Silent Running: Tacit, Discursive and Psychological Aspects of Management in a Top UK Advertising Agency[1]

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In old American World War II movies submarine commanders called for 'silent running' when the enemy were near. No orders were issued but anarchy did not ensue. Everyone knew what to do. This paper describes a research study of one of the top five UK advertising agencies, in which management appeared silent in the sense that explicit, overt, bureaucratic, sanction-backed directive corporate authority was not evident. But this agency is one of the most successful, serious, creative, effective, least showbizzy agencies in the industry. It is a good example of an organization which manages and sells knowledge: knowledge about advertising, about consumers and about creative craft. The research used critical discourse analysis to explore the ways in which power, authority and professional identity were discursively reproduced in the service of corporate instrumentality. As a real, concrete source of authority and direction, 'management' seemed silent, yet as a discursive construction its controlling presence was psychologically pervasive.

'I've been told I've got to talk to you'

To cut a long story short, I was sitting in one of the rabbit-hutch offices in the agency's open-plan 'planning' floor. Some agreeable advertising types had kindly let me come in and wander around and interview people. I had initially made contact with the agency in early 1997 and conducted three interviews with agency staff in my own office in November that year. I maintained informal

contact, and by spring 1998 I had set up my main data-gathering session in the agency itself. For two consecutive days they rounded up anyone who could spare half an hour to come in to my little confessional and unburden themselves into my temperamental hand-held recording device. There were account managers, the people who are supposed to be mature and business literate who liaise with clients and account teams and keep everything on schedule. Then there were creatives, who do not have to be mature all the time but who must be disciplined enough to come up with good ideas from scratch, to a deadline. The third role in account teams is that of the planner. The planner is the agency 'boffin' (a self description) who spends a lot of time wading through research data to distil essential market and consumer information. In some agencies the planner has a marginalized role, providing research data when asked. In this and (a few) other leading agencies the planners have a central role in the development of the advertising strategy. They translate

the client's marketing brief into an advertising brief (that is, expressed in terms which support the client's marketing strategy and which can be achieved through communications). They acquire consumer insights through qualitative research and synthesize these with the harder data to come up with an advertising strategy, the reason for and purpose of advertising in a particular case. Finally the planner will write the creative brief, which will stimulate distinctive creative work within carefully reasoned problem-solving parameters. I talked to creatives, planners and account managers of differing seniority, sex (all the creatives were male) and length of service. All had experience of other agencies, and all had current and recent experience of working on major high-profile national and international accounts in this agency.

I was feeling a bit fragile: I had paid for myself to come to London and was staying in a seedy Paddington 'hotel'. Naturally, I was kept awake all night by people running up and down the stairs. 'Breakfast' was a dish, spoon and multi-pack of Rice Crispies left on the floor in the corner of the room. Fortunately the agency had a twenty-four hour shiny metal kitchen with perpetual percolated coffee, a crate of fresh fruit and tins of really nice biscuits. I turned on my interview smile. 'I've been told I've got to talk to you' said a waif, easing herself suspiciously through a crack in the door. Nice start, I thought. 'Hello – I'm Chris from Oxford Brookes University, and I'm researching a PhD in advertising . . .' In a minute she was putty in my ethnographic hands, all fresh-faced earnestness, expansively gushing advertising talk as my battery-powered recorder hummed in sinister indifference. In wave after wave they came, suspicious at first, then relaxed, earnest and friendly: shiny, happy people making shiny, happy ads. Philosophy graduates, history, classics, social science, Oxford, Cambridge, Sony, Barclaycard, VW, Doritos, Walker's Crisps, British Gas, Gary Lineker, Rowan Atkinson, Mrs Merton, advertising philosophy, creative development, qualitative research, 'doing' groups, the 'planning' philosophy, writing the brief, articulating the Single Thought, stripping everything down into a simple advertising strategy 'your Mum could understand', colloquial, cerebral, intense.

I liked it there: it seemed an urbane, collegiate style of organization, very driven yet informal in terms of modes of dress, modes of address and non-essential time-keeping. My interviewees came across as advertising enthusiasts working at the top of an élite industry. Their regard for the privileged status of their agency in the industry was clear. The emphasis was on words, reasoning, debate, a fluid division of labour and a democratic approach to the expression of opinion. Most of my interviewees were under 40 years old, graduates, many with Oxbridge humanities degrees. Some had degrees in maths or social science, and one senior creative started as a van driver. They all came across as expansive, frank, very engaged with their work and socially poised.

> 'People here are twenty times more clever than anywhere else' (a planner).

> '. . . the culture here is very different to the BBC, less hierarchical, more articulate . . . a place where people think through issues in great detail . . .' (an account manager).

> '. . . people (here) are sparky . . . the approach is very thinking and analytical . . . a very intellectual approach to creativity, not just creativity for its own sake . . .' (a creative).

I emerged from this Platonic idyll with some 35 000 audio recorded words, a hundred double-spaced pages of fully transcribed formal, but conversational, interviews. I made handwritten notes on a further five interviews in the agency. In addition I made several pages of ad hoc field notes, reflections and observations. My sources included one ex- and one current board account director, two senior planners, two junior planners, two junior account managers and five experienced creatives. I spent time looking at reels of the agency's ads and training videos in a viewing room, reading the hard-bound agency stories it published about itself, looking at internal agency documentation, I interviewed creative types in their offices with cartoons on the walls and smelly socks on the floor in the corner, and I spent time drinking free coffee in the kitchen area. I was in the centre of the advertising industry: all pony tails, leather trousers and four-hour lunches. It was rather brisk and businesslike really but it seemed glamorous to a graduate of Stoke-on-Trent's potbanks: Les Dawson to Cary Grant: from Northern grime to Metropolitan sheen. This was Advertising: this was Intellectual: this was Research.

Finally, in spring 1999 I conducted five more interviews with senior planners in the offices of

three more of the top five UK agencies. The aim was to round out some of the ideas I was forming about the original data and to place these ideas in a broader industry-wide context.

A representation of a representation of method

I did all the transcribing by my own fair hand. It took months but I got to know the transcribed interview texts well. This was important because I was trying to apply a social constructionist form of discourse analysis (DA) I had learned from Potter and Wetherell (1987). This entailed seeking out structure, variation and function in social texts. The texts showed some variability in terms of how particular things were described. The analytical task of the researcher in this version of DA is to synthesize ethnographic insights about context and indexicality with a sense of textual patterning. For example, I felt that interviewees often drew on a kind of 'the way we do things here' kind of resource to account for their views and actions in the advertising development process with comments which (performatively) signified a close identification with the agency's sense of its advertising philosophy:

'. . . (the agency) doesn't approve of that system . . .'

'. . . I think [the agency] possibly more than other agencies has an anti-selling ethos . . .'

'. . . I think account managers at (the agency) contribute quite a lot to the planning process.'

'. . . the [this agency] approach is very thinking and analytical' (account planners).

More generally, whenever I asked about the development of advertising, my answer came framed in a grammar of collective process rather than in terms of an idiosyncratic, individualistic and capricious kind of activity. Yet in accounting for the development of specific campaigns the sense of process seemed almost infinitely fluid. Some more experienced planners would still draw on this 'corporate way' repertoire even while admitting that every job was different and the answer to every question was contingent. As a Board Account Director said: '. . . advertising can't be done by a manual'. One planner illustrated that, while the agency places great stock in the legitimacy of qualitatively-based consumer

insights the generation and use of these is far from formal.

Q: 'Could you describe to me some of the ways in which you conduct your qualitative research, the ways in which you kind of formalise the kind of data you get back?'

Planner: 'Right . . . I think its quite difficult to . . . you sort of know from experience what qualitative research can and cannot tell you . . . [gives account of qualitative research].'

Q: 'And then would you normally record the conversation if it's focus groups or something . . .?

Planner: 'Yeh, yeh.'

Q: 'Then when it comes back here what do you do with the tape?'

Planner: 'Well, normally, if there isn't, likely there's someone making notes at the time, either that or I'll listen back and make them myself, from them sort of write the debrief, erm, normally structured along the lines of the research proposal that you wrote.'

Q: 'So am I right in assuming that for you qualitative research is a very impressionistic kind of thing . . . you form impressions without doing any sort of formal discourse analysis or anything like that'?[2]

Planner: 'That's right.'

Certainly there was a documented process, a paper-trail of advertising development very similar to those in any other agency. But the distinctiveness of this agency could not lie in this pretty generic sense of process. Furthermore, not only was the tangibility of a 'corporate way' of doing advertising difficult to pin down to specifics. The more senior staff tended to draw on the 'corporate way' repertoire in ways which both signified and subverted their performance of corporate solidarity:

'Well, yeh, we're supposed to [do things a certain way] but I'm not very good at that: no reason for it . . . I know it's an unfashionable view . . .' (senior creative).

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[2] Of all the planners I spoke to, only one, at another leading agency, claimed to adopt precise and formal (first-hand transcriptions and 'content analysis') research methods with qualitative data.

'. . . I think other agencies do it [planning] but we just do it louder and have done it for longer really' (board account director).

'. . . the proposition has to be really spot on, you can't look at another part of the brief as making up for some deficiency in the proposition, the proposition must really encapsulate the brief' (relatively junior planner).

'. . . propositions . . . I mean for a start it's a silly word isn't it? Proposition. I mean proposition is a word which kind of encourages people in agencies to be terribly precious . . . actually I think it often just takes people away from being really really commonsensical.' (senior planner).

So more junior planners drew on the (mythical) 'corporate way' repertoire to position their actions as flowing from a collective sense of process sanctioned by an élite organization's working tradition. More senior staff confirmed this sense of a corporate way, while positioning themselves as experts who had assimilated it and hence became the sceptical but authoritative embodiment of it. I felt that, if a junior member of the account team had shown such scepticism for conventional corporate wisdom it would have struck a discordant note of arrogance quite out of keeping with the team philosophy.

The agency went to some lengths to encourage the sense of a 'corporate way', fostering its own myths energetically in hard-bound volumes and case histories.[3] A pantheon of advertising heroes is described in respectful terms in the self-told agency narrative of a special and distinctive way of doing advertising. The integrity of this advertising philosophy has, according to the story, been preserved and strengthened by successive takeovers and mergers. Of course, company stories are often treated with ritual irreverence by staff (although I observed no impiety in this case) but they nevertheless expropriate discursive space instead of alternative versions. New employees, especially young ones, clearly felt as if they were stepping into a powerful and unique advertising tradition. But for the junior staff, the corporate way was a tangible, concrete thing, a discourse of realism which made sense of events and which positioned them as good corporate professionals.

For senior staff the corporate way repertoire was used in a more subtle way to position staff as individual experts rather than slavish followers of convention. The use of this repertoire itself was a structural feature of the interview texts, but its functions and the relations constituted through it (senior, junior, expert, novice) were indicated by variations in its manner of use. It seemed that this 'corporate way' had a mythical character: it did not constrain the creative expertise of staff because it did not actually contain any inviolable concrete procedures. But as a discursive resource it was very important. It displaced a discourse of 'anything goes' and hence positioned the agency as a rational, managed corporation which owned and imparted to its staff a unique philosophy of advertising development. Thus the repertoire was available to be drawn upon in agency discourse for roles to be reproduced, it allowed professional identity to be constructed and maintained and it acted as an article of faith. Furthermore, in foregrounding a carefully developed 'way' of doing advertising it made it difficult for individuals (particularly creatives) to make special claims of expertise and hence destabilize the invisible hierarchy.

The agency was a nice employer, if your face fitted, but people would occasionally leave feeling very unhappy (I was told by one ex-employee) because, as they saw it, they had not been given a fair chance to show what they could do. They were not told what they had done wrong, because they had not done anything wrong. The pervasive presence of the corporate way interpretative repertoire in the interview texts suggested that the assimilation of this interpretative repertoire was a discursive precondition for success in the agency. If the 'way' warrant became unsustainable in the face of contrary evidence, or if it became an embarrassment as one became more senior, it assumed the character of an ideological dilemma. Senior staff had to draw on it to signify piety but in a way which also positioned themselves as professionally beyond it. To accomplish this they would assimilate the 'way' and become the embodiment of it. I felt that the interview texts betrayed a sensitivity to linguistic discourse and its power effects that was psychologically hugely complex.

The variability in patterns of accounting could be indicated by structures of linguistic usage, tropes of speech, colloquialisms or syntactic patterns. Particular linguistic resources seemed to be drawn

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[3] The agency is the most frequent winner of advertising industry awards in the UK for the creativity and effectiveness of its campaigns over the last ten years.

upon fairly regularly to make sense of certain events. These resources tend to be referred to as 'discourses' in the Foucauldian tradition, and as 'interpretative repertoires' by Potter and Wetherell (1987). The 'interpretative repertoire' is defined as . . .

> '. . . basically a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events.' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 139).

The Foucauldian approach reflects its broader, less technical usage in post-structural historical analysis. The Potter and Wetherell (1987) approach reflects their tendency to draw on traditions of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to sketch out a technical, a-historical approach to the analysis of discourse. However, Wetherell (1998) argues that ethno/conversation analysis and post-structuralist/Foucauldian approaches need not be mutually exclusive. The Potter and Wetherell (1987) discourse analytic method need not eschew the genealogical dimension: interpretative repertoires are aspects of local, psychological meaning-making, but they also have a political and historical character. That is, interpretative repertoires, like discourses, come from somewhere and have political implications, but they also act locally, locating the speaker in a social context and constituting the speaker's psychology. In localized discourse interpretative repertoires are used to position speakers in the social order and to resolve 'ideological dilemmas' (Billig *et al*., 1988) which could prove unsettling or destabilizing. In this agency the discursive production of the normal and everyday entailed the reproduction of managerial imperatives and corporate power.

My methodological Damascus

I had arrived at this perspective by slowly learning to appreciate the intellectual value of a critical approach to social research. In the beginning, my analysis of the interview texts seemed to lack intellectual penetration. The social constructionist ontology and discourse analytic methodology are still relatively novel in marketing and I felt that grounding advertising development in this way was valuable. But all I had was a very interesting (if you are interested in advertising) account of the development of some of the most striking

and acclaimed television campaigns of the 1990s. The DA perspective turned my attention from (imagined) objects of discourse inwards to the discourse itself in its political, constructed and constitutive character. In the following example a senior planner described events in the development of a major global television account worth many millions of pounds:

> '. . . we right up front spent ages clarifying because . . . to get to the common sense you often have to do an awful lot of hard work . . . the work we ended up running and producing and winning lots of awards for . . . but it bombed about three times in research the clients didn't like it . . . the more people had different ideas the more the account team became wobbly and thought 'God we don't know what the best thing to do is any more and all that kind of stuff . . . but all the way through the process when everyone was being really wobbly and the clients were being wobbly and all that stuff I was always able to bring back the debate . . . to a really commonsense view of what we had to communicate . . . and all of a sudden you've just sort of simplified the debate and all the stupid conversations we have just like, oh of course its really simple then . . .' (account planner).

When you add the agency context, you know the brand and you have seen the ads this stuff is fun in an anecdotal kind of way. And several interviewees at this agency spoke engagingly without punctuation or grammar, which added a sense of immediacy to the events they described. It is also fun to speculate whether foregrounding concepts like 'wobbly' and 'commonsense' is typical of other Oxford PPE graduates. Yet a mere description of the creative process seemed to have little point even if it was enlivened with industry gossip and vivid personalities. I felt that I had an intellectual point of entry into the data when I began to appreciate the critical dimension of this methodology and the central role of power in social relations. This was a new form of understanding to me. I read Elliott (1996) and then Alvesson and Willmott (1992), (especially Morgan, 1992), Banister *et al*. (1994) and more critical social psychology like Fox and Prilleltensky (1997) and Bayer and Shotter (1998) and I felt as if I was beginning to get some purchase on the data. Passages like the one above began to fall into much more abstract categories (in the above case into a 'Strategic Imperative' interpretative repertoire)

which discursively reproduced professional identities and relations of power within the agency.

My use of the notions of power and discourse in this analysis was perhaps unsophisticated, but I liked it and enigmatic aspects of the data now made sense to me. In particular, the critical focus on discourse and its uses in reproducing relations of power and authority highlighted a striking absence of overt managerial controls in this collegiate, verbal and apparently democratic, yet commercially highly effective, organization.

Discourse and power: critical traditions

Discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1998; Burman and Parker, 1993; Antaki, 1994; Harre and Stearns, 1995; Parker, 1992, 1997; Banister *et al.*, 1994) is seen as an intrinsically 'critical' methodology (Elliott, 1996; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Fox and Prilleltensky, 1998). It seeks to reveal something of the discursive constitution of power relations in everyday interaction by drawing on aspects of critical theory (especially Foucault, 1971, 1972; Habermas, 1970) to inform a discourse analytic methodology. An important feature of the Foucauldian discourse analytic tradition is its focus on the way power relations are reproduced discursively in many differing contexts. Within this agency this feature of discourse was especially interesting because practices were thoroughly normalized, the culture was easy, staff seemed relaxed and no interviewee implied anything other than contentment with the corporation.[4] A critical perspective might seek a deeper level of understanding to earn insight into the power issues underlying this first impression.

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[4] The one exception to this contentment concerned the career progression for senior people. I asked one senior account executive if he had worked his way up in the agency. He explained that 'I began as a graduate sort of account executive, and became account executive, account manager, account director, you become the board account director and the next move is probably into senior management, head of department, something like that. So I mean you're about as high as you go now where you have day-to-day . . . with your accounts . . . the next move up would be . . . but nobody ever moves there 'cause . . . been there for ages . . . which is fine, it's cool.' The agency boasts a much more stable (i.e. lower turnover) workforce than is typical in advertising.

The issue of organizational power falls within the scope of critical management research (Deetz, 1992; Deetz and Mumby, 1990). Organizations are, by definition, instruments of control and order. There must be some suppression of conflict and imposition of organizational power in order for the instrumental ends of the organization to be accomplished. In many cases, organizational authority over employees is overt, reproduced in texts of 'disciplinary procedure' and employment contracts, and symbolized by time clocks, lunch 'hours', meeting protocol and the control of space ('staff dining-rooms', 'management' washrooms). Corporations engage in surveillance in many forms which seeks to corporatize private consciousness. Many offices are now 'open plan' with the employees always in view of managers. Many organizations record details of employees' email and telephone communications, and have access to records of employees' private financial and domestic activities. Other features of organizational control intrude into private life. Employees must work proscribed hours and days and must organize their domestic lives around the demands of the organization. Organizational demands for 'skills', qualifications and attributes of appearance, manner and voice impose influences on education and socialization from the earliest years.

Yet, interestingly, in some organizational contexts, especially, I think, organizations which sell the knowledge, ideas and expertise of their members, this sense of control is not at all overt. The discursive forms which manifested themselves in the agency tended to have the effect of privileging certain warrants, positions and discursive repertoires over others. What resulted was a kind of discursive silence in which dissent, rebellion and non-instrumental interests were whitewashed from the public discourse of the agency. Conflict, self-evidently a feature of advertising development in which people argue their points of view, remained tacit. There were occasional amused allusions to situations where the silky surface was rent by tantrums, fallings out, discontent or disasters with clients. Such things are the everyday gossip of every organization. Yet, in general, the impression given of working life at the agency was, on the face of it, verbal, rational, emotionally contained and instrumentally directed. This effect was itself a discursive accomplishment of the organization. The confirmation of it to me, an outsider conducting interviews, seemed especially

significant. This accomplishment of control, directedness and subjugation of sectional interests in the greater collective interest owed nothing to technicist discourses of managerial efficiency, and seemed all the more profound for that. As Alvesson and Willmott (1992) note:

> 'management and management techniques . . . can be conceptualised as forces pushing to the "delinguistification" of a domain, presented as beyond disputes of meaning and ambiguity'. (Alvesson and Willmott, p. 15).

These authors were referring to the more common tendencies of managerial groups to make use of technical and specialist vocabularies (or obfuscatory jargon) in order to represent what they do as impersonal, technical, incontestable and driven by common interest. The use of such vocabularies silences oppositional voices through a premature discursive closure. Notably in this agency's advertising development discourse there was little recourse to such vocabularies, rather the opposite, with a lay vocabulary and colloquialism predominant. Yet here the effect of control and management was nevertheless accomplished, and very effectively, judging by the agency's achievements. Agency staff had certain freedoms, perhaps signifying their élite status. They could roll up to work by 10am: nobody seemed to mind. There was an endless free supply of food, snacks, fruit: travel and lunch expenses were generous, sometimes lavish. The working atmosphere was very congenial, comfortable, 'nice' people and a 'nice' working environment. Pleasure was a mechanism of control and compliance, as it is in many organizations. But underlying the easygoing culture there was an understanding that deadlines had to be met, work had to be produced on time and the clients' interests had to be served. Critical theory opens up a route into this constitutive reproduction of organizational power and control:

> '. . . CT (Critical Theory) directs attention to the deeper and more pervasive aspects of control . . . dimensions of power and ideology are of greatest significance in domains where they are not easily recognised as such. In particular . . . language and communicative action produce and re-produce the world-taken-for-granted, thereby giving priority to certain (unrecognised) interests and presenting social reality as natural and given'. (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, p. 16).

The impression given from a politically naïve reading of the transcripts was of a group of people, happy in their work, secure in their professional status, generally deferential towards their colleagues and content that the agency is engaged in a socially valuable enterprise, or at least indifferent if it is not. This caricature, perhaps unfair, is suggestive of certain discursive silences accomplished by the agency through which it sustains control (over both junior and senior staff) and directs purposive activity.

As Mingers (1989) has noted (in Deetz, 1992), lack of open conflict in work organizations can preclude the discussion of other interests. People may feel that they are all working ultimately for self interest, to get a better (material) life, and that their self interest is bound up with that of the organization. Self-evidently, organizations must exert some kind of control in order to sustain themselves and to avoid anarchy and destabilization. The interesting thing is how this lack of conflict is discursively accomplished by silencing the language of potential destabilization.

Discourses of organization in advertising

As a generalization, popular textual representations of marketing communications and advertising are known neither for their political acuity nor their ethnographic integrity (methodological critique in Buttle, 1995). Even the better texts (for example Shimp, 1997; Belch and Belch, 1995) adopt a 'hey, isn't advertising great?' level of description which rules agency politics and the strategic role of advertising planning out of their legitimate scope. Well-informed practitioner-focused treatments of the organization of advertising agencies (for example Crosier, 1999) tend to take an overtly managerial/behaviourist approach which reiterates a hierarchy-of-effects story of advertising message transmission. The interpretive tradition in marketing and consumer research (for example, Arnould, 1998; Hirschmann and Holbrook, 1992; Holbrook, 1999; Sherry, 1991; Mick and Buhl, 1992) fails to get a serious mention when the consumption of advertising is under discussion in such texts. It is rare for these well-developed approaches in consumer research to be turned back on those charged with the

task of producing consumers and managing their consumption.

Advertising mobilizes an ideology of marketed marketing values (Elliott and Ritson, 1997) which is culturally and psychologically constitutive. The alluring myth of corporate control over consumers through marketed communications has been assimilated thoroughly into the managerial(ist) genre of marketing research (noted and criticized by Brown, 1998). But in focussing unreflexively on advertising's alleged role in transmitting product benefits, popular marketing texts silence much of what is most interesting about advertising, and trivialize the complexity of what ad agencies do. Descriptions of advertising which draw on discourses of naïve behaviourism to construct a picture of marketing communications acting upon its objects fail to capture either the semiotic power of mediated marketing or the chaotically constructed character of consumer experience. Many studies of the consumption of advertising point to the contested nature of advertising meanings and the suitability of interpretive perspectives for capturing insights into the constitutive psychological and social effects of consuming, or resisting, advertising (for example Elliott *et al.*, 1995; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Sherry, 1987; Stern, 1988, 1991, 1996). The superficiality of popular representations of marketing which ignore the critical implications of such perspectives has been noted witheringly in a growing body of critically-informed marketing literature (see, for an especially pungent example, Willmott, 1999). The advertising industry has evolved contemporaneously and symbiotically with the explosion of the mediated communication industries (Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1997) and has thus been central to the popularization of marketing concepts and values. Ad agencies can be seen to be operating in the engine room of a panoptic marketing system. What they do and how they do it is worthy of proper examination.

But, sermons aside, the present study can be roughly located in a diverse tradition of ethnographically-informed organizational and consumer research. Arnould (1998) assimilates several strands of this tradition to construct an approach to consumer research he calls 'consumer orientated ethnography'. For Arnould (1998) this project develops a modernist vision of social science which, nonetheless, eschews the lexicon of naïve positivism and constructs self-conscious representations of situated consumer experience. Watson (1994) used an ethnographic stance to construct an empirically grounded representation of management in chaos, while Munro (1997) draws on critical ethnography to problematize preconceptions about the ontological status and temporal contiguity of organizational management and control. Of most direct import for the present study is work by Kover and Goldberg (1995) and Kover, Goldberg and James (1995) who studied power and language in US advertising agencies. In Kover and Goldberg (1995) the focus falls on the discursive strategies employed by copywriters to out-manoeuvre account management in the agency power struggle over who 'owns' creative work. These struggles are dysfunctional but inevitable because of power differences (between copywriters and account management), differences in needs and goals, and because of a 'lack of a shared language' (Kover and Goldberg, 1995). Tellingly, these authors allude to innovatory attempts by one industry pioneer (who, incidentally, is one of the lauded heros of the present agency's advertising philosophy) to forestall this conflict by experimenting with an intermediary role of 'planner' to act as a buffer between creatives and account management. Indeed, in several ways the present study responds directly to points raised in Kover and Goldberg (1995) regarding language, power and conflict and its management in advertising agencies. The following discussion develops the discursive 'take' this study has on these points.

Agency discourse: silence and power

It struck me that, in this agency, organizational members had to assimilate discourses (expressed through interpretative repertoires) which were ever present but nameless. Assimilate the right discourses in the right way (such as the 'corporate way' or the 'strategic imperative') and a credible professional identity could be constructed through momentary authoritative expressions of them. In this credibility lay personal power, particularly the power to have one's point of view heard and noted. But this personal power was accomplished only within the terms set by the discourse itself. After painstakingly typing and re-reading the various interview texts over the best part of a year I finally felt that I had eight main categories of

interpretative repertoires.[5] These were mutually dependent and, as it were, sprung into life as little shafts of meaning running through agency life. Below I dwell on the ones I felt were at the core of the ordering effect.

The 'intellectual contingency' and 'power of rationality' repertoires

There were many indications of a pragmatic approach to advertising development within the (mythical) corporate way. This approach privileged verbal reasoning and novelty, and suppressed recourse to the linguistic cliches of textbook marketing. Responses to events were contingent (Q: 'You said proposition . . . is that written prior to the creative brief?' Account planner: 'It could be, if . . .'). An important part of this was the absence of the kinds of technical language which one often associates with marketing fields. The planners understood the more concrete discourse (of objectives, market share, product features) of their marketing clients but never employed these terms in their own talk. Professional lexicons close off discursive possibilities and reinforce social boundaries, which in a knowledge industry demanding a high order of creativity would be dysfunctional. The pre-eminence of a lay vocabulary framed within a grammar of indeterminacy, along with the freedom to speak, created an effect suited to an industry which creates and sells ideas. Account team members (especially the newer ones) made approving reference to what they saw as high intellectual standards at this agency ('people here are twenty times cleverer than anywhere else'). This climate created the conditions for a sense of problem-solving rationality, democratic inclusion and verbal debate within account teams. However, it became apparent that, in drawing selectively on particular repertoires, the interviewees were re-creating power relations

within the agency in subtle but powerfully self-sustaining ways. The frequent account-team planning meetings, the open style of communication in the agency and the flexible roles created a sense of the agency as an open text. Yet the very openness of this discursive space served to psychologically constrain the ways of being that were available. There were no explicit, concrete rules of behaving, talking or thinking. So staff had to draw on publicly available discourses in order to position themselves within the space in ways which were not discordant, dysfunctional or upsetting to colleagues. In an important sense, this construction of democratic openness was a tougher regime than a more directive paternalistic approach. In open textured discursive space, you sink or swim.

The management of advertising, as a knowledge-based activity, is not, cannot, be closely directive. You cannot make people assimilate complex knowledge representations and have bright ideas simply by telling them to do so. Indeed, the performative dimension of directing behaviour such as 'telling' actively prohibits compliance unless the sanctions for non-compliance are pretty extreme. Yet if this is appreciated then there are other managerial resources, discursive managerial resources, which can be highly effective instrumentally, if you are interested in managerial instrumentality. In open-textured organizations people who want to belong and succeed face a pressing need to assimilate and exploit those discursive practices which, while elusive, form the ethnographic vocabulary of the organization. The discursive perspective offers a relatively benign managerial context in which consent, motivation and a desire to participate in the goals of the organization are presupposed. Where organizational texture is open people can walk out. The only sanction is exclusion.

Silencing the repertoire of creative power

One repertoire was notable for its absence. In advertising, the power of creativity is often accorded a mythical status. It is a, perhaps the, major feature of conflict and destabilization within advertising agencies (Kover, Goldberg and James, 1995). Several creatives alluded, only slightly wistfully, to the greater power and prestige accorded to star creatives in other agencies. But creativity was lauded at this agency. The agency's own self-penned hardbound history, liberally

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[5] The eight mutually-dependent interpretative repertoires were: 'corporate way', 'strategic imperative', 'managerial imperative', 'intellectual contingency', 'power of rationality', 'knowledge of the client', 'knowledge of the consumer' and a 'power of creativity' repertoire which was present by its absence, silenced by the others. Several of these are developed in the text. The 'managerial imperative' and 'knowledge of the client' were owned by account management who had, at times, to impose pragmatic considerations such as deadlines, cost practicalities or what the client would (or would not) accept.

distributed around the premises, expresses these sentiments:

> '... properly practised creativity can lift your claims out of the swamp of sameness ... it's ... legacy lies in the commercial power of well-directed creativity ... a conviction that really effective advertising must be both relevant and outstandingly distinctive ... (the agency) pioneered the discipline of account planning, a process designed to give us greater consumer insights ... turning these into more competitive and perceptive strategies provides the inspiration for mould-breaking creative work.'

Yet in the interviews the power of creativity in itself was always suppressed as a warranting device. No interviewee, not even the creatives themselves, once drew on a 'power of creativity' repertoire to explain or justify particular actions or parts of the advertising process. Creativity was always spoken of in person in minimizing terms: 'it's just problem solving really', as one creative said. This agency displaced the 'power of creativity' repertoire so prevalent in the industry with the 'strategic imperative' and other repertoires which afforded political power to planners and account management and took it from creatives. This was made possible by the inclusive verbal style of the agency which circumscribed account-team meetings within a 'what is the strategy for this advertising?' discourse. This kind of discourse could always be drawn upon to legitimately torpedo non-instrumental viewpoints like 'but this is one great idea'. And the planners owned the advertising strategy.

The privileging of certain repertoires can displace alternative formulations of experience. As some of the quotes above illustrate, in this agency advertising strategy is carefully thought out, based on up-front qualitative research while in some others the 'creatives start sparking off ideas as soon as a client walks in through the door'. Within the advertising industry creativity and effectiveness are often seen as mutually exclusive binary oppositions representing the 'advertising is art' mentality on the one hand and the 'advertising is business' mentality on the other. In this agency no interviewee once made any unprompted reference to this dichotomy. There was no dichotomy. The dilemma of creative *or* effective is resolved through the 'strategic imperative' repertoire.

I felt that there was a sincere regard for creativity in this agency even though at times

account-management and planning staff qualified their piety with a little gentle mockery. A board account director said that he thought this agency 'has high standards of creativity'. The planners generally seemed acutely aware of the need for good ads to be distinctive and hence valued the creative input. Creative work in advertising was seen as 'quite close to art ... a very modern form of art' and was admired, sometime with reluctance, by planners:

> Planner: Most of the time creatives do their job a hundred per cent better than I could ever ... maybe it's not talent, maybe it's just the division of labour. I don't have time to play with Lego all day and they do.
>
> Q: The experience of creatives is so different isn't it? They get so much more psychological space don't they?
>
> Planner: Absolutely.
>
> Q: Maybe the distinction between creative and non creative is more a contrivance of agency structure?
>
> Planner: That's where I don't agree with you. We are far too aware of social codes.
>
> Q: So creative people have to be more radical thinkers.
>
> Planner: Yeh, more individuality, probably more selfish, less socially aware.

Some account directors on the other hand privileged their own role and downplayed the role of the creative by pointing, with wry condescension, to the 'craft skills' and 'mimesis' in creative work. One said of creatives 'they're not babies', obviously grimly recalling temper tantrums. One planner said the agency was not known in the industry as a 'rule breaking' agency. But all, even account directors agreed that creativity, as distinctiveness, was central to the success of advertising.

Creative staff in the agency admitted that they enjoyed a cosseted existence. They might be in their office, or out at the pub or the cinema. Much agency talk is of football, films and what is in the papers: the agency is full of information, both informal (all the daily newspapers are strewn around) and formal (a hugely efficient research-resources section). Keeping abreast of popular culture in a free-flowing way (multi method ethnography?) is, for creative staff, the way they get ideas and understand the popular climate.

They have to go to some meetings, and they certainly have to produce good work on time. But on the whole they are treated as self-disciplining professionals within the advertising development process. When I asked one senior creative his role from the point the client comes in with a brief he said:

> 'well it's all fairly well sorted, exactly what they want before we even see it: at least it should be . . . they're good like that here'. (Creative).

Another creative agreed that 'tight' creative briefs were liberating in the sense that the creatives could trust the account team to do the preliminary work defining the advertising strategy and target audience well. And as Kover and Goldberg (1995) note, building trust in this context is often a major difficulty. Therefore there was no dichotomy of creative versus effective. Effective and distinctive advertising demands an order of creativity, and creativity in this agency operates within carefully considered strategic constraints.

The planning 'philosophy' and discursive closure

But, sober and reasonable as this may sound, few agencies are able to manage well the tensions and open conflicts that arise between the interests of account management, representing the corporation and its commercial rationality, and creative staff, who may see themselves as the representatives of a morally superior tradition drawing on classical discourses of art, aesthetics and individual freedom. In many agencies open conflict is the order of the day and the agencies suffer from consequent instability. 'Creatives' commonly position themselves in agencies by sustaining an informal division between themselves and the 'suits', or rather between themselves and the conformist capitalist lackies who occupy the interior of the pejoratively signifying suits. Clearly, having one's work subject to the judgement of other interests is a difficult experience (what will my Research Assessment peer-review subject committee think of *this*?). Creative work in advertising is all creatives have. As one said, 'people don't say "who did the research" or "who did the media planning": its "well, was it your work or not?" So it is easy to imagine the sense of powerlessness they must feel, at least until they acquire a big reputation. This sense of powerlessness must

be exacerbated in an agency which is too intellectually sophisticated to give ground to essentialist arguments about creativity. The creatives/suits divide was one feature of this agency which is not different from others and the sense of subcultural power it can give to creatives is easy to imagine. Yet although this agency experienced the same political and ideological divisions as other agencies it managed this potential source of instability in a sophisticated and effective way which was unusual in its discursive character.

Clearly, one reading of the texts might be that there was a thin, even insincere veneer of politeness covering the rabid jealousies and internecine wars of the account groups. Maybe agency staff just mouthed pieties about inclusiveness and process because they felt oppressed and powerless by the size, grandeur and tradition of the corporation. But such a bald and one-dimensional view would do a great disservice to the individuals concerned. They were earnest about their work and committed to their careers but they were not powerless. And I believe that they were telling what they felt to be the truth.

The escape from the dichotomous bind of creative *or* effective advertising closed off a major potential source of instability. This discursive feat was accomplished through privileging the power of the planner in the advertising development process. This in turn was accomplished by privileging the interpretative forms of understanding deriving from qualitative consumer research which the planners drew upon to acquire power in account meetings. The main repertoires which politically supported account planners and politically (though perhaps not creatively) backgrounded creatives were repertoires of the 'strategic imperative' and the 'knowledge of the consumer'. Both of these interpretative repertoires were owned, as it were, by the planner and their legitimacy accepted by the other account-team members. This legitimacy was sanctioned by the agency itself through its self-told stories. Qualitative data ('talking to people') was considered a good source of knowledge, not incontestable or unqualified knowledge, but as a useful source of insight which supported a kind of dialectical reasoning process around advertising strategy. In other agencies, the planners can be marginalized or ignored, or even regarded with open contempt as philistine number-crunchers or, perversely, as suspiciously intellectual purveyors of social

research. Many agencies (and, increasingly, consultants) espouse a planning philosophy in brand and marketing communications development but the planners themselves confirmed that in most agencies they fall victim to the wars between creative and account management and find themselves hated by both. 'Respect' was what one planner, from another agency, felt he had in his current employment which he had not with previous ones. In this agency the planners circumscribed the advertising development process by taking the lead role in researching and writing the advertising strategy and the creative brief. The repertoires available for planners to draw upon afforded them power within the agency and this power reproduced an order which served the instrumental interests of the corporation.

I would not want to exaggerate the managerial influence of planners: as noted above, every decision the account teams made was subject to public argument and debate. The planners themselves saw themselves as ethically neutral problem-solvers and sometimes expressed disappointment at their place in the agency as a quasi 'suit' and 'boffin'. But the open debate of planning meetings was circumscribed by the discursive organization of work within the agency, and a major feature of this discursive organization of work was the availability of repertoires which afforded political power to planners, and, generally to a lesser extent, account managers, and subverted that of creative staff. Incidentally, (though perhaps not incidentally), these discussions were characterized by a halting, colloquial, non-technical use of simple language. Kover and Goldberg (1995) argue that agency conflict appears insoluble because of a lack of shared language between creatives[6] and account management. Perhaps the use of a kind of rock 'n' roll advertising patois was significant in the discursive management of this potential conflict. Planner talk was not distinctively colloquial in the interviews I conducted at other agencies but then this agency is widely regarded within the industry as the archetype for the 'planning' philosophy of advertising. Maybe what Kover and Goldberg (1995) noted as the intractable incommensurability

of rival language communities in US agencies had been resolved in this agency. The social order in the agency was constituted through the various interpretive repertoires and perhaps the prevailing grammar of indeterminacy I have noted several times was a precondition for this. It often struck me that, if you have a first class Oxbridge degree and you work for the cleverest agency in town you do not have to use long words to show you are clever.

'Discursive' management

I have tried to offer what I hope are telling empirically-grounded examples of ways in which the social order in this advertising agency appeared to be reproduced discursively. My emphasis has been on management as an effect present in the practices, especially linguistic practices, of day-to-day work. The availability, or non-availability, of certain interpretative repertoires acted to impose discursive closure on potentially non-instrumental viewpoints. Paradoxically the agency culture of open argument and debate imposed a silence of participation in which the apparent freedom to choose things to say in account-team meetings was in fact sharply circumscribed. In advertising agencies the most common source of instability is the tension between creativity and corporatist instrumentality. This tension was not eliminated, but was effectively managed. Furthermore, this act of management was silent in the sense that the corporate interests were enacted significantly through tacit means and manifest discursively rather than being imposed through explicit directives backed by public, explicit sanctions. Knights and Willmott (1985) have suggested that management, as a set of routines and practices, 'constitutes identities and experiences' (cited in Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, p. 26) which sustain the discursive preconditions for certain aspects of decision-making. I have tried in this piece to illustrate how management in this case might be seen as a discursive effect.

The discursive production of management must be seen as occasional, accidental, disconnected, a mutual construction apparent here and there within organizations, constructing the psycho-social worlds of both managed and managing. But discourse is out there to be drawn upon. We do not

[6] In US agencies there tends to be one 'creative': the copywriter. In UK agencies it is common for creative teams to comprise two people, essentially a words/scripts/music person and a visualiser, but these roles can be interchangeable.

make it up, although we do feel as if we exercise some limited but significant choice. I do not wish to make any incursions into metaphysics here but I am, I guess, suggesting that a micro-structural dynamic can be seen here which circumscribes discursive action. In this case, this particular organization has expropriated discursive space in significant ways. It places its corporate myths in the public domain. It manages pleasure by constructing certain kinds of privilege through, for example, a nice working environment, generous expenses, free fruit and snacks, late morning starting times. It tends to hire a distinctive kind of person, usually young, very clever (preferably Oxford humanities) good at advertising with experience elsewhere, socially poised and very verbal though somewhat diffident. One planner at another leading agency told me about his experience of failing an interview at this agency. He reckoned all the 'types' who got in were very quiet and studious. He was, he was told, considered a bit too 'scary'. Now this man was not 'scary': if you met him in a dark alley at night you might throw him 50p. But I knew what he meant. In the agency there are many people who do not conform to type, but nevertheless there is a type. The type is not one-dimensional or bland, but it is polite and not likely to do anything which would create a socially uncomfortable occasion. Like publicly challenging the way things are done. I do not mean they will not argue or have a definite point of view or dislike some colleagues and perhaps say so. I mean that the agency seems to recruit people with a certain social sensitivity, sensitive to prevailing discourses in the social climate. Or maybe that is just a definition of cleverness. Maybe I am making too much of this but I felt that the 'type' was important. In an open-textured knowledge-management organization there must be a tendency towards suppression of conflict and a tacit agreement on the legitimacy of the corporate enterprise. People who thrive on conflict are right for very different kinds of organization: the kind of organization where people would really rather not be. Discursive management can be seen where sharply prescriptive direction of work practices is neither socially legitimate nor instrumentally useful. Discursive management populates discursive space and makes possible the construction of psycho-organizational moments. These moments enable organizing to occur when it is instrumentally necessary, but allow

organizational space to appear de-populated at other times.

Such a form of management in some senses reflects an anti-management philosophy. People are not told how to behave and are not threatened with punishments. But, I have suggested that, given some important preconditions, discursive, tacit management can be more powerful and pervasive that explicit, sanction-backed management in that it acts on the psychological constitution of reality within the organization. In some ways the advertising agency is a special organizational case. Managing the psychological environment of people is probably easier if a sense of separation from the rest of the world can be sustained. But then again, a psychological sense of separateness is a precondition for the production of identity. In the agency there was. People felt that they were members of social élite, even within a socially-élite group, advertising. And, incidentally, in the Oxford colleges so familiar to many of the staff, psychological space is defined by the curiously insular signification of the architecture, the donnish culture, the traditions and the glorious alumni, all of which (and whom) are signified powerfully at every turn. To reject this tradition is merely to confirm its power over oneself. Maybe this is fanciful but I felt that some echoes of this kind of power to populate socio-psychological space were reflected in the culture, for want of a better word, of this agency.

Another methodological bit. Discourse analysis: beyond binaries?

Discourse analysis is still a minority sport in psychology. It has failed to respecify psychological entities in terms of interactional practices, or rather that it has done so is not acknowledged by the cognitivist mainstream. It also has its critics from within post-structuralism. One form of critique tends to point to evidence of a latent structuralism in the way discourse analysis makes use of binaries. Structuralism can often appear to be in the mind of the beholder, which is essentially what Wetherell and Potter (1998) seem to be arguing in their own defence of a feminist critique. Inner/outer and representation/reality were, they argue, binaries set up in Potter and Wetherell (1987) in order to be destabilized rather than to impose (an unwitting) discursive closure on feminist viewpoints. As Elliott (1996) points out,

discourse analysis is not an 'it'. Acts of scholarship in discourse studies are not subject to methodological unity, only to a somewhat wobbly (could 'wobbly' become technical research jargon?) ontological and thematic unity. However, the methodological aspect of DA raises suspicions among some post-structuralists. The extensive use of techniques from conversation analysis can seem to be encouraging such a view and Parker (1992, 1997) is highly critical of this tendency. Indeed, some conversation analytic researchers argue in favour of an out-and-out methodological paradigm for DA (Shlegoff, 1997). But looseness of interpretive method, anathema to some social scientists, seems in the spirit of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) scheme. As Wetherell (1998) argues, DA as a critical form of discursive social psychology can be seen as entailing a focus on the:

> 'situated flow of discourse, which looks at the formation and negotiation of psychological states, identities and interactional and intersubjective events. It is concerned with members' methods and the logic of accountability while describing also the collective and social patterning of background normative conceptions (their forms of articulation and the social and psychological consequences).' (p. 405).

Hence there is no necessary virtue in separating the codification of DA findings from the interpretative process which assimilates ethnographic and genealogical context. Critical DA should investigate 'the social and political consequences of discursive patterning' (Wetherell, 1998, p. 405) and is subject to the evaluative criteria of good scholarship.

As I think I discovered, the methodology of DA can blind the politically naïve beginner to its critical potential, which is the intellectual point of DA. Used critically as a set of broad methodological principles rather than as a technical procedure DA can capture subtle shades in the power/discourse landscape in ways which can, to some extent, be conveyed and subject to critique. In the somewhat rarified organizational setting of this advertising agency DA demonstrated that representations of knowledge (knowledge of consumers, knowledge of clients, of markets and marketing, of art, popular culture and creative craft) were constitutive of the social order in a very telling way. Qualitative knowledge of the meaning of consumption in certain contexts was

legitimized within this agency and, along with other mutually supportive discourses, acted to impose a constitutive instrumentality on advertising development.

DA is crucially founded on a social constructionist ontological premise which probably condemns it forever to the margins of social science. But as a protracted lesson in ontological instability it can generate insights into the constitutive character of language and practices of power in different contexts. The foregoing example of DA in an organization which manages, produces and sells special knowledge and creative ideas has tried to show that practices of management in such organizations can appear to be characterized by a powerful tacit, psycho-sociological, discursive character which operates within an apparent constitutive corporate intensionality.

Watch your back Michael Hammer: I'm talking to you Tom Peters: it's Discursive Management, the Next Big Thing in organizational body building. You too can have a body like mine in just ten minutes a day (if you're not careful).

No, but really, no, stop laughing for a minute, I am a serious academic. And I do not think that normative considerations necessarily lie beyond the realm of ethnographically informed representation. I think that discursive approaches to managing, if they are possible as intentional acts, would entail an understanding of the limits of management in certain contexts. Managerial silence, judiciously constructed, can apparently form a vacuum into which available discursive resources might be located. It carries risks: the outcome must be uncertain. In advertising that might be okay because uncertainty, in the form of creativity, is part of the knowledge stuff the corporation produces to sell. It would, perhaps, require a highly knowledgeable management to order discursive organizational space in a conscious manner. That is, discursive management would have to be done by specialist experts who are managing other specialist experts. As a(n explicit) formulation of normative management the notion of discursive management might be

appropriate for a relatively small number of knowledge organizational forms: perhaps just the best ones.

   The active connotations of the word 'management' tend to privilege the conscious, the explicit, the directive, the cognitive and the causative. The use of critical social constructionist discourse analysis in this particular case has pointed to an alternative understanding of management in terms of the discursive, the tacit, and the psycho-sociological in one important and successful form of knowledge-management organization. A consideration of language and discourse seemed, in this case, central to the kinds of insight available for representation.

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