strong corporate cultures and in the development of associated 'visions' represents a

form of ideological development and underpins contemporary processes of coercive persuasion. Many management development programmes are expressly designed to produce what can be described as conversion on the part of managers, through the adoption of corporate evangelism, in order to convert people into 'True Believers' in the designated belief system (Turnbull, 2001). The rhetoric of self discovery, faith and commitment (more often associated with religious environments) is often employed to engage people in an emotional quest for a new identity sympathetic to corporate goals (Ackers and Preston, 1997). In the context of asymmetrical power relationships, such rhetoric can easily have a coercive undertone.

Accordingly, what has been defined as 'corporate culturism' frequently

[...] aspires to extend management control by colonising the affective domain – the hearts as well as the minds of employees – in an innovative, oppressive and paradoxical manner – by claiming to extend their practical autonomy [...]. The implicit intent of corporate culturism [...] is to establish monocultures in which choices and decisions are made within a normative framework of core values that are established, or at least sanctioned, by management. (Willmott, 2003: 75)

It is frequently assumed that core organisational values must take priority over all other values. This viewpoint is often expressed in the authoritarian language of those in senior positions, intended to intimidate and reframe individual identity within a narrow corporatist paradigm. The following quotation is taken from an e-mail sent by Neal Patterson, then CEO of Cerner Corporation (a major US healthcare software development company), to his line managers:

We are getting less than 40 hours of work from a large number of our [...] EMPLOYEES [...]. The parking lot is sparsely used at 8a.m.; likewise at 5p.m [...]. NEVER in my career have I allowed a team which worked for me to think they had a 40-hour job [...]. I STRONGLY recommend that you call some 7a.m., 6p.m. and Saturday a.m. team meetings [...]. My measurement will be the parking lot [...]. The pizza man should show up at 7.30p.m. to feed the starving teams working late (Cited by Wong, 2001: 1 – emphasis in the original).

Such pressure on staff to work longer and longer hours, coupled with surveillance (the parking-lot metric), illustrates how corporate leaders can coercively persuade employees to privilege (paid) work above everything else (see also Collinson and Collinson, 2004). The discourse, in the example given, is clearly one of surveillance, measurement, and compulsion: an attempt to construct the leader as a subject of power and employees as its compliant objects.

Alternative discourses to those of corporate culturism tend to be viewed as deficient and disposable (Willmott, 1993). Corporate culturism creates a struggle for a new identity and a conflict with whatever old ones get in the way (du Gay, 1991). The ideal state is assumed to be one of employee devotion to corporate goals and values. It has long been clear that one of the main tactics for dealing with people's sense of ambivalence in the face of management power has been to depict corporate life as being much freer than it really is (Hoopes, 2003). In this context, the compulsory engagement we are highlighting is often couched in the language of empowerment, and liberation. Fundamentally, this

discursive framing represents a 'systematic and totalising approach to the design and strengthening of the normative framework of work' (du Gay, 1991: 524 – emphasis in the original).

Coercive persuasion is rooted in the imbalance of power between key organisational actors and reproduced through the emphasis on followers' identity. In contemporary corporations coercive persuasion is frequently facilitated by the compelling and 'positive' visions of leaders seeking to attract the enthusiastic support of employees (e.g. Deal and Kennedy, 1982; 1999; Collins and Porras, 1995). Visions have been defined as a set of beliefs about how people should act and interact to attain some idealised future state (Strange and Mumford, 2002). They are intended to establish cultures that rest on uniform values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours and in which alternative discourses are marginalised and suppressed. As Maccoby (2003: 229) has written with specific reference to the US, the public has been 'seduced by the promise of visionary leaders'. Given that people want work with some social meaning or social value, want to feel part of a larger community, and want to live and work in an integrated fashion (Pfeffer, 2003), their tendency to comply is hardly surprising.

Underlying these positive visions, leaders and managers typically make all-important organisational decisions. In practice, they retain the power to reward and punish, to define strategic direction, and to withdraw the empowerment initiatives upon which they embark. Organisational influence sharing has therefore made remarkably little progress over the past fifty years (Heller, 1998). Coercion thus remains an endemic characteristic of the leader-follower, management-employee relationship.

By extending leaders' and managers' power into the affective domain, corporate culturism promotes a mono-culture in the workplace (at least as the ideal) and significantly limits dissent. The intent often appears to be to activate intense commitment on the part of employees as a means of heightening work effort, productivity and profitability.

Within this world-view, senior managers are encouraged to influence every area of their employees' lives, including their behaviour at work, their attitudes towards the organisation, and increasingly their most private values and belief systems as evidenced by a growing interest on the part of many corporations and chief executives in promoting 'spirituality' in the workplace (e.g. Bell and Taylor, 2001; 2004; Fry, 2003; Duchan and Plowman, 2005). As the quotation from Kunda and Cunningham (1999) cited at the beginning of this paper suggests, the intent appears to be to render behaviour consistent with the needs of the corporation, always and everywhere.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have examined the important dynamics of coercive persuasion and discussed how these dynamics, shaped through leadership control practices, can come to manufacture employee conformity and minimize dissent within contemporary organisations. In a sense, we have used Schein's (1961) framework to cast a new light on the

subtle but essential and powerful process through which our individual 'I's' become functional corporate 'we's' (Burke, 1937: 140). Given the argument that 'power is relational because it reveals itself in its application with others vis-à-vis specific practices, techniques, or procedures' (Fairhurst, 2007: 81), we have sought to illuminate how coercive power can be expressed in organisations, through a series of practices aimed at combining surveillance with the internalisation of particular ideologies deemed to be acceptable, and therefore more likely to produce the 'appropriate individual'. We have used Schein's (1961) early work on 'coercive persuasion' as a framework through which to identify and assess such persuasion and then argued that contemporary corporate attempts to sustain employee conformity through coercive persuasion are informed by the exercise of particular forms of control that invoke specific (legitimised) identities. In such cases dissent tends to be defined as disloyalty and punished, while conformity is rewarded. These tensions may be especially pronounced in particular kinds of organisations. As Gordon et al (2009) have noted, such organisations as police forces play a distinctly coercive role in society, and many have struggled with the legacy of their quasi-military past. In short, where a tradition of hierarchy and obeying orders is particularly marked, those who belong may be attracted to or affected by the articulation of strong cultural values and the mechanisms of coercive persuasion discussed in this article.

Nevertheless, we believe that the issues discussed here have a much wider application. We have therefore connected our discussion to the literature on organisational surveillance, and to Foucault's influential work on disciplinary processes within prisons, with a particular focus on his discussion of the Panopticon. This literature focuses on 'the few watching the many' (Sewell and Barker, 2006: 935), and therefore conceives of organisational control in terms of powerful individuals exerting control over relatively powerless ones. But however insightful much of this literature is, it cannot fully account for all the conformist behaviours that we witness daily in organisations and that occur in the absence of constant surveillance. We have not argued that the techniques of coercive persuasion are likely to achieve such a totalitarian impact either and have acknowledged the forms of resistance that are also found in most organisations. To take one example, some scholars have claimed that call centres could be viewed as instances of perfect panoptic surveillance (Fernie and Metcalf, 1999). Yet detailed studies have demonstrated that resistance, both overt and covert, is a daily occurrence (e.g. Bain and Taylor, 2000). Thus, there is no perfect Panopticon, or other forms of social control that can infallibly regulate human behaviour (Simon, 2005).

Despite this, coercive persuasion seeks to combine both explicit forms of surveillance and intense indoctrination, in order to ensure that those at its receiving end are more likely to internalise dominant ideological norms as their own. Such 'thought reform' (Lifton, 1961) reduces the need for surveillance, since if people embrace a particular belief system and the norms that are associated with it, they can guide their behaviour in desired directions with minimal external oversight. While

Schein studied this phenomenon in a particularly coercive context, we have argued that these coercive persuasion techniques are still found in a modern corporate context, and thus warrant our understanding and critique. Schein (1961) himself drew attention to similarities between the techniques he was exploring and their use in other contexts such as religious orders, prisons, educational institutions, and mental hospitals. But he also recognised that these methods only exerted an effect in some cases due to the interaction between the techniques and such factors as individual predisposition, innate interest in whatever ideology was being promoted, and social context (Introvigne, 2002). Hence, the outcome of compliance and conversion is partially determined by the content of the ideology in question as well as by the specific techniques that are employed in its promotion. The general dominance of and unquestioning attitude towards a managerial or pro-business ideology in today's society would suggest that when techniques of coercive persuasion are employed in a corporate context, they may be operating within a particularly fruitful environment since the techniques will be building upon attitudes that are already at least partially in place.

Thus, we argue that the notion of coercive persuasion represents an under-utilised analytic lens through which to study power, conformity, and resistance in organisations. The application of the nine techniques in Schein's framework provides a model for engaging and interrogating both the pull toward and the possibility of resistance against (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007) conformity in modern organisations. This article has suggested that, by focusing on the behavioural aspects embedded in Schein's framework, we can gain a more sophisticated and useful understanding of how coercive persuasion in contemporary organisations can shape and direct subordinate behaviour and identity.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, all groups and organisations must share some norms of behaviour and have some agreement about the vision they are seeking to achieve; otherwise, they would be incapable of functioning. However, when the norms and vision in question become all-embracing in their scope and particularly when they prohibit critical discussion, they can facilitate the harmful exercise of manipulative and coercive control by leaders and managers. Coercive persuasion seeks to sidestep the challenge of followers' autonomy and resistance by convincing those in subordinate positions that what is on offer is in their real best interest. Its message is that people should embrace an organisational identity set for them by their leaders, display enthusiastic commitment in support of organisational goals, and adopt conformist behaviours that have been centrally sanctioned, while avoiding any behaviour likely to be regarded as 'deviant'.

Individual identity is a fluid and multi-faceted construct formed in the context of conformity and resistance (Collinson 2003). People do not enter organisational life with an immutable identity which they either uphold in an organic 'pure' form or which they collapse into whatever shape is

dictated to them by powerful others. Identity is always relational: 'one can only ever be seen to be something in relation to something else' (Clegg, 1989: 159). A creative process of struggle, therefore, unfolds in which neither the agents of influence nor their subjects remain fixed in time or space, but in which they exert a reciprocal influence on the other (Shamir, 2007). Accordingly, we would stress that these processes of coercive persuasion and of employee conformity are themselves characterised by numerous ambiguities, inconsistencies, tensions, and contradictions, which in turn can produce counter-productive effects as well as the possibility of organisational change.

Nevertheless, given the constraints imposed on dissent, employee conformity in contemporary organisations is often more evident than resistance. Drawing on Schein's model, this paper has critically examined leadership practices designed to reinforce employee conformity via coercive persuasion. Many of these practices have become so widespread and 'normal' as to assume an unchallenged status in the minds of organisational actors, and we have highlighted several problems that this 'normality' is likely to create. More critical studies of the dynamics of coercive persuasion in everyday life are clearly required.

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