

CONSTRUCTION WORK: EVOLVING DISCOURSES OF THE “WORKER” IN MANAGEMENT TEXTBOOKS, 1920s TO THE FIRST DECADE OF THE 21ST

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore and critically evaluate how the concept of “worker” is produced in management textbooks. In other words, we seek to reveal hitherto underanalyzed discourses regarding workers and the employment relationship. Further, we seek to track the evolution of these discourses over time, linking the evolving construction of the worker to shifts in the political, economic, and social context in which the textbooks were created. Adopting the theory and method of critical discourse analysis, our analysis will reveal the underlying power relations at play within the text, as well as their consequences for education in management and organization studies (MOS).

INTRODUCTION

Anyone with the slightest familiarity with business school curricula is aware that large numbers of management courses address the human elements of organization. The subject is variously referred to as “human relations,” “human resources,” “labour relations,” and “employee relations,” or given other, related names. Regardless of the name, at its core is the management of “workers.” Therefore the worker becomes a central concept in management studies. It is important to note, then, that when teaching about workers, business educators not

only teach the nuts and bolts of recruitment, compensation, and employment law but also impart, through their language, impressions of workers—who they are and what their position in the organization is. In other words, the process of business education frames and constructs conceptions of the “worker” that students carry forward into organizations.

This realization raises two important, and underexamined, issues related to education in management and organization studies (MOS). First, the constructions created by management teachers are not free of value, ideology, or interest (Mir, 2003). The image of workers created in textbooks privileges certain interests and marginalizes others (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Second, the creation of a particular conception of the worker serves a practical purpose—to provide future managers with a coherent ideology of the employment relationship that will shape the way they manage.

The purpose of this article is to explore and critically evaluate how the concept of “worker” is produced in management textbooks. In other words, we seek to reveal hitherto underanalyzed discourses regarding workers and the employment relationship. Further, we seek to track the evolution of these discourses over time, linking the evolving construction of the worker to shifts in the political, economic, and social context in which the textbooks were created. Adopting the theory and method of critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2002), our analysis will reveal the underlying power relations at play within the text, as well as their consequences for MOS education.

THE TEXTBOOK AS PERSUASIVE ACT OF CONSTRUCTION

Textbooks are not passive, objective accounts of the prevailing “knowledge” of a subject. While they may adopt a dispassionate tone, they contribute to the construction of an idealization of science rather than an accurate representation of it (Kuhn, 1970). Stambaugh and Trank (2010: 664) observe that “textbooks are not simply collected accounts of discrete ‘findings.’ They present a coherent, thematically integrated view of a discipline” and are embedded in a particular disciplinary pedagogy. In other words, textbooks must be understood as part of the scientific paradigm for and within which they are created (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). Further, textbooks do not just reflect the dominant paradigm; they are an active agent in its production and reproduction. They are acts of persuasion as much as vehicles for education. “The persuasiveness of a text is influenced by its design and the arrangement of the words on the page. A host of typographical and schematic devices add meanings to text, enhancing both the authority of the product and its marketability” (Fineman & Gabriel, 1994: 379). This persuasiveness is achieved through both form and function—the ways in which information is presented as well as the decisions about what to exclude and how the included is to be articulated. Perlmutter (1997: 68) finds that “the textbook vision of society is homogenized and sanitized to reduce the risk of controversy.”

In MOS education, the textbook plays a particularly central role, as it has become the primary pedagogical tool in business schools in North America (Mills & Hatfield, 1999). Given this centrality, there has been a growing call for a closer examination of the discourses found in management textbooks (Hackley, 2003; McQuarrie, 2005; Stambaugh & Trank, 2010; Wright, 1994). A more rigorous examination appears overdue, for despite growing awareness of textbooks' ideological and discursive nature, the perception persists that, at their core, they are grounded in "truth" and "scientific data" (see Cameron et al., 2003).

What the prevalent view overlooks is the role of the author in distilling and selecting the "data": "textbook authors are not passive conduits but active participants in the creation of a hegemonic discourse" (Mir, 2003: 737). In the case of management textbooks, authors are immersed in a managerialist ideology that prescribes certain power relations as legitimate, elevates the role and status of manager, entrenches organizational hierarchy, and declares the inherent superiority of private enterprise (Grant & Mills, 2006). Thus, in their textbooks, "this social order [of managerialism] is seldom questioned. They naturalize this order, make it appear to be the logical end of a historical development and assume that things will remain this way" (Mir, 2003: 736). In presenting ideology as objective truth, both the power dynamics at play and the interests of those who benefit from these dynamics are obfuscated (Durepos, Mills, & Weatherbee, 2012).

THE ABSENT WORKER

There is a growing body of research examining how MOS textbooks construct and reproduce particular conceptions of managerialist ideology (e.g., Grant & Mills, 2006; McLaren & Mills, 2010; Mir, 2003). Much of the literature has examined how particular schools of thought are presented and/or excluded (e.g., Stambaugh & Trank, 2010), how historical developments and theorists in MOS are interpreted (Durepos et al., 2012; Dye, Mills, & Weatherbee, 2005; Weatherbee & Durepos, 2010), and how certain political events and eras are filtered (Foster, Mills, & Weatherbee, 2012; Grant & Mills, 2006; McLaren & Mills, 2010). In this literature, however, the worker in organizations is rarely a subject for critical examination. Some organizational communications scholars adopting a constructivist epistemology have explored how discourses about organizational members are constructed. Work in this mode does not address workers specifically; instead it begins from a position of "persons as objects" (Cheney & Carroll, 1997), which turns attention to multiple roles within an organization (e.g., Farrell, 2000). Analyses that have focused on workers restrict themselves to examining shifting discourses in the "new" economy, such as the rise of the "knowledge worker" (Cloud, 2001). In one of the more worker-oriented examinations, Conrad and Poole (1997: 585) unpack the creation of the "disposable worker" and its functions in facilitating corporate downsizing. They observe what a minor role workers play in the overall economic discourse of necessity:

Workers are a minor part of this construction. They are mentioned only in passing, as inevitable victims of necessary and successful managerial actions. Good workers are those who accept the dominant construction, who recognize that the anxieties they feel are an inevitable part of the process of creating jobs, who know that CEOs are being unfairly vilified for making visionary decisions.

While Conrad and Poole offer the valuable observation that worker discourses are constructed to serve broader purposes, their articulation of the worker as discourse remains only a sketch because their primary interest lies elsewhere.

Even in human resources management (HRM), a specialty that should emphasize insights into workers, research is scant. In large part, this is due to the propensity of HRM scholars to adopt a positivist outlook, which denies the ideological and constructed nature of HRM (Harley & Hardy, 2004; Legge, 2001). The result is that HRM becomes a form of “managerial triumphalism” (Legge, 1995: 55) embedded within the dominant discourse rather than a vehicle to be used to deconstruct that discourse. Even critical HRM scholars have tended either to look at how workers “respond” to HRM initiatives (e.g., Grant & Shields, 2002; Guest, 2002), or to look at the more “active” role of managers in creating and reproducing HRM discourses (e.g., Litvin, 1997; Zannoni & Janssens, 2004).

Manufacturing the Employee

A noted exception to the general ignoring of worker discourses is Roy Jacques’ *Manufacturing the employee* (1996). Within his sweeping historical analysis of the construction of management knowledge, Jacques considers the role that constructing the “employee” plays in supporting dominant organizational narratives, and how the construction has morphed over time. Key to his analysis is that the “employee” is a creature created by management (and management scholars) to achieve stability in the organization, to create legitimacy for managerialist assumptions about employment, and to quell fears of class conflict and revolt.

Jacques makes two key distinctions that are pertinent to any examination of the worker. The first, and most essential, is the difference between “employee” and “worker”: “The employee is not part of labor, even if s/he is a laborer. Labor is a threat, *l’employé* an ally, to employers” (Jacques, 1996: 71; emphasis in the original). The discourse of the “employee” developed a century ago to combat conceptions of the worker that “were obstacles to production of the industrial corporate order as it has developed” (Jacques, 1996: 11). In contrast, the employee fits contentedly into the traditional hierarchical and power structure, thus aiding in its domination. Jacques’ second distinction is the divide between “manager” and “employee”:

Speaking of people in organizations as “managers” and “employees” will seldom raise an eyebrow. This distinction is deeply engrained in common sense. Yet managers are also employees. . . . Associating the tasks of management

with the persons called managers makes invisible the numerous ways non-management employees also “manage” work activities. (Jacques, 1996: 4)

Distinguishing two types of organizational members entrenches the constructed hierarchies of corporate organization and elevates them to the realm of what is natural and expected, rendering the possibility of workers obtaining control over their work unthinkable.

Jacques is helpful to our project for his explicit acknowledgment that constructions of the worker are rooted in power, and that the employment relationship is inherently about unequal power relations—an acknowledgment avoided by mainstream management scholars. However, the construction of employee/worker plays a mere supporting role in Jacques’ narrative, as his ambitions extend beyond questions of the “worker problem”; thus there remains a need for a more thoroughly committed examination of worker discourses.

Elusive Notions of the Worker

What becomes evident in the discussion above is that coming to terms with how one perceives the “worker”—even for the purpose of exploring discourses—is no easy matter. Without much difficulty, one can find oneself ensnared in the trap of idealizing notions of the worker. For our purposes here, we attempt not to “fill in” the concept too much, lest it interfere with our efforts to bring to the surface the discourses used by others. However, certain contingent considerations are inevitable.

By its nature, “worker” implies a relationship within the economic structure—one of subordination to and dependence upon an employer. But that actually tells us very little about “who” workers are. We must take care to avoid notions that overly homogenize workers, such as color of collar. But we must also refrain from equating “worker” with any individual who works. Crossing over the precipice into the workplace alters and restricts individuality—only parts of one’s being are permitted to be exercised at work. Race, gender, and sexual orientation do not cease to be relevant among workers (quite the opposite), but they are articulated in unique forms due to the constraining nature of work itself. We are attempting here not to presuppose what the worker looks like, but we must have some way of knowing that it is “worker” and not some other construction that we have found. Our decision is to remain focused on work itself (also a challenging notion to identify) and the relations that flow from it. The worker cannot be separated from notions of work, and so, by coming to understand the worker through the lens of interrogating work, we hope to isolate qualities that fit the worker without prejudging what those qualities should be. Therefore, in some small way, the analysis below aims to address the extant literature’s failure to understand notions of the worker without replacing the void with some equally obfuscating idealized notion of the worker.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

We interrogate discourses of the “worker” by adopting critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is both a theory and a method that “gives rise to ways of analyzing language or semiosis within broader analyses of the social process” (Fairclough, 2002: 121). Language, under CDA, is perceived as being an “irreducible part of material social processes” (Fairclough, 2002: 122). Language, as a “form of social practice” (Fairclough, 1989: 22), plays a key dialectical role in the production and reproduction of social relations, and thus must be seen as conditioned by social relations. The task in CDA, then, “is to explore the relationship between discourse and reality” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: 3).

Discourse is a central concept in CDA, and it embodies language, its use, and the social context in which it takes place (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Fairclough (1992: 63) offers a succinct description of discourse’s dual nature: “discourse is a mode of action, one from in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation.” Discourse is both constructed and constructing. It is “historically produced and interpreted, that is, it is situated in time and space” (Wodak, 2002: 3), but it is also an active agent in the production and reproduction of existing social relations (Fairclough, 2010). Therefore, discourse must be seen as only one moment of social dynamic, and must be understood in relation to other moments, including social relations, beliefs and values, institutions, material practices, and power (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Thus, CDA “is not analysis of discourse ‘in itself,’ but analysis of dialectical relations between discourse and other objects, elements or moments, as well as analysis of their ‘internal relations’ of discourse” (Fairclough, 2010: 4).

What differentiates CDA from other forms of linguistic analysis is its attention to power (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Power relations take a central place in CDA, with an explicit recognition that power is both unequal among social groups and partially rooted in material relations. “It is because the relationship between discourse and social structures is dialectical in this way that discourse assumes such importance in terms of power relationships and power struggle: control over orders of discourse by institutional and societal power-holders is one factor in the maintenance of their power” (Fairclough, 1989: 37). Discourse is particularly important in the exercise of ideological power (Mumby, 2004), which is “a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power” through projecting certain practices as “common-sense” (Fairclough, 1989: 2). To this end, discourse is a central feature in the formation and maintenance of hegemony, and thus is integral to legitimizing existing power structures and relations (Fairclough, 1992).

CDA’s “analytical dualism,” which accepts relations as being socially constructed but also anchored in materialist reality (Fairclough, 2010), makes it an ideal perspective from which to explore discourses of the employment relationship. The employment relationship, it can be argued, is the most materially rooted

of social relations, arising as it does out of the specific conditions of production found under capitalism. The means of controlling production (access to capital) is held by a small minority of the people in society, meaning that the large majority of people are required to sell their labor power to the minority in return for wages—an inherently imbalanced exchange. The imbalanced origins of this exchange set in motion a particular economic relationship:

The unequal power in the formulation of the employment contract leads to a significant asymmetry in its content. The obligations undertaken by the employer are relatively precise and specific. . . . The obligations on the worker, by contrast, are imprecise and elastic. . . . The “equality” of the employment relationship is one which gives the employer the right to issue orders, while imposing on the worker the duty to obey. (Hyman, 1975: 24)

The power imbalance found in employment is anchored in a materialist reality of economic production (Hyman, 1989). Language cannot alter, or wish away, the nature of these relations. “[L]anguage is both a site of and a stake in class struggle, and those who exercise power through language must constantly be involved in struggle with others to defend (or lose) their position” (Fairclough, 1989: 35). The role of discourse in this sphere is the legitimation of the existing employment relationship, through the articulation of particular ideologies that support it (Fairclough, 2010). CDA, through its theoretical capacity of “mediating the relationship between events and structure” (Fairclough, 2010: 348), is well suited to the task of recognizing that the employment relationship is both socially constructed and economically bound.

METHOD

CDA offers a clear theoretical framework for understanding discourse; however, the nature of its analysis is harder to translate into prescriptive methodological steps, particularly at the data analysis phase. When using CDA as a method, “researchers need to develop an approach that makes sense in light of their particular study and establish a set of arguments to justify the particular approach they adopt” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: 74). However, CDA does establish some methodological principles, key among them being the importance of interpreting text in its sociopolitical context (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992, 2010). In practical terms, this requires the researcher to consider the relationship between language use and the structures and social relations in which it occurs (Fairclough, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2002).

Textbook as Text

The purpose of the present study is to examine how “worker” is presented in introductory management textbooks from the 1920s to the first decade of the 21st century. Textbooks are a semiotic genre (Fairclough, 2002): they enact the

structures and relations of the topic they discuss—for our purposes, the employment relationship in mainstream organizations. Therefore, they can be analyzed as discursive texts using CDA approaches.

For the study, we selected 17 introductory management textbooks (see Table 1 for a complete list)—one from the 1920s, two from each subsequent decade—from a repository of over 600 management and business textbooks found at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The choice of introductory management textbooks was intentional. Introductory books, aimed at the widest audience of management students, offer the broadest overview of the subject matter, offering a “bird’s-eye” view of the discipline and thus revealing a full picture of the discourses. The researchers felt that books on more technical topics (such as human resources or industrial relations), while more detailed, would be too narrow and task specific to permit a full view of the discourses in action.

The selection process began with a larger pool of textbooks (4–8 per decade, except for the 1920s, for which only one textbook fitting the criteria was found) that were reviewed for topics discussed, language conventions used, tone (attitude created toward the subject matter), and format. For each decade except the 1920s, two books reflecting the broad style and structure of the period were selected from the pool. Author name, publishing location, and other incidental characteristics were not considerations in selection. The method used in selection permits the authors to argue with some plausibility that the reviewed texts are not “anomalies” and reasonably reflect language use in textbooks of the time.

The analysis of the text was divided into four steps. First, the books were scanned to reveal all of the passages that made reference to workers in an organization. This process was not a simple vocabulary search, as the intention was to find all the incidences showing how workers are framed, requiring that a passage be taken in the context of the broader topic. Second, the selected passages were analyzed for both linguistic and discursive characteristics. What words were used to label workers (e.g., “employee,” “workman,” “member”)? Were workers subjects or objects in the sentence? Were the sentences active or passive? What adjectives and descriptors were attached to workers? What characteristics were

Table 1. List of Textbooks

1. Anderson (1928).	10. Miner (1973).
2. Balderston et al. (1937).	11. Koontz & Fulmer (1978).
3. Folts (1938).	12. Schermerhorn (1986).
4. Knowles & Thomson (1946).	13. Donnelly et al. (1987).
5. Spriegel (1947).	14. Plunkett & Attner (1994).
6. Wylie & Brecht (1953).	15. Madura (1998).
7. Terry (1956).	16. Rue & Byars (2000).
8. McFarland (1964).	17. Robbins (2005).
9. Dale (1965)	

ascribed to workers? Was a particular tone implied by the author? What does the author leave the reader thinking/feeling about workers?

Third, the findings were considered against the sociopolitical context, defined as both the nature of the employment relationship in general and the specific political and economic environment of the time. This step allows the analysis to incorporate an understanding of how power is imbued in the selected passages, and how language-in-use relates to existing power structures and relations. It also grounds the texts in space and time, permitting the researcher to observe patterns of change and consistency in the discourses across the decades.

A central principle of CDA is to consider how the discourse relates to a “social wrong,” how social order requires the continuation of the wrong, and possible routes to overcoming the wrong (Fairclough, 1992, 2010). The fourth and final step in the analysis was to reflect upon how the findings are linked to the problematic nature of the employment relationship under capitalism. The results of the analysis are presented below.

THE EVOLUTION OF WORKER DISCOURSES

Our analysis reveals patterns both of constancy and of change in how “worker” has been constructed over the past nine decades. We identify three eras that parallel broader socioeconomic and political contexts in North America. The discourses reflect the shifting context; however, certain aspects of the construction of “worker” span the decades. The dimensions of continuity, we argue, reflect underlying power dynamics embedded in the nature of the employment relationship. Below, we outline the contours of “worker” discourses across the three eras, highlighting both evolutionary and stable components. We also explore how those discourses serve to privilege certain interests in the employment relationship and how powerful actors maintain their advantage.

The Worker Problem: The 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s

The first era is represented by textbooks from the interwar period, World War II, and the years immediately thereafter. This was a period of great transformation in the economy and in both the practice and the theory of management. The sociopolitical context of this period was one of upheaval. The tensions and conflicts arising from the shift to industrial production were still fresh (Bendix, 1974). The interwar period in North America was marked by extensive labor unrest and uprising, including the rise of Communism as a serious alternative to capitalism (Heron, 1996). It was a period of labor militancy, and working-class political movements effectively channeled workers’ discontent with the economic conditions of the years after World War I (Fletcher & Gapsin, 2009). The Great Depression also brought hardship and change, including the imposition of the New Deal, which heralded a new role for government in the economy (Hiltzik, 2011).

Modern theories of management were in their infancy during this period, with the rise of Taylorism and Fordism as well as nascent forms of the human relations movement (Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980). This was the period when the modern concept of management came into its own, and business schools sprang up to teach aspiring professionals (Wren & Bedeian, 2009).

The textbooks of the time were structured more as books than as teaching aids, and authors tended to make use of a freer prose style than we might be accustomed to today. Rhetorical flourishes and editorial comments are more readily found than in subsequent eras. By far the most common term used for the worker was “worker” or “workman.” “Employee,” “man,” “manpower,” “personnel,” and other terms appeared occasionally.

“Worker” in this era is constructed as a (primarily male) factory worker with limited drive and capacity, needing direction to ensure productivity and good behavior. Workers are framed as a “problem” to be solved: “the problem of human relations” (Anderson, 1928: 302); “the dual nature of the problem” (Balderston, Karabasz, & Brecht, 1937: 154); “the business executive is essentially a problem solver” (Folts, 1938: 8).

As a general category of persons, workers are depicted as lazy, lacking ambition, and needing firm direction from the employer, as seen in the following examples:

- It is difficult for many workers that, basically, under any logical payment system, they should be paid for *the work that they do*. (Spriegel, 1947: 326; emphasis in the original)
- Workers are not qualified to make decisions on problems of finance, distribution, engineering, purchasing and the like. They do not seek responsibility in these matters. (Anderson, 1928: 307)
- But in monotonous jobs, . . . they seem to relish work that demands little or no active thinking. (Balderston et al., 1937: 243)

Thus the so-called “worker problem” arises. Management must figure out a way to provoke productivity out of workers who, if left to their own devices, will perform at levels lower than those of which they are capable. The manager’s job is, then, to “handle,” “direct,” “coax,” “arouse interest in work,” “check the foibles of each worker,” and generally offer “intelligent control of manpower.” In this framing, the active, spirited manager is contrasted with a flawed, passive worker. The need for management to educate and direct extends to correcting the shortcomings in workers’ personal lives, taking on a somewhat moralistic tone. Managers are counseled to teach workers how to be more frugal, eat properly, and develop good posture. The message, often explicit, is that if left to their own devices, workers will make poor choices affecting their financial, physical, and mental well-being. Further, the implication is that appropriate management leadership will dampen disruptive instincts in workers and produce more compliant, cooperative workers.

But the textbook writers also typify workers. Frequently, the word “worker” is preceded by adjectives of various types, modifying the qualities and attributes of

the person to whom they refer and thus judging that person to be “good” or “bad.” Spriegel (1947: 326) identifies “first class workers” in contrast to “substandard workers.” Anderson (1928: 320) talks about “indifferent workers and slackers” and “unintelligent workers” compared to “ambitious workers” (Anderson, 1928: 434). Folts (1938: 311) has “slow,” “medium,” and “superior workmen.” Balderston and colleagues (1937: 245) discuss the importance of “mentally alert” workers. The adjectives draw exclusively on immutable individual characteristics. Therefore while workers, as a general group, require direction and education, managers are warned to watch for particular “types” of worker. The importance of identifying types of workers, for managers, is their effect on production and workplace harmony. The writers warn of discontented workers sowing dissension among their coworkers. Bad workers also hamper production. “Slower workers often set the pace in the shop—the potentially fast workers tend to slow down” (Knowles & Thomson, 1946: 380). Managers are wise to watch out for bad workers and weed them out of the workplace as quickly as possible.

The worker discourses of this era lead to a justification of rigid hierarchy in the workplace. Workers are articulated as being different from managers, needing direction and leadership. The textbooks not only speak of workers’ “need” for leadership but also contend that workers “desire” a clear hierarchical structure. This bolsters the institutional role of the manager and provides a “natural” justification for the concentration of authority in the hands of the manager.

Another component of worker discourses in this era is that “worker” is viewed as a collective construct. Workers belong to a “class” distinct from managers, owners, and professionals. Persons are workers whether or not they are in the employ of a particular company, or whether or not their work is high or low skilled. Once marked as part of the worker class, they are then endowed with the characteristics outlined above.

Power and the nature of the employment relationship under capitalism are explicitly acknowledged in these early textbooks. Power is acknowledged to arise from the economic structure of society and to be inherently imbalanced in favor of employers. Further, there is an admission that workers have reason to be dissatisfied with their position in the economic structure. Workers are described as being “shackled to their jobs” and dependent upon “selling their services” to an employer (Knowles & Thomson, 1946: 6). The structural nature of this dependency is openly discussed: “Labor and Capital became definitely opposing forces with, too often, ‘fighting organizations’ in conflict. . . . In many instances labor was at a disadvantage in the conflict because of the wealth and power of the capital interests which they opposed” (Anderson, 1928: 10). It is worth briefly noting the use of upper-case type for the initial letters of “Labor” and “Capital,” a formalization that denotes the structural, permanent nature of distinct class interests.

This recognition of power and capitalist relations is included in the texts not to foster class consciousness but as a launching point from which to promote the virtues of cooperation and collaboration between workers and employers.

Behavior arising from class discontent, such as union activity, is derided as destructive and damaging. An appeal is made for “intelligent labor leaders to advocate efficiency in production to make possible the lowering of costs and prices” (Spiegel, 1947: 590). Even as early as 1928, an author argues that industry has moved past conflict and entered a period of “cooperative policies” (Anderson, 1928: 15), where harmony between workers and employers can reign. It is to be expected that management authors would downplay the relevance of class conflict. What is interesting is that in this era they felt a need to discuss the concept openly, which suggests that the employment relationship remained contested terrain, a matter requiring the direct attention of those molding the next generation of managers. As we will see below, the active contest over workers as a class as against workers as individual employees is what sets this first era apart from subsequent periods.

The Rise of the Employee: The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s

The post–World War II United States experienced unprecedented prosperity and economic and social progress as the so-called Fordist compromise took hold (Holmes & Leys, 1987). The new labor relations regime, which institutionalized and legitimized labor but also stripped it of its radical tendencies, began to take hold during this period (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2009). With economic stability, institutions were able to focus on labor peace and on the absorption of workers into middle-class lifestyles (Gonick, Phillips, & Vorst, 1996). While the degree of labor harmony can be overstated, the post–World War II period stands in contrast to the interwar period in this regard. Further, the rise of the Cold War had profound effects on the political context of the period (Gaddis, 2005). The range of “legitimate” political options was narrowed, and notions of free enterprise became intertwined with patriotic attachment to the nation (Spector, 2006). While home and neighborhood became scenes of conflict, the workplace was becoming a more harmonious place under the machine hum of steady economic growth, rising wages, and improving working conditions.

It was during this period that the role of management also settled into a reliable pattern and the study of management in universities coalesced into a recognized academic discipline (Wren & Bedeian, 2009). Management scholars were particularly influenced by Cold War ideology, which shaped the burgeoning discipline significantly (Kelley, Mills, & Cooke, 2006; Mills, Kelley, & Cooke, 2002; Spector, 2006). In this period, the so-called human relations movement rose in popularity, and the emerging discipline looked to elements of social psychology for insights (Wren & Bedeian, 2009).

Management textbooks of this period reflect the postwar context, adopting a more scientific and neutral use of language, and emphasizing structure and form in the explanation of organizational matters, in part reflecting the popularity of structural functionalism in sociology and organization studies during this period.

Language usage around “worker” shifts during this period. The word remains in common use in textbooks, but now it is supplemented more frequently by a variety of synonyms. In particular, the term “employee” becomes popular, but “personnel,” “staff,” and “subordinate” are also present. Also, more frequently authors simply refer to the worker as an “individual” or “person”—a connotation that strips the person of the identity as worker. The normative worker remains male and culturally Anglo-Saxon—unique needs and motivations are ascribed to female workers (Genoe McLaren & Mills, 2008).

This new eclectic naming of the worker is not simply a case of linguistic diversity; there is a clear embedded meaning. A closer examination of how each term is used reveals a growing duality. “Worker” is used most often when the authors wish to convey negative aspects of behavior or character. A “worker” is lazy, recalcitrant, discontented, and untrustworthy. A person becomes a worker when acting unsafely, engaging in union activity, or creating difficulties for the employer. Conversely, “employee,” “personnel,” and “individual” are used when explicating positive aspects of the employment relationship. One example is particularly pointed:

. . . during the period of labor scarcity, many offices were forced to hire employees who would not have been hired in normal times, workers who, quite frankly can be called “undesirables.” . . . These “temporary” workers have no real interest in promoting office efficiency. They are not career personnel. They are inefficient, and in an effort to cover up their inefficiency and unworthiness, they are willing to embrace any movement which may give them temporary advantage and undeserved gains. They are trouble-makers by desire and tradition. (Wylie & Brecht, 1953: 397)

Authors adopt a second usage of “worker” when they wish to accent the differences between managers and workers or to highlight the limited capacity of workers. Koontz and Fulmer (1978) speak of even the “lowliest worker” needing self-actualization. Workers are not as capable of grasping complex economic matters, in contrast to managers, and thus certain perks are not appropriate for them: “It is a plan [stock ownership] which works better for the executive personnel than for rank-and-file workers, who are not accustomed to stock investments” (McFarland, 1964: 547). Further, Koontz and Fulmer (1978: 368) argue that “many workers do not understand the vital function of profits.” Miner (1973: 241) demonstrates both usages in one passage when he compares “white-collar employees” and “blue-collar workers,” with the former benefiting from job enlargement while the latter respond negatively due to their being “alienated from society.”

A final usage of the term “worker,” in contrast to “individual,” occurs when the authors want to group and generalize traits. “Individuals clearly do differ, and their personalities and abilities vary, as reflected in modern selection and placement techniques used by well-managed organizations. Yet workers are sufficiently alike in many ways, so that we can understand and to some extent predict their feelings

and behavior” (McFarland, 1964: 528). The pulling apart of the “individual” from the “worker” plays a crucial role in our understanding of worker discourses during this period. First, it is part of a process of individualizing employees, of stripping away notions of collective class membership, while the authors still retain the ability to make assertions about the tendencies of employees as a category. An employee wants “to satisfy his individual wants,” “recognition as an individual,” and “acceptance” from the group (Terry, 1956: 345). The manager’s task is to channel those individualized desires for the good of the organization.

Second, framing employees as individuals serves the purpose of elevating an ideology of individualism, upon which the American free market ethos is built. “One [attitude widely held by Americans] is respect for individuals, regardless of race, religion, origins or creed. Respect for authority is related to ownership of private property and elected or appointed political position” (Koontz & Fulmer, 1978: 52). It also marginalizes the sense that workers have a collective interest in opposition to employers.

While the worker is constructed as an individual in this discourse, the authors are not creating autonomous entrepreneurs. The employee remains a passive and subservient player needing direction and motivation to maximize his potential. Elements of the former period’s characterization of workers remain in this era as well. Left to their own devices, workers will underperform: “It is widely accepted that in the majority of cases, employees are not motivated to perform at a level anywhere near that of which they are capable” (McFarland, 1964: 522). They are likely to be “misinformed” and “unrealistic” in their actions. Management, the hero, enters stage left to play the decisive role: “The organization structure is created, maintained and adjusted by managers” (Terry, 1956: 240). The manager is the key figure in the organization, while employees/workers passively respond to the manager’s stimulation, looking for “guidance and inspiration” (Wylie & Brecht, 1953: 217).

Not only do workers require the direction of management, but they desire it. This point is made repeatedly in textbooks of the period:

- actually most people want to be led. (Terry, 1956: 377)
- In general . . . people tend to recognize the right of a manager to give orders because of his position. It appears only natural to most of them that the owner of a business should be allowed to decide how it should be run. (Dale, 1965: 455)
- Many employees find themselves more comfortable in the presence of strong and definite authority than in the absence of it. Acceptance by individuals of prescribed authority in an organization conserves their time, energy, and efforts. If they respond readily to the wishes of authority, they need not think, plan, or worry unduly about the reasons for the action. (McFarland, 1964: 290)

This framing props up the legitimacy of the manager’s authority and the existence of organizational hierarchy. Just as individualism is made natural, so too is the manager, together with his role, constructed as orderly and proper.

Within this discourse of workers as compliant individuals, there is no room for class struggle or power. Discussion of power disappears from the pages of the textbooks of this period. There is no inherent conflict of interests between workers and employers. Where the textbooks of the earlier period needed to actively engage what was the contested domain of class conflict, there is no equivalent need in the postwar period. The specter of Communism and the “natural” superiority of the free market drive away any need to combat worker responses to exploitation. Worker discontent becomes individualized, along with the rest of the worker. Power becomes implied and its use subsumed under legitimate “authority” and hierarchy.

In the postwar discourses, the task of management is rearticulated, yet at its core remains the same. There is no more talk of the “worker problem,” because the worker has become the individual. The manager’s task remains one of maximizing productivity and minimizing disruption and discord in the workplace, but now it is performed with an eye to creating “buy-in” and legitimizing existing structures. The task is aided by bifurcating conceptions of the worker, where managers work with individuals to achieve organizational goals and outsource troublesome workers to an existence external to the organization.

The Team Player: The 1980s, the 1990s, and the First Decade of the 21st Century

In the 1980s, major cracks in postwar society became too big to ignore. Inflation, economic stagnation, and concern over rising government debt marked a major transition from the three decades of prosperity that preceded the 1980s (Stanford & Vosko, 2004). Politically, the Fordist compromise began to break down (Reed & Hughes, 1992). Governments began to implement policies of restraint, deficit reduction, and restriction of citizen entitlements, reflecting the rise of neoliberal ideologies (Harvey, 2007; Panitch & Swartz, 2003). Unions began a long period of decline in the United States (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2009). The fall of Communism and the end of the Cold War also shifted the political context. Alternatives to capitalism retreated, and “free markets” became the unchallenged means of organizing society.

The combination of technological advances and political changes led to an intensification of globalization, creating a significant upheaval and insecurity in North American workplaces (Panitch & Swartz, 2003). The rise of Asian, and recently South American, economies challenged North American corporations in competitiveness and organizational innovation (Mittelman, 2000). Insecurity, globalization, and economic uncertainty have marked the most recent decades.

Management textbooks during this period place greater emphasis on international issues, competitiveness and flexibility, and organizational change. The discourse of the worker also morphs during this period. “Worker” is displaced as the dominant descriptor for working people in management textbooks, being

replaced by “employee.” When “worker” is used, it is stripped of any real significance, used solely as a linguistic variant by the authors, interchangeable with “employee.” However, both terms are used in such a fashion as to separate managers from others in the organization. Managers, it is argued, are not “employees,” but the people they manage are.

The worker/employee emerges in this period as a fully formed individual, truly unique and possessing personal attributes and characteristics. “Employees have different personal needs and goals that they’re hoping to satisfy through their jobs. A diverse array of rewards is needed to motivate employees with such varied needs” (Robbins, 2005: 285). As individuals, they are identified and distinguished through aspects of their humanity—race, gender, cultural background—rather than through their position in the economic structure. Discussion of managing workers turns to respecting diversity and attending to cultural differences.

Further, as individuals, workers/employees they are said to possess motivations and characteristics akin to those of capitalists. Workers are said in the modern era to “own their job” (Plunkett & Attner, 1994: 454) and are encouraged to develop their inner entrepreneur (Rue & Byars, 2000). Work, in this frame, becomes “a give-and-take, a positive and mutually beneficial exchange of values between the individual and the organization” (Schermerhorn, 1986: 213). Manager and employee become “partners” working toward a common goal.

But how does one address the “worker problem” when the worker is a free-agent individual? The textbooks of this period solve this conundrum in three interrelated ways. First, the task of managing humans is depersonalized. A separation of job from person occurs. This is the rise of “human resources”—treating the worker as a “commodity” and an “asset.” “A business firm has two major inputs: human and nonhuman resources” (Donnelly, Gibson, & Ivancevich, 1987: 22). One text goes as far as to compare humans to machinery: “Just as machines that are poorly maintained break down and eventually wear out altogether, so too do the human resources suffer from neglect and adverse working conditions” (Schermerhorn, 1986: 18). The manager becomes the keeper of the “job,” rather than the keeper of the employee. The textbooks write about the functions of human relations, particularly recruitment and selection, in a manner devoid of human-ness. The manager is manipulating a disembodied entity called the “job.” The manager ensures good “job fit,” performs a “job analysis,” establishes “task performance” benchmarks, and so on. The individual does not reside in this portion of the manager’s functions.

But one cannot avoid the human in organizations for long. So the second solution is to turn toward psychology. Textbooks in this period are heavy with organizational psychology theory—providing managers-to-be with the latest psychological research about human motivation, behavior, and cognition. The manager is to play amateur psychologist studying employees for the benefit of productivity: “By analyzing employees’ comments, attitudes, quality and quantity of work, and

personal circumstances, the manager can identify the particular need level that individual workers are attempting to satisfy. Then the manager can attempt to build into the work environment opportunities that will allow individuals to satisfy their needs” (Plunkett & Attner, 1994: 393).

The psychologizing of employees leads to the third method of addressing the “worker problem,” leading to the entrenching of the managerial role. Psychology is used to demonstrate that workers require direction and motivation—a task that falls to managers—to create work satisfaction that fosters productivity. “By developing a positive work environment, management teams can capture the commitment of their employees. The result is employees who are truly motivated—they want to do their jobs well” (Plunkett & Attner, 1994: 387). The key here is that the manager is the active party, while the workers are passive: “Managers can motivate employees by ensuring job satisfaction” (Madura, 1998: 314). Further, the worker is an object to be changed and altered by management manipulation. “[M]anagers will often attempt to mould individuals by guiding their learning in graduated steps. This process is called *shaping behaviour*” (Robbins, 2005: 338; emphasis in the original). This dynamic constructs workers as almost childlike: “When a parent begins by saying ‘When I was your age . . .,’ the child tunes out. When the boss begins with ‘When I did your job, I . . .,’ the subordinate tunes out” (Plunkett & Attner, 1994: 358).

Workers, the discourses suggest, are not capable of motivating themselves; they require the intervention of their manager. The passivity reflected in this portrayal of workers is demonstrated well through one example (Schermerhorn, 1986), in which the author utilizes a parable involving drunk and lazy donkeys to make a point about motivation and incentives. The frustrated owner finally gets it right when he allots carrots on the basis of each donkey’s performance—thus creating the appropriate incentive for work.

Even when the textbooks discuss the values of “empowerment,” it is always the managers doing the empowering: “companies have experienced very positive results from having empowered their employees” (Rue & Byars, 2000: 191). The structure of the preceding sentence is worthy of comment. The employee becomes the recipient of empowerment. Power is given, not taken; thus the integrity of organizational hierarchy is preserved.

The seemingly contradictory notions of the worker—both active equal partner and passive subordinate—come together through the legitimization of hierarchy and authority in organization. Once again, workers are conceived as seeking and desiring order and leadership. “One of the primary reasons for organizing is to establish lines of authority. Clear lines of authority create order within a group. Absence of authority almost always leads to chaotic situations” (Rue & Byars, 2000: 186). In this period, the desire for order and leadership is balanced by employees having some say over daily events, but even this must serve the interests of the organization: “The manager can influence preferences by listening

to employee needs, guiding employees to help them accomplish desired outcomes and providing proper resources to achieve the desired performance” (Donnelly et al., 1987: 306). The workers’ need for direction and leadership establishes the legitimacy of organizational hierarchy. Current structures need not be questioned: “Unquestionably, the manager has the legitimate power to run a plant, establish new accounting procedures, or discard the present performance appraisal system. These rights to influence and make decisions are granted by the organization” (Donnelly et al., 1987: 376).

A final observation about the third-era discourses is the reappearance of power, but in mutated form. In contrast to the previous period (where power was absent), power is a central topic of discussion in textbooks of this era. However, power is presented as positive, necessary, and individualized. Power is considered “a very ‘good’ thing when used properly by the manager” (Schermerhorn, 1986: 278), “a necessary part of corporate life” (Plunkett & Attner, 1994: 398), and “a foundation of leadership” (Schermerhorn, 1986: 296). Power can be exercised in a manner acceptable to the subordinate: “Positive power results when the exchange is voluntary and both parties feel good about the exchange” (Rue & Byars, 2000: 310). Finally, power is nested in individuals, not in economic structures: “The degree and scope of a manager’s referent and expert power are dictated primarily by individual characteristics” (Donnelly et al., 1987: 375). Further, conflict is also individualized and “occurs because individuals have different perceptions, beliefs, and goals” (Rue & Byars, 2000: 330) and not because they possess differing economic interests. This conception of power is far removed from power as discussed in the first period studied. With the locating of power in individual authority and characteristics, the concept is stripped of its connection to objective economic relationships, and thus is reduced to a tool of employer legitimacy rather than an object of contestation.

In assessing the latest discourses of the worker overall, we see the rise of the “team player.” Active, but not too active. Creative and thinking, but only to the extent that it serves organizational purposes. Clearly a follower and not a leader. The worker becomes a fully actualized individual, with a depth of personal complexity, but workers lose any independent collective identity. Like members of any sports team, they are expected to focus their energies on the common team goal. Workers are now fully subsumed under the goals of the organization. Their purpose is in perfect alignment with that of their superiors. And, like any sports team players, they know their position and stick to it, allowing others to play theirs.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of management textbooks across the decades reveals both stability and flux in the discourses related to workers. The discourses of each period reflect the specific political and economic context in which the texts were written, but

they are also connected to the underlying, formative nature of the employment relationship.

In each period, workers are constructed as passive and limited, needing clear direction and leadership from management. Further, they desire the clarity and order that comes with strong leadership. This frame both places managers in a central, integral position in the organization and establishes a rationale for rigid divisions between managerial and nonmanagerial members. Hierarchy becomes natural and necessary. While conflict is possible, it is framed as an anomaly and hazardous to organizational interests; thus, cooperation is both encouraged and deemed to be better aligned with both managers' and workers' desires.

These discourses serve the purpose of legitimizing and entrenching a form of social relations that benefits particular interests in capitalist production. The disempowering of workers, achieved by removing autonomous, self-interested capacity and motivation from the inventory of workers' human characteristics, smooths the path for managerial dominance. The discourses are ideological and arise out of the material conditions of the employment relationship (Fairclough 2010). They do not shift or change, because the fundamental nature of that relationship has not changed over the past 90 years. Employers require both the cooperation of workers and the suppression of class-related awareness to facilitate production (Hyman, 1989). The discourses help achieve this end.

But to talk only about the constants in the worker discourses is to miss important nuances that arise when we examine the discourses' evolution across the three periods. The discourses also reflect how managers (and textbook authors) perceive the acuteness and overtness of the threat to the class interests and organizational structures they work to uphold. Thus, they also reveal the shifting patterns of capitalism in the past 90 years. In the first era examined, the combination of insecure, uncertain management and significant political and economic upheaval—including real threats of worker unrest—leads to discourses that overtly contest class conflict. However, the overtness forces them also to acknowledge workers as a class.

In the second period, an era of prosperity and workplace stability, the need for overt contestation over class and class interests fades, to be replaced with the rise of the concept of the employee. The employee is a worker stripped of the power conflict, and thus there is less need to discuss power as an organizational dynamic.

In the most contemporary period, instability re-arises, this time not from class conflict but from other capitalist organizations (e.g., Asian corporations) and it becomes necessary to emphasize cohesiveness and solidarity, within the organization rather than between classes. The workers need to identify themselves as part of "their" organizational team playing against other teams. In a team context, power features strong individuals and the specific role they play, rather than being grounded in social relations.

The shifting contours of worker discourses demonstrate the ideological nimbleness of managerialism. Discourses can morph according to specific contexts but

retain their basic nature due to the immutable nature of the employment relationship. The three periods identified in this paper roughly parallel both Jacques' (1996) historical epochs of managerial knowledge and Fairclough's (2010: 259) "three spirits of capitalism." Both of these writers argue that specific orders of discourse can be discerned in each period, but that they are linked through common threads found in all eras. That we found a similar pattern of discursive ordering when examining the discourses of the worker suggests that Fairclough is correct in claiming that discourses are "a moment in the material production and reproduction of social life, and analyses these social 'work' done in texts is a significant focus of materialist social critique" (Fairclough, 2010: 304).

CONCLUSION

Revealing the discourses of workers in management textbooks is not simply a matter of academic concern. It has direct practical consequences for organizations. Management textbooks are written by management teachers for management students—the future generation of organizational managers. Because textbooks impart ideology as well as information, the discourses found in those books have real and tangible effects on what happens at work.

Textbooks immerse managers in existing discourses and provide ideological tools through which the dominant discourse is reproduced. It is not simply a matter of telling managers "what" workers are, but of defining and shaping for them the social relations that take place between managers and their "employees." Therefore the link between discourse and material relations occurs both in texts and in the daily experiences of people as they navigate organizations.

Textbooks are by no means the only mechanism in which discourses of the worker are re-produced. They are, however, a key aspect in understanding the complexities of how dominant discourses develop material consequences. And that is why we must study them closely.

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