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Everyday resistance in home help services in Sweden – Selective loyalty, consent and irony

The aim of this paper is to gain further understanding of the complexity and dynamic of resistance in organizations. This is done by describing and analyzing how a team of workers in municipal home help services in Sweden interpret and make use of their possibilities to act at work. The point of departure for the theoretical framework is power and resistance in accordance with Michel Foucault (1991) and Jon McKenzie (2001). But to grasp the multi-faceted characteristic of resistance, Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson's (1999) line of thought on organizational *misbehaviour* as well as the concept of self-organization is fruitful. James C. Scott's (1985) work on everyday resistance is particularly important for an understanding of everyday actions and responses as forms of resistance.

The employees in this study are being subjected to a process of change initiated by the management. They are dissatisfied with the process as well as with the intentions behind it. In spite of this they do not make collective and planned resistance; rather their actions and responses can be understood as informal resistance. They act with consent but not cooperation, with irony and other symbolic sanctions as well as a lighter form of sabotage. Above all they have a loyal attitude and loyal way of acting apparent in work situations and it has limiting effects on their resistance strategies. They also use their loyalty in a selective manner as a way of making resistance. The home helps identity formation and interpretation of meaning as well as scope of action is in this paper seen as intertwined with doing resistance. In the line of Scott

(1985) I argue for the use of ethnography in general and participant observation in particular as a fruitful way of grasping this kind of everyday resistance.

(Re)conceptualizing resistance

There is a challenge for researchers with an interest in the relationship between power and resistance in organizations and how it is expressed in everyday work situations. Even though there is interesting research concerning the exercise of management power and/or employee actions as planned and formally performed resistance there are gaps to fill. Employee resistance of a more informal character with its local and cultural variations in both form and content is a field of organizational research with a never ending urge for supplementary studies. It is, however, problematic to clearly define resistance, there is no set definition (and perhaps there shouldn't be one). The problem area is multifaceted and complex and there are at least three disputable aspects (Edwards, Collinson & Della Rocca, 1995). Firstly, who owns the preferential right of interpretation to define employee actions as resistance? Which actions, conditions and consequences should be considered in studies of employee resistance? It can be the case that employees don't define their own actions and responses at work as resistance even if it through scientific analyses can be identified and presented as resistance. Furthermore, employees can consider their actions as resistance but for an outsider it can seem rather to be driven by some sort of end in itself. Secondly, expressions of resistance take specific local and cultural forms. It can be hard to discover in the everyday complexity and dynamic at workplaces. Therefore, studying it requires a lot of time, good access to cases to study and researchers prepared to get involved. Thirdly, it is problematic to carry out comparative analyses due to the above mentioned factors and also because of a conceptual variety. Some studies have an explicit aim to study resistance while others do in fact do resistance studies, but without using the concept of resistance. Concerning models of explanation, there is a variety. Either the employee actions and responses *or* the management control pose as the primary research interest. It is, with an awareness of the aspects mentioned above, of great interest to shed light on and acknowledge every possible form of resistance, especially those of informal

character such as the unorganized, unplanned and, on the surface, unaware manifestations.

Resistance has been reconceptualised (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, p. 54) and is in need of further reconceptualisation (Karlsson, 2006, 2008; Hjalmarsson, 2009; Thomas & Davies, 2005). In the concept of self-organization the basic assumption is the employee's struggle for autonomy rather than formal responses to exercise of power. Acts of self-organization are shaped by and can at the same time be understood as a reply to the structural conditions where they takes place. But they are thereby *not only* a response to or a reaction against something. If we suggest that the techniques for discipline are so engraved in the minds and bodies of employees that they automatically discipline themselves, an all too limited image of employees, as well as managements, is presented. If on the other hand employee actions are considered self-organization it suggests a view of them as subjects capable of action. In line with Ackroyd & Thompson (1999) I claim that employees are conscious of and should be in a position where they are able to interpret and evaluate the (disciplinary) practices they are involved in. To study resistance as a form of self-organization is to take a sensitive, open minded and tentative approach. You never know what the informants and the setting will show.

Power in this paper is, in line with Foucault (1991), considered something that has to be repeated and exercised to exist. In line with the concept of discipline, power is understood as being integrated in a society through being in alliance with the financial and productive purposes of institutions and organizations of that society. The disciplinary power is productive, which means that it produces *opportunities* to exercise power. Even if there are representatives of management, it is not these individuals that "have power", it is the machinery in itself that produces and distributes power. It is self-reproductive and it is discrete. Sometimes so discrete that it seems invisible in contrast to traditional power.

McKenzie (2001) presents the concept of performance as a way of understanding how the exercise of power is transforming from a disciplinary exercise into one of performance. In organizations it is expressed as an idea where a creative and self-regulating employee is preferred and is considered a source of high performance

rather than an obstacle. Traditional forms of discipline through standardization of work and lack of opportunities for employees to take initiatives of their own is accompanied by innovation, creativity and increasing possibilities for the employees' own initiatives. This means, admittedly, that the ways of governing employees are changing, but it does not mean that the motives are. Models and discourses like human relations, learning organization and new public management contain different ways to optimize work performance, but they still have one thing in common, which is the basic principle of performance:

The challenge of efficiency, the imperative to maximize outputs and to minimize inputs.

(Mc Kenzie, 2001, p. 82)

McKenzie (2001) names the power of performance *nomadic* (p. 247). Its ruling and controlling systems are widespread and generates a network of opportunities and financial means for pressure. This pressure is not only in place in order to shape employees to adapt, but also for them to subscribe, to resist and to stretch the boundaries of the controlling systems. This complexity makes the power of performance almost paradoxical, but also relevant for the understanding of complex and contradictory structures of power. How can we then study resistance if resistance itself is approved and embedded in the exercise of power? I suggest we turn the question around and ask what exercises of power can we identify by studying resistance? If our conceptualization of resistance involves taking into consideration its complexity and contradictions it is also to identify and criticize contradictory structures of power.

To resist something also means to reify it, by privileging it as a meaningful area for political contest.

(Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 687)

In my study of home help services in Sweden the overall purpose was to gain further understanding of how employees interpret and make use of their possibilities to act. The point of departure is then to highlight a struggle for autonomy: how the employees in everyday work try to do things their own way, to preserve their dignity

and to create an identity of their own. In short (a more detailed description will follow), the study takes place in a situation when the employees are expected to exercise self control through a kind of performance monitoring (see also Ball & Wilson, 2000), in this case hand held computers. To be honest, I was expecting (and didn't find) formal resistance, collective and planned, in the beginning of my long term visit to the home help services. The lack of such activities puzzled me until I realized that it was resistance I experienced. It was a struggle for autonomy, and not necessarily a protest against something. The home helps where acting to create a scope of action and to gain and maintain self respect along with a professional identity of their own.

Ethnography – a way to grasp everyday resistance

The study has an ethnographic approach. This renders possible a relatively long term relationship with people in their own contexts, and through this it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of their ideas, values, actions and driving forces (Hammersley, 1992). The issue of the amount of time of the long term relationship spent in the field must be considered by an ethnographer. Fieldwork takes time but does that make it the critical attribute? The answer might be yes according to ethnographic tradition (Wolcott, 1995, p. 77), but it might as well be that it depends. In today's sped up research reality an ideal of several years in the field as a standard is continuously being condensed. Is it then not worth while if you don't have as much time and/or access as considered necessary? Of course it is. It's not just about *being* in the field: "the essence of fieldwork is revealed in the intent behind it, rather than by the label itself" (Wolcott, 1995, p. 67). Jeffrey & Troman (2003) discuss different time modes (three actually) for doing fieldwork, considering not only the total length of the ethnographic research project, but also the frequency of visits at the sites and the importance of theory. My study can be characterised as having adopted a "selective intermittent mode" (p. 540). It is being conducted over a relatively long period of time, as opposed to "compressed time mode" (p.538) where one short period of deep and intense observation represents the central empirical material. The "selective intermittent mode" has a flexible approach to the frequency of visits at the site, in contrast to "recurrent time mode" (p. 542) where temporal phases (e.g. specific dates or specific events) specified in advance formalize the methodology. My "selective intermittent mode" have, after an opening period of familiarisation, a crucial element;

namely to concentrate on specific contexts of special value and expected richness. Theory as a guide for this continuously ongoing *in the field interpretation* is also characteristic for the “selective intermittent mode”. The role of theory was to select relevant events and contexts as the research went on. Time spent in the field as well as a number of visits was determined as the fieldwork progressed in accordance with the analytical categories that emerged from experiences in the field. I became more and more selective about where and with whom time should be spent based on the (theoretically) specified area of investigation, and above all, the early analysis.

The fieldwork lasted 18 months in total, from autumn 2003 to the end of spring 2005. It started with an opening period of familiarization followed by a period of observation of selected sites, contexts and events. The familiarization period focused on, apart from “getting my feet wet” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), understanding the work performance and its routines. A part of the initial plan was to study the learning process of how to use, as well as the actual use of the hand held computers. This intention failed because the computers weren’t functioning as they were supposed to due to severe and frequent technical problems. The focus shifted to try to get an understanding of the ICT-project (Information and Communication Technology) as a process. The ICT-project went on despite the technical problems and this puzzled me. Later on, interactions amongst the home helps and between the home helps and the management became of special interest. To obtain a rich material I followed the home helps during their entire day at work; at the care recipients’ homes, at meetings, at lunch, during smoking breaks and so on. I was also studying documents such as the application for funding to run the ICT-project, formal regulations for carrying out home help services, work schemes and more informal to do-lists (e.g. yellow post-it notes) and the home helps’ lists of problems related to the ICT-project. Reports from the national board of health and welfare also served as empirical material.

To summarize, the empirical material is based on a combination of participant observation, interviews and document analysis. The interviews with the home helps were conducted as thematic conversations with the aim of capturing their descriptions of work routines and work performance, skills and knowledge as well as their opinions of the computers and their intended use. The themes were work

performance, the meaning and content of the work together with the skills and knowledge connected to the work in home help services. I also asked the home helps to talk about their possibilities and limitations at work and their professionalism. One obvious theme of the interviews was the use of the hand held computers and the home helps' participation in the ICT-project.

Interviews were also conducted with the management, the two leaders of the ICT-project, a consultant from one of three software companies involved in the project, a representative from the union and one of the local councillors. The interviews with the management representatives (three persons) had two purposes: to understand the organization and to get a picture of the history and intentions behind the ICT-project.

Observations

In line with Delamont (2004) I acted as a participant observer, but that does not mean that I fully participated in whatever the home helps did. Instead, I saw things being done rather than doing them myself, as I was *shadowing* the home helps (Czarniawska, 2004). There was, however, a few situations where I temporarily assisted the home helps when unexpected things happened at the homes of care recipients, in order to avoid accidents or other difficulties.

This shadowing requires both presence and distance. Presence in both time and space to be able to be an intense observer, and distance enough to keep up an awareness of that your presence have an impact on peoples acting and the course of events in question. Of course this type of participation sets limits for what is possible to experience in the field. But on the other hand it can be an advantage to be aware of that you, regardless how hard you try to get as close as possible, end up being no more than a marginalized native or a professional stranger (Tedlock, 2000). My choice was to keep the distance by deciding to be a professional stranger who is aware of and embraces the fact that you never get any further than being a marginalized native. Therefore I tried not to interfere actively in the work performances of the home helps such as caring, meetings, planning or organizing. But in more informal situations such as breaks, car rides, walks and every day discussions about cooking, celebrities or political matters as well as jokes and small

talk, I was participating in the right sense of the word. I too was making small talk, laughing, joking and grumbling. It was in these situations that I had the opportunity to build confidence. At the same time, when it comes to personal relations, it is easy to lose one's balance and not be able to keep the distance. For example, when you get involved in personal matters, you are subjected to (and share) the ups and downs of life. From time to time it was emotionally tough to take part in the home helps' frustration over some of the care recipients' life situations as well as their own stressful and demanding work situation.

It is not easy to conduct participant observation and perhaps especially difficult when the study has a tentative approach. In this study the tentativeness meant that an empirical and vague research question rather than a theoretical and precise one guided the first part, namely: What happens here? In the first phase of the observations I tried to have an open mind for "everything". However there were themes and certain events that I was expecting to happen and that I assumed to be of importance. But what happened could sometimes be something totally different from what I had expected and at those occasions (it happened quite often actually) I let my prior understanding and intuition decide whether I should stay with my planned theme or take advantage of the opportunity of the unexpected.

To be able to capture the complexity and muddle of everyday events and activities a methodological approach with a high amount of flexibility is essential. The higher the flexibility, the higher are the demands on the observer to have a large amount of knowledge, ability and courage to follow uncertain leads. I can admit in hindsight that my proficiency in this type of observation technique was limited, at least at the beginning of the study.

During my visits at the home help team, I took notes in notebooks, as much as I could manage. Sometime this was not possible during the ongoing situation and I had to take notes afterwards, as soon as possible in direct connection to the specific situation. I transcribed my notes (at train stations, at cafés or on busses and trains) as soon as possible and added comments about possible interpretations, thoughts and clarifications. A good memory and a sense for details enrich the empirical material together with a lot of time at the computer. There was, however, occasions

when I couldn't formulate or even understand what was going on until later on when something else happened that could be linked to the first situation. To produce an empirical material by the help of field notes (as well as interviews) involves following chains of events and being attentive to the stories that stand out when events are linked together. To be able to understand what happens it is necessary to investigate how certain events or situations connects to other things that happens or have happened. Let me present an example.

I had an ambition to do recordings at formal workplace meetings. I considered these meetings to be of great importance and I wanted to get a good recording of as much as possible of the conversations at the meeting. And as the recording went on I planned take notes of body language, movements in the room and facial expressions. This turned out to be impossible due to complete confidentiality in relation to the care recipients. Names of care recipients and their diagnoses and living conditions were supposed to be discussed during the meeting. The home helps nearest manager (who led the meeting) contacted the legal expert at the city council and the message to me was: no recording. To my great surprise, the home helps acted in this situation on my behalf. They suggested that numbers should be used instead of names of care recipients at these meetings. Their proposal was rejected by the manager and I took notes in my notebook as usual. I always used fictive names for care recipients as well as for the home helps.

It wasn't until long after closure of the observations, actually during the rethinking of my empirical material in a resistance-perspective, that I was considering this situation and the acting of the home helps as a part of the story of everyday resistance. They were questioning the manager and her authority as well as the rules of the organization by trying to take control of the situation. They actually for, a few minutes, replaced the manager as they interpreted the situation as open for arguments and they presented their arguments in an active manner. For a while there was no room for the manager to argue because the home helps were both loud and determined. Despite this, their argumentation didn't last; the manager and the formal regulations of confidentiality ended the discussion. But the home helps' scope of action was a little bit widened when they argued for their view of how to handle the issue at hand. What I'm trying to say here is that it was not until I linked this situation together with

other situations of resistance (or compliance and surveillance too for that matter) that it became a part of the story of everyday resistance. This story has to be contextualized in some way and in the next section I describe the history of the reorganization of home help services in Sweden along with an example of today.

The past and present of home help services

The municipal home help services in Sweden provide health care and home help for people who are living in their own homes and who have difficulties managing their daily lives. People in need include, for example, elderly people, physically or mentally disabled persons and people with a combination of mental health and drug problems. The tasks performed by the staff consist of help with their daily hygiene and household duties, such as washing dishes, doing their laundry, cleaning and supervising delivery of prepared food. It also includes providing health care such as changing dressings and distributing medicine as well as providing the clients with social support. The time allocated to each of these tasks is regulated in accordance with each individual person's assistance entitlement. These entitlements form the basis of the fee that the care recipients pay to the local council for the subsidized services they receive.

The home help services in Sweden have gone through radical changes since the 1950's. From not formally organized and unpaid work performed by women to paid and formally organized work by the local councils, but still performed mostly by women. In 2007 93% of the workforce in municipal home help services were women (Sveriges kommuner och landsting, 2007). The changes had their breakthrough in the 1970's and escalated in the 1980's with rationalisation and division of labour as landmarks. The former model for organizing home help was based on mutual agreements between the home help and the client of what to be done. The new model for organizing home help was based on planned and in detail regulated tasks and the planning was now performed by a supervisor who distributed the tasks to the home helps.

The ICT-project

The rationalization of home help services in Sweden is still going on. In this paper I will shed light on the employees' actions and responses in relation to an ICT-project introduced in order to change the ways of work and organization within home help services. The project displays a touch of old taylorism but with the help of a new tool: hand held computers. The time spent at a care recipient's home is regarded as care recipient time. The remaining working time is called *indefinable time*. It consists of activities like telephone contacts with relatives, nurses and doctors; lunches; picking up medicine from the pharmacy; travel time; meetings and planning and lots of unplanned actions. This indefinable time was when the project started 37% of the working time. This is considered to be an efficiency problem by the management in this specific local council as well as by the national board of health and welfare (e.g. Socialstyrelsen, 2004; 2005). The purpose of the hand held computers is to register what happens during the working time of the home helps.

The home help team studied during the implementation of hand held computers consisted of 12 women. The project started in the spring of 2003 with the aim of developing new ways of working by registration and documentation of the tasks performed by the home helps: "by means of the new IT-based tool the staff are expected to develop new ways of working and registering the tasks they perform" (Application for funding, 2002)¹. Each member of the staff was given a hand held computer containing information about their care recipients and the help that they require. These computers are connected to a large internal server in the municipal offices and the staff is expected to be able to quickly get the information they need and at the same time register each completed task. Every action they perform during working hours is supposed to be registered. These include morning meetings and other scheduled meetings, time for planning, every single action performed in the care recipients' homes such as health care, personal hygiene and cleaning, and the time spent talking to the care recipients' relatives, nursing staff and doctors. A software for measuring work performances has to be as complex and detailed as the

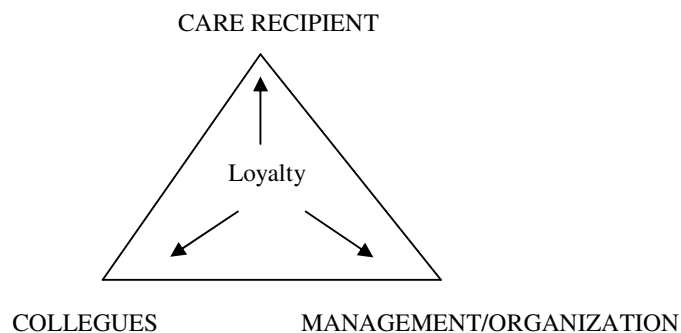
¹ The application was made by a local council servant and it was sent for funding to a foundation formed in 1984 involving county and local councils. This particular foundation is supposed to promote job security for people employed by county and local councils, through information, counselling and development work.

work performances in the profession in question. The software in this particular project was changed three times during the study and still the function and use of the hand held computers was complicated due to software and other technical problems. During my stay with the team it never once happened that all of them were in use at the same time, there was always something that wasn't working.

One could have expected loud protests against the computers and even refusal to use them but I experienced loyalty and consent. The next section is about the adaptability, responsibility and reliability, permeating the home helps thinking and acting, for the care recipients, of course, but also for their colleagues and management.

Loyal thinking and acting

The actions of the home helps in every day work situations as well as in relation to the ICT-project, is characterised by loyalty and consent. They think and act according to basic values such as adaptability, responsibility and reliability. They act as someone that can be trusted and they show a constant readiness to help and to put things in order, whatever and whoever it concerns. The home helps act with emotional as well as cognitive flexibility in order to be adaptable and helpful. This loyalty appears above all in relation to the care recipients, but it also spreads to other situations and contexts. It can, for example, appear in relation to colleagues or to the management.



It is a (value) rational way of acting where adaptability, responsibility and reliability permeate the thoughts and actions of the home helps. It functions as a premise for

how they interpret their possibilities to act. One of the fundamental premises for how the home helps think and act is expressed like this by one of the home helps:

...that you make things work, whatever it is.

This loyalty is reproduced in the daily work by the home helps as well as by the management. There is a conception of loyal home helps that appears in different situations and is reproduced by different actors. However, it has a different meaning depending on by whom and in what situation it is expressed. The home helps present themselves as, and place great value in, directing their loyalty towards the care recipients. Loyalty towards colleagues or towards the organization as whole as well as specific representatives of the management is also considered valuable. The conception of loyal home helps is also reproduced by the management. It is however contradictory; they express a view of the home helps as both loyal and unreliable. The loyalty the home helps show towards the care recipients is considered an asset by the management at the same time as it is questioned. On the one hand it is desirable with someone who is loyal towards the care recipients because it retains a certain level of quality of the caring. On the other hand someone who is loyal towards the organization and its financial and bureaucratic demands is convenient from a management perspective, and to a certain extent an ingredient of the employees' widened responsibility.

The home helps loyal way of acting raises questions about resistance, whether it exists at all and, if it does, how it appears? It exists and it appears, as I will describe in the following sections. The story of everyday resistance continues by how the home helps use loyalty as a way of creating autonomy and professional identity.

Selective loyalty

The home helps are, to a certain extent, aware of their loyalty and they sometimes use it in a conscious way. Their loyalty can be addressed towards different directions. Who or what they are loyal to is considered, more or less consciously, in work situations. They sometimes make considerations of how strong the loyalty towards the care recipient should be. The loyalty can be affected by whether the response

from the care recipient is good or poor or by the home help's own preferences concerning what they like to do. Nice and thankful care recipients get more attention and help than insignificant/indifferent or even grumpy ones:

It's rewarding to work with elderly, it really is. You get a lot back and I think that most of our care recipients are very nice. You feel appreciated. It is only a few that make you feel like you're not appreciated for what you do, like it is taken for granted. But from most of them you get a lot back. You feel needed and you almost become like one of the family.

Another aspect is that sometimes the home helps act according to their own norms of caring and household duties and sometimes even according to their own preferences for what they find pleasure in doing. Some of them put more energy into cleaning than caring and vice versa and this affects how they interpret the needs of the care recipients:

Anna is cleaning at a care recipient's home. She is dusting and says that she is doing more than what she is supposed to do according to the rules. She says that it is sloppy in the apartment and that she now has to do extra tidying... She explains that the extra tidying is as much for her own and her colleagues' sake as for the care recipients.

To act loyal towards the care recipients often means breaking the organizational rules of performing time-regulated and (economically) effective home help:

There are norms and rules; you don't do window cleaning, you don't cook, there are certain things that you're not supposed to do [according to the] But you always evade them. You feel pity for her [care recipient], she hasn't had a home cooked meal for such a long time. It's not the whole world if I boil a couple of potatoes and fry a sausage while I do the vacuuming. But this is considered unprofessional, I know.

The home helps also express the contradiction between acting according to the formal rules for performing home help services and to be compassionate and emotionally flexible. To follow formal rules of the work is often considered something

that complicates the performance of care. One of the home helps talks about what she sees as good work performance:

...I don't mean that they should work so much more and give the person so much more. I mean that they should open up a little bit and give some warmth, not everyone does. It depends on their personality, some have a more difficult time than others...and some find it easier to deal with people than others. I definitely think that it is complicated [to work in home help services] if you think that everything has to follow the rules to the point. You have to be a little handy, solve problems and work things out as they come.

In a resistance perspective the selective loyalty can be considered a way to create a scope of action as well as an alternative definition of professionalism.

Sometimes they use their loyalty towards the care recipients as a more explicit way of expressing resistance. The home helps often express that responsibility towards and caring for the care recipients is something that is limited by the use of computers. This is often done when expressing discontent in relation to the hand held computers:

...it feels like they are going to monitor that we are doing our job properly. I can't see it [using hand held computers] as an improvement. We aren't supposed to work with ICT, we are supposed to work with the care recipients.

They point out that the use of the hand held computers is not supposed to interfere with the caring of the care recipients. The presentation of this argument has, in a resistance perspective, two consequences: Firstly, by using the good of the care recipients as argument, they avoid taking a stance on whether they should formally protest against the time consuming and complicated ICT-project. This is a way for the home helps to deal with the frustration over the extra workload that trying to use the non functional hand held computers means. And secondly, it is, through this argument, possible to maintain self respect and dignity. When they use the good of the care recipients as an argument for not using the hand held computers, they can

avoid the confrontation involved in doing formal resistance with their self respect and dignity intact. It is a situation where the home helps act as if they give consent but the consent is conditioned by the good of the care recipients. Their self respect and dignity is maintained by their reference to something that can't be questioned, namely the good of the care recipients. They are, however, aware of the fact that they should act more collectively and powerful. They explain their non-resistance partly as gender specific:

We are too nice and wimpy, accepting this [to participate in the ICT-project]. I mean, to accept that much extra work without getting paid. We develop software for this company that they can make profit on. A male working team would never have accepted this.

A male team is presumed to be doing active resistance in a similar situation, which is considered as suitable behaviour by the home helps. Their own way of acting is considered inadequate and is positioned in relation to the way a male working team would have acted. It seems that the home helps see it as desirable, but not normal and expected for them to do formal resistance.

The home helps show consent when it comes to participating in the ICT-project, but that does not mean they are fully cooperating. They collectively agreed to participate. Some of them were cooperative and a few were even engaged, but the majority of them showed a minimal interest. This reluctance to engage in the project was defended by the home helps through explanations related to the care recipients. The extensive technical problems with the hand held computers were embraced by the home helps and expressed as the main reason for not using them. One of the home helps had been trying all morning to log on to her computer and failed. She was not sorry for this and expressed her relief:

They never work and that's good!

The home helps put on other ways of exercising resistance: symbolic sanctions such as slander. But these kinds of symbolic sanctions often take place off-stage and they are implicitly directed to whatever person is at hand, not to anyone with actual power over the issue. One such situation took place in an educational setting apart from the

usual work situation. The home helps were participating in an instruction for some new software for the handheld computers. It was the third version of the software that was tested and only a few of the computers functioned as they were supposed to do. The patience of the home helps was running out. They told me before the instruction started that they were discontent with being required to learn more about something that was already a failure. The home helps made fun of the software consultant. They made comments about his looks and giggled behind his back. Such insults behind someone's back are a kind of off-stage symbolic sanctions. I understand these kinds of situations as, in the words of Scott (1985, p. 284), character assassination. Not of this particular consultant but of the ICT-project. Of course it is possible that the consultant *felt* assassinated but I don't think he noticed the insults. The home helps' choice in this situation is both about convenience and strategy. It is convenient to bother the person at hand and not have to deal with the person(s) in position to affect the situation (i.e. the management). The strategy (de Certeau, 1984; Scott, 1985) here is to focus on the specific (human) agents who are plausible within their space of action. In this particular situation: the software consultant. It is far more unimaginable to directly address the organizational structures that made the situation possible. There were however opportunities for the home helps to confront the management and they did, but in a loyal, indirect and contradictory way rather than being direct and pushy.

Subversion and discipline

The home helps act with consent but seldom with cooperation, they use irony and mild sabotage. They disturb in different ways, make jokes and follow only selected parts of the managers' and the organization's rules and norms. It is especially apparent in interactions with their nearest manager and this is not that surprising. Their nearest manager is the person from the management who has frequent contact with the team and they feel familiar with her. It also seems that this way of acting is both expected and accepted by the management. It could be a part of the management strategy. By letting the home helps act *as if* they were doing resistance creates an impression of you as an employee having a seemingly high degree of autonomy at work.

In this section I will present a shortened version of my field notes on a situation where the home helps act with consent, irony and mild sabotage. It is a workplace meeting and the home helps have informed me that they are going to bring up the complications with the hand held computers and make a stance and they specifically asked me to join. They gave me the impression that my presence is important, maybe because I am someone who is interested in them and their work. They haven't informed the manager in advance about their plans and the manager has in turn intended to treat them to sandwich layer cake². The home helps do not act according to their plans, to my surprise, but they act in other ways to create autonomy. Thirteen people are participating in the meeting: eleven of twelve home helps, the nearest manager and me. It is a meeting without an explicit agenda but there is a hidden one (or two).

I arrive at 12.30 at the house where the team spend their lunches, have their daily planning sessions, workplace meetings and so on. The table in the kitchen is laid with coffee mugs, plates and cutlery. One of the home helps is coming up the stairs with a sandwich layer cake in a box. I ask her why there is going to be cake today and she tells me with a snort that it is the manager that has made the order. She had been asked to fetch the ordered cake on her way to the work place meeting.

It starts getting crowded around the table. Some of the home helps are fiddling with their hand held computers. They are taking photos of each other while howling and laughing. Some are on the internet looking for nice backgrounds for their computers. Two of them discuss how they are going to register the forthcoming meeting; they wonder how it is categorized in the menu on the display. I ask the one sitting next to me how she had managed with the computer today. She tells me that she has been "thrown out of the system" again and hadn't been able to use the computer today. To be "thrown out of the system" means that the hand held computer is logged out from the central system of the municipal office. Usually when the computer is restarted, all the information that was previously registered is lost.

² In Sweden sandwich layer cake is common at affirmation parties, christenings and other family occasions. It has, however, a symbolic meaning when it is offered to employees by a manager; it is sometimes seen as a kind of a bribe. I myself have been participating in making jokes and irony about this kind of cake and its symbolism on several of my previous work places when managers have been offering it. But nevertheless: it tastes delicious!

One of the home helps is putting a mug and a plate in front of me and says: "Marie also needs a plate". I politely say no, thank you, adding that I just had lunch. Haven't you? I ask them. They laugh and says: "No!" I understand that they are hungry and that they knew about the sandwich layer cake in advance.

The manager arrives and opens the meeting. Information about a couple of routine matters is dealt with. The manager speaks and the team is listening without saying anything. Meanwhile the home helps start to dig in to the sandwich layer cake. The manager stops her information and says with a tone that makes you unsure of she is joking or being serious: "I bought a sandwich layer cake so that you will continue to cope with the hand held computers. It is a kind of lubricant if I may say so." Some of the home helps are smiling and one of them is looking really bothered. Suddenly one of the home helps points at the hand held computer belonging to the colleague sitting next to her. She turns to her colleague but speaks out so loud that everyone around the table can hear: "Have you registered 'sandwich layer cake' yet?" She jokes that the time it takes to eat the cake should be registered, as everything else during working hours, in the hand held computer. Laughter breaks out around the table and the eating goes on.

After some more routine information the manager suddenly says: "Shall we talk about the hand held computers?" To my surprise one of the home helps asks were to keep the computers when they are off duty. An engaged discussion goes on for about 15 minutes on how to keep the hand held computers in a safe place. After that discussion the meeting seems to have changed character, a small chaos breaks out. Some of the home helps goes outside for a smoke, some goes to the sink and starts washing up and some speak over the head of the manager who is still trying to make herself heard. It is probably only the ones sitting next to her that can hear what she says. When the smoking and dishwashing is over another discussion begins, this time about new furniture for the office. Almost everyone is engaged in this matter. Once again the manager tries to talk about the hand held computers. This time the one of the home helps who has an extra responsibility in the team for the introduction of the computers, says in a firm voice: "The whole project is very badly planned." She seems

irritated and tired. None of the others are giving her support. The manager doesn't seem to take notice of what she is saying. Instead some of the home helps are taking photos of the manager with their hand held computers while giggling. Some of the home helps are still discussing furniture for the office. "If there isn't anything else we'll end this meeting," says the manager and the meeting ends. Afterwards I walk up to the manager to talk to her. She sighs and tells me that the team shows a large degree of resistance towards the hand held computers. I say that I think the home helps shows patience and she agrees with me and says: "Sandwich layer cake is sometimes needed, this wasn't the first time."

This meeting raises many questions: Why didn't they express their protests? Is talking about making resistance actually a way of doing resistance? What can be interpreted as resistance during this meeting? And last but not least: What is the meaning of the sandwich layer cake in this situation? In the following section I try to answer these questions by analyzing the home helps' way of acting at the meeting as resistance.

Consent but not cooperation

The home helps show what Ackroyd & Thompson (1999) categorize as organisational misbehaviour: consent. To act with consent means to be (or even look as if you are) engaged but not so engaged that you fully cooperate and take initiatives. The home helps show up at the meeting; they refrain from having lunch and they eat the sandwich layer cake with good appetite; they engage in choosing new furniture for the office and they discuss how the computers should be kept safely. They talk about the hand held computers when the manager asks them to. But they talk about them without referring to how to solve the complications related to them or the project as a whole. They use the hand held computers but in their own way, they treat them as items suitable to play with. The home helps know the rules of the game and they play their part with just about enough effort. This seems to be a tactic à la de Certeau (1984). Tactics are of short term characteristics, it is actions and responses that are practiced by those who have to follow the rules of the game, the ones that are in no position to have a powerful overview over their situation. Their reactions are conditioned by someone else's strategies. It is a kind of routine consent; it is calculating and they do it without considering other alternatives. Maybe it is a way to

conform to the stereotypical picture of them as loyal and respectable home helps. Not only for the sake of being seen as loyal and respectable but also for the advantages such a reputation can bring (Scott, 1985, p. 278). It is a calculating and at the same time self-protective way of acting.

Irony

Irony is effective for highlighting situations or conditions that are experienced as irrelevant, illogic or just silly. It also prevents the sender from being personally exposed (Johansson & Woodilla, 2005). This is what happens when one of the home helps asks her colleague if she has registered “sandwich layer cake” on the computer. The question isn’t meant to be answered but it effectively points out the absurdity in the detailed registrations in the computers. The joke hits home, the home helps laugh and the situation strengthen the social bonds within the team. Because it is only a joke the home help in question can’t be held responsible for her utterance. The sandwich layer cake has a symbolic meaning as an encouragement or even a bribe for the home helps to continue to be patient with the complications around the hand held computers. It is also a symbol for the exercise of power. The manager is aware of it, and the home helps are as well, but they all act like they didn’t know; the manager offers and the home helps eat. But with the help of irony the home helps disturb the balance of power and put themselves in a superior position. They use verbal irony to comment on the irony in the situation (e.g. Johansson & Woodilla, 2005, p. 33). Of course irony has its limitations. It balances between having subversive effects and preserving effects (Johansson & Woodilla, 2005; Wahl, Holgersson & Höök, 2005; Wasson, 2005). In this situation, irony had a subversive effect even if it didn’t change the formal positions of power. When the home help uses irony she puts herself in a superior position towards the object joked about. This prevents feelings of degradation and subordination by turning the table. By allowing an alternative understanding of the situation that is opposite to the officially accepted one, the emotional hierarchy can be turned on its head.

Mild sabotage

I use Ackroyd & Thompson's (1999) term sabotage to describe the home helps' activity at the work place meeting. I also add the adjective *mild*, because it is not at all violent or physical damage, but a subtle and disciplined disruption. For example, when the home helps turn their backs at the manager while she is speaking or when they leave the room for a smoking break as well as for doing the washing up. They acquire time during the meeting for a birthday celebration as well³. A particularly delicate form of mild sabotage is when the home helps choose, at several times during the meeting, to talk about the care recipients instead of the manager's issues. This particular kind of sabotage is very subtle and effective; the manager can't criticize it because the home helps are just doing their job: trying to care for the elderly as well as possible.

Conclusion

The home helps do everyday resistance. It takes little or no coordination. It takes place through implied assumptions and informal networks. It makes it possible to avoid confrontation with authorities and it is a kind of informal self help (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Scott, 1985). They did it by using humour and particularly irony to understand and deal with the paradoxical situation of being the object of controlling their own work performances (e.g. Johansson & Woodilla, 2005). They joked about the hand held computers and the absurdity in trying to split up their daily performances into measurable units. Irony was also a way of keeping the social bonds in the work group together and to introduce an alternative interpretation of the situation as opposed to the one presented by the management. They also conducted a degree of mild sabotage, a subtle and disciplined disturbance. It happened, for example, at work place meetings. They talked during the meeting and did problem solution related to care recipients while their nearest manager was trying to run the meeting according to her agenda. This mild sabotage disturbed the power balance between the group and their nearest manager. The home helps created opportunities to acquire time and social space for an alternative agenda. They also used slander

³ I had to leave out greater parts of the field notes on this particular meeting to limit the text in this paper. The birthday celebration of one of the home helps had to be left out. It was, however, traditional with singing, a present and another tasty cake. It was a celebration that was carried out with neither the manager's knowledge or her permission.

as a way of gaining at least some control over a situation they had been ordered to participate in. Perhaps the most subtle form of them all is the way the home helps use their loyalty in a selective manner. Their loyalty has potential to function as both limiting and productive to resistance.

The actions of the home helps are both about consent to and denial of the management's directives. The denial appears when the home helps, in their daily work, interpret and make considerations regarding the rules, regulations and norms that the management and the organization assign to them. They act to create the most plausible scope for autonomy in work situations and this struggle is often related to the caring of the care recipients. The maintenance of, above all, caring relations is an aspect of their work that is of great importance. The home helps make sure to point out their loyalty towards the care recipients in many different situations. This is a form of autonomy and a freedom of action embedded in the position of being a (loyal) employee. Despite control and discipline the home helps make this freedom of action available to them. The management and the organization replies by implementing a tool, hand held computers, for managing what is considered by them to be time wasting and limitation of work.

Despite the limited and informal character of the resistance of the home helps, it can be considered subversive. It has the possibility to undermine exercise of power and it creates an alternative professional identity to the one offered by the management. The resistance of the home helps is a creative and productive process as it generates critical engagement in their identity formation and workplace relationships. This line of thought presuppose a view of identities as well as work place relationships as constant moving. What people do, say and are at work is hardly ever completely set and foreclosed, partly because the contemporary workplace is:

...the site *par excellence* where people learn about and experiment with the possibility and necessity of alternative ways of doing, being and interacting.

(Iedema, Rhodes & Scheeres, 2006, p. 1126).

This study suggests that exploring resistance at a micro-political level involves processes of identity formation and construction of meaning. These processes are dynamic and open for constant reinterpretation. The home helps' ways of interpret and select how to use their loyalty, when to be cooperative and to whom or what is an empirical example of a constant struggle for autonomy at work.

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