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AT THREE HONG KONG SITES

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REPRESENTATIONAL PREDICAMENTS AT THREE HONG KONG SITES

ABSTRACT

Representational predicaments arise when a job incumbent believes that attributions and images assumed by dominant authorities unfavourably ignore, or disproportionately and unfavourably emphasize, aspects of the incumbent's own work and social identity. This is likely to happen when the incumbent does not have a close relationship with a dominant authority, and when power asymmetries give the former relatively little control over which aspects of their work and social identity are made visible or invisible to the latter. We draw on critical incident interviews from three organizations to illustrate a typology of six types of representational predicament: invasive spotlighting, idiosyncratic spotlighting, embedded background work, paradoxical social visibility, standardization of work processes, and standardization of work outputs. We analyze responses to representational predicaments according to whether they entailed exit, voice, loyalty, or neglect. Incumbents tended to respond with loyalty if they felt able and willing to accommodate their work behaviour and/or social identity to the dominant representations, and if there were sufficient compensatory factors, such as intrinsic rewards from the work or solidarity with colleagues. Exit or neglect appeared to reflect the belief that it was impossible to accommodate. Power asymmetries appeared to deter voice. Individual employees with a close and cordial working relationship with a member of a dominant authority group, or who were relationally networked to one, appeared not to experience representational predicaments.

Descriptors: Representational predicaments, organizational justice, fairness, invisibility, power, loyalty, performance evaluation, Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

Through a qualitative study conducted in Hong Kong, we developed the concept of a 'representational predicament'. This phenomenon, as we define it, arises when a job incumbent believes that dominant authorities hold images about his/her work and social identity that are both misleading and unfavourable.

We shall assume that a representational predicament does not arise if an incumbent is a dominant authority, and/or believes that the assumed images are both salient and truthful, and/or believes that the assumed images are favourable. For example, there is no representational predicament if an incumbent believes that his/her work is held in high esteem because he/she has successfully created a mystique that covers up its mundane nature. Nor is there a representational predicament if an incumbent believes that dominant authorities have correctly inferred that he/she has been engaging in fraud. We shall assume also that representational predicaments stem from power asymmetries, in particular the incumbent's relative lack of control over which aspects of his work or social identity are made visible or invisible to dominant authorities. In this paper, we shall illustrate various conditions that may constitute representational predicaments, and analyze how incumbents respond in terms of exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect.

Building on and modifying a framework from Star and Strauss (1999), we shall now characterize two general contexts where representational predicaments arise from power asymmetries. The first involves unfavourable combinations of social visibility/invisibility and work visibility; the second involves unfavourable combinations of social visibility/invisibility and work invisibility. In these contexts, unfavourable social visibility/invisibility entails the visibility of low social status and/or the invisibility of social rights.

Unfavourable combinations of social visibility/invisibility and work visibility

Incumbents face unfavourable combinations of social visibility/invisibility and work visibility when power asymmetries allow dominant authorities to scrutinize their work while also neglecting their social rights. In extreme situations, incumbents may be subjected to hour by hour surveillance and micromanagement, in the process being denied privacy, suffering depersonalization, and being pressurized into subservience (Star and Strauss 1999), as with some domestic service workers (Rollins 1985; Sunderland and Varia 2006) and in 'sweatshop' factories (Boje 1998).

Less extreme power asymmetries may still allow dominant authorities to subject incumbents to invasive spotlighting and/or idiosyncratic spotlighting. Invasive spotlighting entails selective focusing of supervisory scrutiny on issues which cast the incumbent in an unfavourable light, without regard to privacy, dignity, and mitigating circumstances. For example, a superior who considers that incumbents are undertaking 'guardian' jobs, where error prevention is a paramount concern (see Baron and Kreps 1999), might single out mistakes and deliver *ad hoc* public reprimands.

Idiosyncratic spotlighting entails the unfavourable focusing of supervisory scrutiny on issues that the incumbent regards as tangentially relevant to the work or work performance, comparative neglect of issues which the incumbent regards as centrally relevant, and disregard for the incumbent's perspective. For example, a superior might assume that unpaid overtime is both a voluntary investment that yields long-term economic payoffs for incumbents (see Bell and Hart 1999), and an all-important indicator of performance, and might base appraisal ratings on the amount of time spent in the office. An incumbent might

feel, however, that this is a poor indicator of performance, and that unpaid overtime is an encroachment on his or her outside life.

Unfavourable combinations of social visibility/invisibility and work invisibility

Some unfavourable combinations of social visibility/invisibility and work invisibility arise when power asymmetries allow dominant authorities to disregard aspects of the incumbent's work because of his or her subordinate social identity. This may happen when incumbents undertake embedded background work, and/or are subjected to paradoxical social visibility.

Embedded background work is typically undertaken by laboratory technicians, nurses, clerks, secretaries, and other providers of on-call support services, for dominant authorities with considerably higher social status, who may harbour unfavourable stereotypes of the incumbents' work (Blomberg, Suchman and Trigg 1996; Bolton 2004; Robinson 1992; Shapin 1989; Star and Strauss 1999).

Paradoxical social visibility may occur when the social identity of incumbents requires them to make contributions that dominant authorities disregard as work. For example, traditional gender stereotyping expects female staff to manifest 'caring, compassion, willingness to please others, generosity, sensitivity; solidarity, (and) nurturing' (Gherardi 1994: 597), but work that manifests these characteristics can be invisible to dominant authorities (Gherardi 1994; Townley 1994). Fletcher (1995; 1998) found that relational practices adopted by female engineers to support colleagues and superiors, were not regarded as 'real' work. Formal job evaluation systems may undervalue contributions of this kind (Steinberg 1999), while gender stereotyping may also require female incumbents to avoid behaviours that

managements regard as signs of effectiveness (Rudman and Glick 1999). Paradoxical social visibility can overlap with embedded background work (Ogasawara 1998).

Other unfavourable combinations of social visibility/invisibility and work invisibility may stem from attempts by dominant authorities to exercise remote control over the incumbent's work. This may entail standardization of work processes or standardization of work outputs, which are core features, respectively, of machine bureaucracy and of divisional form organization designs (Mintzberg 1983).

Standardization of work processes typically entails the reduction of practices and people to techniques through 'disembodied task analysis, work processes or data flow diagrams' (Blomberg, McLaughlin and Suchman 1993). The resulting representations of work may overlook the need for reflective, improvisational, creative and dialogical practices (Orr 1990, 1996, 1998; Seely-Brown 1991). Orr (1988) has pointed out:

> 'In the domain of work, the model of techniques and technical work has monopolized discussion in the business and organizational literature since Taylor, at the expense of our understanding of practice.' (Orr 1998: 452)

Both the human relations movement ensuing from the Hawthorne experiments (Mayo 1933; Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939) and the labour process movement associated with Braverman (1974) criticized standardization of work as a manifestation of an exclusively economic logic of production and as a tool for deskilling (Star and Strauss 1999). However, work standardization, along with the simplification entailed by this, have been regarded as necessary means for managements to reduce information overload and facilitate detection and correction of errors (Argyris 1978). As Alvesson (1982) has observed, scope for fusion between the goals of efficiency and the goals of humanization may be limited.

Standardization of work outputs and work processes facilitates the operation of global supply chains, through which the products of outsourced work are purchased as commodities (Star and Strauss 1999: 15), rendering invisible the financial, physical, emotional and social costs bourne by remote employees (Kidder and Raworth 2004). Standardization of work outputs involves judging effectiveness and making decisions about resource allocation on the basis of comparative statistics across multiple sites. Representational predicaments may arise when incumbents believe that they face special circumstances that go unrecognized by the canonical statistical indicators. Argyris (1978: 28) characterized this phenomenon as 'necessary injustice' within large corporations, where:

> 'The unique aspects of each situation must be ignored because they would make the data too complex to be useful'. (Argyris 1978: 25).

Factors moderating the impact of power asymmetries

Power asymmetries may not necessarily lead to unfavourable combinations of work invisibility and social invisibility/visibility. For example, the incumbent might develop a close working relationship or 'leader-member exchange' (Yrle, Hartman and Galle 2003) with a dominant authority, or might become relationally networked to dominant authorities through a chain of such relationships (Wong and Leung 2001). In such cases, the way dominant authorities see the incumbent and his or her work may, over time, converge with the incumbent's own perceptions.

Experiencing and responding to representational predicaments

Whether or not incumbents become unhappy as a result of a representational predicament may depend on (a) whether there are compensatory factors, and (b) their assessments of the

magnitude and salience of the difference between the images assumed by dominant authorities and their own proximal work experience and/or sense of social identity. The EVLN framework, derived by Withey and Cooper (1989) from the pioneering work of Hirschman (1970), identifies four response options to adversity, and we shall apply it to reactions to representational predicaments.

Exit entails finding a different job and leaving. This may happen if incumbents judge that other factors, such as friendships with colleagues, fail to compensate sufficiently for their representational predicaments, and if they feel that there are large, salient and unbridgeable differences between their own perspective and the images assumed by dominant authorities.

Voice may entail attempts to bring the images assumed by dominant authorities into alignment with the incumbent's own perspective through advocacy, explanation or discussion. However, voice is not merely a matter of rational argument based on objective evidence but also involves political processes of negotiating impressions, attributions and social relations (Blomberg, Suchman and Trigg 1996; Suchman 1995). It can backfire, leading to increased surveillance (Star and Strauss 1999). Incumbents may therefore refrain from voice if they see themselves as political underdogs.

Loyalty involves working to the best of one's ability, while remaining silent about the representational predicament. Incumbents may choose loyalty, if there are compensatory factors, such as intrinsic rewards or recognition from others who are not dominant authorities. Or they may chose loyalty, if the difference between the images assumed by dominant authorities and their own perspective is tolerably small or can be reduced to a tolerably small amount, by accommodating their work behaviour and social identity to these dominant

images. For example, they may learn to confine time and effort spent on invisible elements of their job to a bare minimum, or, if faced with invasive spotlighting, they may learn to focus on mistake avoidance and on developing a 'thick skin'.

Neglect entails withdrawing psychologically from the work situation, by focusing attention on non-work issues. This may happen when incumbents perceive there to be a large and unbridgeable difference between their own perspective and the images assumed by dominant authorities, but feel anchored to the workplace because of strong social attachments, or because they feel ill-equipped to find alternative employment.

Figure 1 summarizes our discussion of invisibility/visibility configurations and the EVLN response options. It also incorporates the possibility that (a) situational factors moderate the extent to which power asymmetries give rise to representational predicaments, and (b) factors within the work situation other than representational predicaments have an impact on the incumbent's overall balance of happiness or unhappiness. This framework was developed in conjunction with our research, but is subject to modification in the light of further research in different contexts (O'Sullivan et al. 1995).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

THE RESEARCH

Research Questions

The following research questions emerged during the research and subsequent analysis and reflections:

- How, if at all, do the representational predicaments that are reported by Hong Kong Chinese respondents correspond to unfavourable combinations of (a) social visibility/invisibility and work visibility (b) social visibility/invisibility and work invisibility?

- Are there representational predicaments that are not associated with these combinations?

- What factors, if any, reduce the likelihood representational predicaments by moderating the impact of power asymmetries between dominant authorities and job incumbents?

- Do representational predicaments necessarily lead to unhappiness? If not, what are other factors are important?

- How do incumbents respond to representational predicaments, whether in terms of the EVLN (exit, voice, loyalty, neglect) typology, or otherwise?

Research Design

Although our primary focus was on individual incumbents, we adopted a qualitative case study research design (Miles and Huberman 1994), based on the assumption that interviewing several incumbents from the same organization would provide a comparatively richer picture of the organizational context that each individual faced. Because of the relative sensitivity of the topics (Brannen 1988), and the tendency for Chinese societies to avoid open disclosure to strangers (Shenkar 1994), we chose what we believed was a relatively innocuous public title, 'Interpersonal Skills at Work' for the research. This reflected that much of the invisible work identified in prior research entailed an element of interpersonal skills.

Through networking (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Hornby and Symon 1994: 169-170), we obtained research collaboration via contact people at three diverse sites: Agency A, Company

L, and Organization U. Agency A was an insurance retail branch attached to a multinational financial services company. Company L was a small on-line database service provider, recently acquired by a larger company but remaining under the day to day control of its former owner-manager, a Hong Kong Chinese male. Organization U was a publicly funded provider of tertiary education.

Data collection and analysis

Between November 2002 and August 2003, a Senior Research Assistant interviewed 24 staff at various levels of seniority at the three sites: 13 at Agency A, 6 at Company L, and 5 from the non-academic administrators at Organization U. At each site, roughly equal numbers of men and women were interviewed. Informants were spread across a range of seniority levels, including, at two of the sites, one director level informant. Each informant was given an assurance of confidentiality, but was told that the aggregate data would be made available to each informant. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese, and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Notwithstanding the public title of the research, the interviews were designed also to investigate invisible aspects of work and social identity that were concerned with issues other than the use of interpersonal skills. Central to the interviews with the 22 non-directorial informants was the probing of 4 types of critical incident, each of which entailed work contributions self-perceived to have been effective for the organization. The incidents comprised:

- One particularly difficult encounter or transaction with an internal or external customer or supplier regarding a sensitive issue about which the other party appeared to feel strongly and badly about, and which the informant believed he/she had handled particularly well.

- One contribution that the informant believed was particularly important and had been successfully made at a workplace meeting.

- Two potentially emotionally difficult and/or sensitive interactions (one of them involving a supervisor or subordinate, and the other involving a colleague or fellow team member), which entailed the informant attempting to get work done effectively, and which the informant believed he/she had handled particularly well.

The 22 non-directorial informants were encouraged to provide descriptive narration (Miles and Huberman 1994) for each critical incident. They were also asked to describe skills and character attributes that, they believed, had enabled them to handle the incident effectively, and to explain any benefits that may have resulted for their organization. In addition, for each incident, they were asked to rate, on a scale ranging from 'every day' to 'less than once a month', how frequently they had to deal with that type of incident, and also to rate the amount of recognition they typically received (none/ a little bit/ nearly enough/ enough/ more than enough) from their organization for that type of work. Thus it was not assumed or contrived that every critical incident would entail a representational predicament, and the methodology was open to descriptions of good work which, from the point of view of the informant, had been duly appreciated.

The two director-level informants were asked general questions about corresponding human resource policies and practices. For example, they were asked, 'How much importance does your organization attach to employees' effective management of feelings during their interactions with internal or external customers or suppliers?' What kind of behaviours and/or achievements during such interactions does your organization especially value? What recognition does your organization give to them?'

All informants were asked to characterize how performance evaluation was conducted within their organization, by indicating the relative emphasis on individual, team and unit level performance, the relative weights attached to interpersonal, technical and strategic skills, and whether or not co-workers, colleagues, subordinates, and other stakeholders were involved in appraising performance. They were also asked, 'In general terms, how do people have to behave in order to be recognized and rewarded in your organization?' and, 'What should be done in your organization to assess work contributions such as interpersonal skills more accurately and to recognize them more fairly'. As a tentative indicator of potential gender bias within the organization regarding unfavourable visibility or invisibility of work performed by male versus female incumbents, informants were asked to estimate the proportions of male and female employees at senior, middle and lower levels of seniority.

All interviews were transcribed into English. Analysis of transcripts of completed interviews commenced long before all the interviews had been conducted. Interviewing multiple individuals in each case organization allowed background data given by informants, such as their descriptions of performance evaluation systems, to be cross-corroborated (King 1995). Themes were allowed to emerge from the data, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). A series of half-day meetings between the authors and the interviewer alerted the interviewer to emerging issues that she was then able to pay attention to in subsequent interviews. At a later stage in the analysis, data were categorized into clusters involving abstraction until the clusters were saturated (Glaser 1978) and formed analytical generalizations that could explain more general phenomena experienced by others (Husserl 1973; Yin 1989). We now analyze each of the cases in turn, with reference to Figure 1.

AGENCY A

Background

Agency A was one of 22 locally-based life insurance agency branches attached to Company A, which was the divisional office for the Hong Kong region of a multinational financial services company that had its global headquarters in the West. While Company A was responsible for Hong Kong operations, it was financially accountable to the global headquarters, which paid close attention to the figures for sales volume, operating profit, and growth in assets under management, both across each of its businesses, including life insurance, and across each of its regional divisions, including Hong Kong. In 2003, Company A, including its attached Hong Kong agencies, had a total of 2,100 staff, while Agency A had 76 life insurance staff, comprising a director, 9 other managerial grade staff, and 66 sales grade staff. Each managerial grade staff member at Agency A, including the director, was in charge of one team of sales grade staff. The job titles at Agency A are shown in Table 1, along with the associated formal responsibilities, and the respective numbers of informants.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Standardization of work outputs

The divisional form structure of the global financial services company, and the associated pressure for results in terms of sales volume, operating profit, and growth were reflected in the performance management system used by Company A to control the local agencies and the staff within them. Company A compared each of the 22 agencies against measures of growth in 'production' (sales revenue), staff headcount, and 'productivity' (sales revenue per staff member). Each agency was rated annually on a scale from '3A' (growth on all three

indicators) to 'hurry up' (growth on none of the indicators) and the ratings were announced at the annual sales meeting attended by the staff of all 22 agencies. The performance of each managerial grade staff member was assessed on the basis of statistics about the growth in size of their sales team, the productivity of their sales team, their own direct production rate, and their own annual 'persistence' rate (renewal rates of existing policies). The performance of each sales grade staff member was assessed on the basis of their production, production yield per customer, and annual persistence rate.

The performance management system

No one in Agency A received a base salary. Sales grade staff received monthly salaries made up entirely of sales commissions, and they received a year-end bonus based on their annual persistence rate and on commissions from policy renewals. Managerial grade staff earned some additional income from overriding commissions that derived from the production of their sales team. Symbols of success or failure were highly visible. Job titles were determined annually on the basis of performance statistics; the titles of sales grade staff members reflected their productivity over the previous year, while the titles of managerial grade staff reflected the size and performance of their sales team over the previous year. Company A set minimum monthly and quarterly sales targets for every staff member, sent warning letters to those who missed the monthly target once, 'auto-terminated' the contracts of those who missed this target for two consecutive months, and suspended the medical benefits of those who missed the quarterly target. Whiteboards and posters displayed around the walls of the Agency A offices reminded staff about their sales figures. Trophies, free trips and cash prizes were awarded for high level of productions.

Unfavourably invisible client service work

All informants said that they had undertaken invisible client service work, such as helping clients to present claims and appeals, and explaining assessments, which, they explained, required skills of interpretation, analysis, and counseling. They also indicated that such work was situationally extorted and driven by contextual rationality (Townley 2002), because clients expected immediate service, and assumed that this was part of the job of the informants, even though the performance management system applying to the latter was based exclusively on sales. The twelve non-directorial informants each described one critical incident where they believed they had interacted effectively with angry and/or distressed clients. With regard to ten such incidents, the respective informants indicated that the organization had given them no recognition for the associated work, implying that there had been unfavourable work invisibility. For example, a female informant, (Ms. I, sales manager), described a meeting with an aggrieved and abusive client, which had lasted from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., and which had led to further follow-up meetings. Another female informant described a series of lengthy telephone calls with a distressed client, who had moved overseas, who was unable to work because of cancer, and who had not received a payout at the level warranted by her policy. This informant explained that she had eventually managed to obtain formal approval for the appropriate payout and its transfer to the client, but then stated:

> "I got zero recognition from the company for any of this. This is an insurance company and these efforts are 'no production'. Management won't understand your efforts." (Ms. M, business manager).

Reactions to the unfavourable invisibility of customer service work

Incidents of the kind reported by Ms. I and Ms. M involved both emotional labour (Spector and Fox 2002) and emotional toxicity (Frost 2002). Ms. M said that she had been very unhappy about the company's mishandling of the cancer patient's claim, and about the lack

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of care entailed by this (Gilligan 1982). She responded to this incident with a mixture of neglect and loyalty, remaining with the company but passing back responsibility for supervising three agents to her line manager. Another female informant considered exiting because of an unhappy incident with an angry male client about a policy that he felt had been mis-sold:

> 'When he lost his temper, I felt helpless. At such times, when I am very down, I sometimes think of quitting.' (Ms. N, agent).

Only three informants reported that incidents involving strong and negative client emotions happened more often than once per month. Three other informants provided incidents that indicated, conversely, that they found client service work rewarding when clients expressed their appreciation. Although nearly all informants implied that they believed that their client service work was unfavourably invisible to dominant authorities, most adopted a loyalty type response, and accommodated to its invisibility by treating it as containable obligation. For example, a male informant explained that he confined client service work to policy-related requests and to annual visits at policy renewal time. He reasoned that going beyond this meant not doing 'real work' (Bailyn and Fletcher 2004):

> 'I explain to them that the responsibility of a good agent is not to meet them regularly to have tea, rather it is to help them solve their issues when they really need assistance.' (Mr. S, sales manager).

Unfavourable social visibility/invisibility vis-à-vis Company A

Agency A informants identified two issues concerning unfavorable social visibility/invisibility vis-à-vis Company A. The first concerned the lack of direct access by sales grade staff to senior staff at Company A. The second issue concerned the invasive spotlighting of performance decline. While many informants expressed loyalty to Agency A,

both issues appeared to militate against loyalty to Company A. One informant reported that some years previously, there had been a mass defection, with 50% of staff across Company A and its associated agencies leaving to join a new, rival company. Two other informants mentioned that, more recently, there had been several cases where individual staff from Company A's associated agencies had been 'headhunted' and 'bought out', by competitor organizations.

Access/non-access to senior staff at Company A

The right to make direct contact with senior staff at Company A made it relatively easy for managerial grade staff at Agency A to represent their clients. Once a staff member, newly promoted to managerial grade, had settled into this role, Mr. T would introduce him or her to senior staff at Company A. According to Ms I, a sales manager, Mr. T's personal introductions, along with a good record on the canonical performance indicators, was a platform upon which managerial grade staff members from Agency A could build favourable social visibility, while also developing a sense of belonging to Company A. Another female manager described how she had leveraged her relationships with two senior people at Company A in order to obtain intelligence to build up a dossier to support a client's claim:

> 'Both managers trusted my credibility, based on my track record. I believe that our company is a really customer-oriented company. This is the third time I have experienced something like this here. I am proud of this company'. (Ms. T, senior sales manager).

By contrast, four sales grade staff at Agency A expressed frustration about the status barrier against contacting senior staff at Company A. A female informant described the junior staff at Company A as follows:

> 'They put on their defensive armour. They don't look at your case seriously and just give you standard replies.' (Ms. M, business manager).

Sales grade staff felt obliged to ask their respective line managers to pursue complex claims or appeals on their behalf, but some of the former indicated that they did not receive the support that they needed from the latter. For example, a male sales grade informant said that his line manager was often unavailable, while a female sales grade informant complained that her line manager was unsympathetic to the cases that she brought up. The agency director blamed this lack of support for agency staff by line managers, on the performance management system that applied to the latter:

> 'It encourages sales managers to focus on their own selling activity. The agents then complain to me that they can't find their sales manager.' (Mr. T, agency director).

Invasive spotlighting of performance decline

Four informants criticized the performance management system for its invasive spotlighting of performance failure or decline. Ms. U, a senior agent, who had moved up and down the title hierarchy several times, commented, 'Some people, when demoted, hid themselves away and eventually left'. The agency director mentioned the indignity suffered by some long-serving sales grade staff:

> 'They used to rent their own booths, but now they can only afford to rent a desk in the open-plan office. There was no space for their old trophies, which were just left aside.' (Mr. T, agency director).

Maintaining loyalty despite unfavourable social visibility/invisibility

Despite their unfavourable social visibility/invisibility vis-à-vis dominant authorities in Company A, four sales grade informants indicated that they had a strong sense of loyalty to Agency A. A major reason for their loyalty appeared to be that in the two years since becoming agency director, Mr. T had cultivated what one female informant described as a

'strong human touch' at Agency A, by imposing a form of matrix structure that required each managerial grade staff member to lead a team to perform functional duties, such as business development, recruitment, information technology, finance, social events, and administration. Mr. T led the training team himself, and enlisted all 9 managerial grade staff, along with 3 high-performing volunteer sales grade staff. A male informant said that regular training sessions took place for sales grade staff:

> 'The experienced people here are really willing to help us and share their experiences… Colleagues here are like brothers and sisters helping each other out'. (Mr. G, assistant business manager).

Four informants related critical incidents where they believed that they had undertaken functional support duties that had been invisible to Company A, but had nonetheless given them satisfaction, because their ideas or contributions had been adopted by Agency A and had been recognized by Agency A colleagues. Two of these informants said that Mr. T often praised people's functional contributions at agency meetings. More generally, informants said that Mr. T was supportive, caring, encouraging, and helpful, and that if people were going through a bad patch performance-wise, Mr. T managed to find ways to support them. Informants also mentioned giving and/or receiving support from one another, through informal internal community sustenance activities (Wenger et al. 2002). For example, Mr. R, senior business manager, said that, 'Sharing your experience and learning from others can enlighten you, but sharing your troughs with colleagues helps you also'. Mr. Y, an assistant business manager, reported giving technical and analytical support to some members of other sales teams, who were in their 50s and facing obsolescence, in exchange for a share of their commissions.

Unfavourable social visibility/invisibility regarding domestic identity

An attempt to standardize aspects of work processes was evident in a ruling, enacted by the most senior members of Agency A's management team just before the research interviews began, that all staff must report for duty by 9:15 a.m., Monday to Saturday, or face a $HK10 fine, increasing to $HK50 by 9.45. Previously, the reporting time had been 10 a.m. Three informants had criticized the ruling on the grounds that it was incompatible with the domestic routines of some female staff. Among them, two females indicated that they were unable to accommodate to this unfavourable social invisibility. One indicated that she was on the verge of neglect. The other wept during the research interview and said that she had initially expressed voice, then neglect, and then contemplated exit:

> 'I cried for half an hour telling Mr. T. about my family problems. I'm losing my zest for work. I'll probably quit because I'm guilty about my family situation and my work isn't smooth.' (Ms. P, assistant business manager).

COMPANY L

Background

Co. L was a web-based search engine company, established in 1999 by the owner-CEO, Mr. A. After Co. L was sold to a listed holding company in April 2000, Mr. A kept an ownership stake and remained CEO, with responsibility for day to day control. Co. L had 26 employees – 6 managerial and 20 lower level staff – in 2003.

Autocratic managerial control

Informants' accounts suggested that Mr. A's approach to managerial control matched the simple structure and traditional 'headship' patterns typical of small Chinese businesses

(Redding 1990; Westwood 1997). One informant, who was a close friend of Mr. A in the early days of the company, said that the latter's management style had become autocratic:

> 'The CEO always asks me to do something and I can't say no or raise any objections. I just follow his ideas… You don't argue with the CEO. He expects us to support him. We had cases in the past where we argued with him for 4 to 5 hours and it was a waste of time'. (Mr. H, senior web designer).

Ms. C, the administration and finance manager, explained that she took the role of mediator between Mr. A and most other staff, trying to soften what she called his 'imperative orders'. However, another female informant felt that this arrangement was unhelpful, because it allowed most staff to remain unfavourably socially invisible vis-à-vis Mr. A.

> 'I think that if the CEO were to get more involved with other colleagues in the company, the atmosphere would become better. Now, he just talks to a few direct reports and is distant from everyone else.' (Ms. L, administration secretary).

The performance bonus system

During the first three years after the company's inception, staff members received a loyalty bonus in the form of 'double pay' every Chinese New Year. According to Ms. C, the holding company asked Mr. A to base the payouts, which had been due in early 2003, on performance, and she (Ms. C) had devised a bonus system that Mr. A had found acceptable and had implemented retrospectively, covering the preceding twelve months. The evaluation criteria had not been formally announced, but details had leaked out after the bonuses were paid. Informants indicated that they believed that the criteria had emphasized punctuality, absenteeism and the number of personal telephone calls made or taken during office hours. The system had also taken into account Mr. A's ratings of the performance of his line managers, and the latters' ratings of the performance of their subordinates.

Idiosyncratic spotlighting of attendance and punctuality

Ms. C defended the performance bonus system and another informant, Mr. D, an account manager, whose sales performance, attendance and punctuality records were said to have been 'exemplary', also supported it. However, three other male informants expressed dissatisfaction during the research interviews, not only because they felt that their social rights had been ignored when the system had been applied retrospectively and opaquely, but also because they regarded the measurements as arbitrary, incomplete and inaccurate. None of these three dissenters had voiced their criticisms to the management at the time of imposition. Their subsequent responses manifested loyalty, in the sense that they had been willing to go along with the system, even though they had not respected it. One of them said, for example:

> 'It is better to get to work earlier than Mr. A, leave the office later than him, and let him know it. When you perform a duty, exaggerate the difficulties of the task. For example, you tell Mr. A that you need more time to finish the duty than actually needed, and then complete the task before the deadline. This will impress him and you will receive recognition for it.' (Mr. O, senior account manager).

Embedded background work

Two informants reported representational predicaments regarding embedded background work. One of them regarded the incident as an isolated event and had reacted with loyalty, letting the matter rest. The other, Mr. W, IT engineer, reported four incidents which appeared to signify the unfavourable social visibility of the IT support team and the trivialization of IT support work. Two of these incidents were closely linked. First, Mr. A had rejected the IT support team's request to purchase a firewall. The IT support team had then persuaded Mr. A to purchase a cheap alternative to use in an experiment to create a quasi-firewall. The team had then conducted the experiment overnight, but this had failed, and the system had remained open to virus attack, which had happened again some time later, requiring the team

to spend another 6-7 hours restoring the system. Mr. W indicated that, in the face of all this adversity, he and his peers were still responding with loyalty, but that the lack of financial support for the IT system had led some staff to contemplate exit:

> 'The system is always being attacked and has been 'down' so many times. Most team members feel they have no prospects in this company, and staff morale is low.' (Mr. W, IT engineer).

Paradoxical social visibility

Two informants reported representational predicaments regarding paradoxical social visibility. Ms. C referred to her role as mediator between Mr. A and other staff. On the one hand, Mr. A's gratitude toward her encouraged her to remain loyal, but on the other hand, Ms. C believed that the very nature of mediation prevented Mr. A from fully appreciating the emotional toxicity that she had to endure and the amount of emotional labour that she had to perform. Ms. C described two incidents where, during mediation, staff members had made negative comments and had expressed negative emotions that she believed they would not have expressed directly to Mr. A, and vice versa. For example, she said:

> 'Their harsh words made me feel uncomfortable, and I felt I had to absorb all the blame. I was unhappy that night. Nobody knows about my invisible effort but I take it on as part of my daily duties.' (Ms. C, administration and finance manager).

Ms. L reported a similar, albeit one-off, incident, involving Ms. C's predecessor, when Mr. A summarily dismissed the latter on the grounds of fraud. He required Ms L to witness the interrogation, and assigned Ms. L to supervise the dismissed manager as she packed her belongings:

> 'She swore and was very hostile to me. I said nothing and just endured it. I felt I had to complete my duty as assigned by Mr. A.' (Ms. L, administration secretary).

Again, Mr. A's gratitude encouraged Ms. L to remain loyal, but, like Ms C, she believed that he did not fully realize how toxic the emotions were that had been expressed to her.

ORGANIZATION U

Background

Organization U was a Hong Kong based tertiary education institution employing around 500 staff, including 300 non-academics, whose work ranged from clerical duties to financial management and other specialist professional and managerial tasks.

Professional bureaucracy

Control within Organization U followed a pattern of professional bureaucracy (Mintzberg 1983). Decisions were formalized and activities were reported through committees. Each post was subject to formal job descriptions and salary scales, and to formal criteria and procedures for appointment and promotion, and respective committees vetted annual appraisal reports for the staff. One informant illustrated how the grievance procedure operated:

> 'A supervisor spoke harshly to a staff member. The case went to an independent committee, where we advocated a more considerate approach. The supervisor was told to pay attention to his words.' (Ms. R, director of human resources).

Informants indicated that such arrangements were designed to protect fairness and objectivity and to restrict abuse of power, but that they did not signify an absence of power asymmetries.

Possible moderating factors

None of the four non-directorial, non-academic administrators who were interviewed indicated that they had experienced representational predicaments. The interviews suggested

two moderating factors that may have reduced the impact of power asymmetries: close and supportive working relationships with key superiors, and opportunities to convey a fair impression of the work to dominant authorities.

A close and supportive working relationship with a key superior

Each of the four non-directorial informants indicated that they had developed a close working relationship with at least one key superior, whom, they said, gave regular praise and personal recognition, and thus understood and appreciated both their work and their status as a person. Among the four non-directorial informants, two had a key (different) superior, who was both an immediate supervisor and a member of the senior management team. A third had a key relationship with another member of the senior management team, which had developed as a result of reporting directly to that person for certain tasks over a period of several years. The fourth said that although he had had relatively little direct day-to-day contact with the senior management, he had built a close relationship with his department head, who was on good terms with members of that dominant authority group.

Opportunities to convey a fair impression of the work to dominant authorities

Three non-directorial informants were confident that the positive recognition that they believed they had received from key superiors, who were also dominant authorities, was based on knowledgeable insights into their own work. For example, Ms. L, said:

> 'What is recognized and rewarded here are that you do your work effectively and accurately.' (Ms. L, senior officer).

As an illustration, Ms. L described when, during a meeting with four male chair professors, she suggested a solution to a problem that the academics had been unable to solve:

'Their response was that my idea was very fair and good. In the end, my suggestion was accepted. I gave them time to think of solutions to avoid giving them the impression that the secretary was very dominant. I had to make them feel they were being respected. A boss is always a boss.' (Ms. L, senior officer).

The second informant, Mr. H, found that the duty to report to a relevant internal committee had provided an opportunity to represent his work accurately and favourably to dominant authorities. He also indicated that he had capitalized on his ready access to his key superior, whose area of expertise was very different from his own. For example, he had had a series of meetings about a large project with his superior, whom he helped to gain direct insight into his work through detailed dialogue.

The third informant, Ms. K, expressed confidence that her key superior fully appreciated the difficulties and obstacles that she was encountering. She said:

'I feel that my office is the happiest place in the university because we have a very understanding boss.' (Ms. K, senior officer).

Although the fourth non-directorial informant, Mr. K, lacked a direct reporting channel to dominant authorities, he reported directly to his head of department, who was closely relationally networked to the senior management. Mr. K said that he occasionally needed to bring proposals regarding resource utilization to his key superior, who had praised his ideas.

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

We acknowledge that the relatively small number of case sites and interviewees may limit the generalizability of the grounded model in Figure 1. However, small numbers are a hallmark of qualitative research and enable in-depth examination of accounts (El-Sawad 2005). Further research may refine the model and adapt it to other industrial and cultural contexts. Another

possible limitation was our reliance on qualitative data for our interpretations of the extent of informants' unhappiness with their representational predicament(s), the closeness and supportiveness of their relationships with key superiors, and their reactions in terms of exit, voice, loyalty and neglect. Notwithstanding the scope for more extensive empirical grounding, Figure 1 emerged from in-depth analysis of different types of representational predicament identified in the current research within the specific cultural context of Hong Kong, as well as bringing together diverse strands of prior literature.

The representational predicaments reported in the study are summarized in Table 2. Each of them related to one or other of the six subtypes of the two main configurations of unfavourable social visibility/invisibility and unfavourable work visibility/invisibility. Further subtypes may become evident in subsequent research.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Many of the representational predicaments appeared to be attributable to organizational structures. The divisional form structure appeared to account for the majority of representational predicaments at Agency A, where standardization of work outputs rendered client service work unfavourably invisible and invasively spotlighted performance decline. Simple structure, combined with autocratic management by the owner-CEO, appeared to be associated with most of the representational predicaments at Co. L., where the idiosyncratic spotlighting of attendance and punctuality seemed to reflect the absence of systematic performance management, and where the technicians' embedded background work appeared to reflect the absence of systematic budgetary process informed by specialist opinion. However, while it is possible that the lack of representational predicaments reported by

informants at Organization U may reflect the professional bureaucracy organizational structure, informants' accounts pointed also to the influence of situational moderators, mentioned next.

Close and supportive working relationships with a key superior belonging to, or relationally networked to, a dominant authority group; along with opportunities to convey a fair impression of the work to dominant authorities appeared to reduce the likelihood of representational predicaments. The personal style of the key superior appeared to be an important underlying factor governing whether the working relationship was supportive. For example, at Organization U, each of the four non-directorial informants mentioned that their key superior praised them, whereas informants at Company L characterized the CEO as someone who did not give praise, and one female informant indicated that her relationship with him was a source of paradoxical social visibility, since her role as mediator between him and other staff involved emotional intensity and toxicity that she felt was onerous yet undiscussible with him.

It appeared that many of the representational predicaments identified in this study resulted in sporadic unhappiness, in the face of which incumbents could exercise loyalty. For example, the sales grade staff at Agency A found ways to treat their invisible client service work as a containable obligation, and/or derived intrinsic satisfaction from doing it, and their loyalty response may have been encouraged by the 'humanistic' management of Agency A by its director. However, when incumbents regarded the issues and events associated with representational predicaments as being of longer duration, or as arising frequently, as with the embedded background work by IT support staff at Co. L, or when incumbents regarded the issues as major and intractable ones, as with the policy to standardize working hours at

Agency A, the unhappiness appeared to be more enduring, and incumbents were more inclined to respond with neglect, exit or voice. It appeared that only informants at Organization U had both formal and informal channels for exercising voice proactively, as a means to forestall representational predicaments.

Although the research did not seek to investigate the relationship between representational predicaments and organizational effectiveness, reports about the history of relatively high turnover across Company A and about service disruption at Company L suggested that representational predicaments have the potential for substantial adverse impact on company performance, depending on the issues involved and on the depth and breadth of the associated unhappiness.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS

We concur with Dingley (1997), that while the human relations movement is widely regarded as 'old hat', there would be much to commend about it if it were to be updated by the ethical concerns that Durkeim elucidated but which Mayo failed to articulate and emphasize. Our findings are compatible with the following claim:

> 'High powered executives will only develop a conscience about their workforce if they are in regular contact with them, and at first hand become aware of their problems and needs on a personal level. Seen to do this, executives then lay the basis from which to act in a more moral way in a spontaneous, not calculated, manner toward their workforce, thus creating the platform for a reciprocal sense of obligation from their workers.' (Dingley 1997: 1128)

We have assumed that a combination of power asymmetries and social distance between dominant authorities and job incumbents provides the context for incumbents' representational predicaments. Further research might test these assumptions by examining whether representational predicaments can arise in more 'egalitarian' contexts, such as

between professional partners, and whether they can arise where there are shifting coalitions and no core bloc of dominant authorities.

The research interviews focused on identifying the nature of representational predicaments, whereas the impact of representational predicaments on informants' feelings and behaviour was not an item in the initial interview guide. Nonetheless, all informants spontaneously provided sufficient data for us to categorize their responses using the EVLN framework (Hirschman 1970; Withey and Cooper 1989). Future research could examine the impact of representational predicaments on overall job satisfaction, and on satisfaction with promotion prospects, opportunity to show initiative, and the work itself (Rose 2005). Alternatively, since representational predicaments might be regarded as an adverse hygiene factor (Herzberg et al. 1959), future research could examine the impact of representational predicaments on job dissatisfaction, using measurement scales such as environmental frustration (Keenan and Newton 1984) and psychological strain (Beehr et al. 2001).

Future research could also examine the impact of representational predicaments in terms of Collinson's (2003) typology of conformist, dramaturgical, resistant, or ambivalent stances. Conformist approaches (Jackson and Carter 1998; Savage 1998), might entail responding to representational predicaments by disciplining oneself to become valuable in the eyes of dominant authorities. Dramaturgical approaches (Bowles and Coates 1993) might entail manipulation of one's reputation and image to forestall representational predicaments. Resistant approaches might entail 'reflective indocility' (Chan 2000) in holding to a proximal view of the work and social identity that may clash with institutionalized systems of performance monitoring and status hierarchy. Literature on impression management (Rosenfeld et al. 1995; Schlenker and Weigold 1992) provides additional perspectives that

might guide further research into individual strategies for responding to or preventing representational predicaments.

That there was no sign of collective voice against representational predicaments may reflect the cultural and institutional context of Hong Kong, where large power distance (Wong and Birnbaum-Moore 1994) militates against challenges to dominant authorities. The cultural assumption that upward influence involves relational networking with authorities (Redding 1990) points to an alternative path, which was evident at Organization U. Further research could investigate whether collectively organized responses to representational predicaments are more likely to arise in contexts that have cultural and institutional characteristics that are different from those of Hong Kong.

Table 1. Title Hierarchy at Agency A

Grades	Basic official responsibilities	Job titles	N*
Managerial	Sales, recruitment, agency policy, management development	Agency director	1
	Sales, recruitment	Senior branch manager	0
		Branch manager	0
		Senior sales manager	1
		Sales manager	3
		Assistant sales manager	0
Sales staff	Sales	Senior business manager	1
		Business manager	1
		Assistant business manager	3
		Senior agent	1
		Agent	2

* No. of people interviewed in the research study

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Table 2. Summary of Representational Predicaments Reported

Types of representational predicament	No. of incidents reported at			
	Agency A	Co. L	Org. U	All
Invasive spotlighting	4	0	0	4
Idiosyncratic spotlighting	0	3	0	3
Embedded background work	0	5	0	5
Paradoxical social visibility	0	3	0	3
Standardization of work processes	3	0	0	3
Standardization of work outputs	14	0	0	14
All types	21	11	0	32

Figure 1. Representational predicaments as configurations of invisibility/visibility, and incumbents' response options

Power Asymmetries
The parameters of work visibility/invisibility and social visibility/invisibility are set by dominant authorities rather than by incumbents

Situational moderators
Close working relationships with and personal recognition by key superiors, and opportunities to convey a fair impression of the work to dominant authorities may help to align images assumed by dominant authorities with the incumbent's view of the situation

Representational Predicaments

Unfavourable Social Visibility/Invisibility & Unfavourable Work Visibility

Invasive spotlighting
The incumbent believes that dominant authorities unfavourably frame negative aspects of his or her work while ignoring social rights for fairness, privacy and dignity

Idiosyncratic spotlighting
The incumbent believes that dominant authorities unfavourably frame unrepresentative aspects of his or her work while ignoring social rights to participate in the definition of their own situation

Unfavourable Social Visibility/Invisibility & Unfavourable Work Invisibility

Embedded background work
The incumbent believes that his/her work is trivialized by a higher-status occupational group to whom he/she provides support services

Paradoxical social visibility
The incumbent believes that some of his/her work is required because of his/her social identity but that such work is disregarded as work by dominant authorities

Standardization of work processes
The incumbent believes that dominant authorities neglect the role of human agency in shaping the work and that they assume that the work can be reduced to routine procedures without the need for improvisation or creative problem solving

Standardization of work outputs
The incumbent believes that dominant authorities privilege output indicators above everything else and that they have no interest in them as people, and do not care about the nature of their work, or the conditions in which the work is undertaken.

Unhappiness about representational predicaments
The incumbent may feel unhappier about representational predicaments, the greater their perceived salience and the greater the perceived differences between the incumbent's view of the situation and the images assumed to be held by dominant authorities

Overall balance of happiness/unhappiness
Unhappiness about representational predicaments might be alleviated (or compounded) by happiness (unhappiness) about other aspects of the work situation

Situational moderators
The incumbent might derive happiness from other aspects of the work situation, such as recognition from others who are not dominant authorities, and solidarity with colleagues

Response Options

Exit
The incumbent finds a different job and leaves

Voice
The incumbent attempts to change the images assumed by dominant authorities through direct discussions with and proposals to them

Loyalty
The incumbent accommodates to representational predicaments, remains silent about them, and performs to the best of his or her ability

Neglect
The incumbent withdraws psychologically from the work situation, by focusing attention on non-work issues.

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