



# Resistance Through Compliance: The Strategic and Subversive Potential of Frontstage and Backstage Resistance

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## Abstract

Cynicism, gossip, foot-dragging, simulation of productivity, etc. have been regarded by some scholars as manifestations of resistance that are subtle and unobtrusive, but still real and effective. Denying their strategic and subversive potential, others have argued that such informal, indirect or infrapolitical demonstrations of subversion are risk-free and ineffective, and, because members shy away from acting on their critique, that they should be re-evaluated as mere compliance. Refuting an either–or framework, we ask the more pertinent, empirically grounded, and underexplored question of how resistant and compliant behaviours are performed in situ. This allows us to discern and examine different forms and effects of infrapolitical strategies. Building on an ethnographic case-analysis of a planned change programme in the Amsterdam municipality's Department of Work and Income (DWI), this paper explores in detail how organizational actors subtly synthesize compliance and resistance in their situated positionings vis-a-vis a change initiative, and how such ambiguous positioning becomes consequential. We describe two distinct infrapolitical strategies, which we term frontstage and backstage resistance. While frontstage resistance derives its subversive potential from mixing open protest with implicit complaisance, backstage resistance functions via a benign appearance of carefully staged compliant behaviour.

## Keywords

compliance, infrapolitics, organizational change, performance, routine resistance, resistance to change

## Introduction

Carel (income consultant): I'm *never* opposed. I'm *always* in favour of trying new things. If it has no advantages, then it shouldn't be continued, but I am always a supporter of change. I'm always all for it.

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- Martha (fieldworker): Yes, okay. I'm still thinking about the 'process improvement teams' you were talking about. Are you going to participate?
- Carel, emphatically: No!
- Martha, surprised: Excuse me?
- Carel: I'd rather not. Not anymore.
- Martha: Not anymore? Why?
- Carel: Not voluntarily. I might, if I think that it would be useful, but the way things turned out last time... Then I think: if you have no say, then ehm... if my opinion doesn't count, then why don't they just decide for themselves?

While the management of the Amsterdam municipality's Department of Work and Income (DWI) claimed to actively involve staff members in developing its organizational change programme, this staff member was convinced that he had 'no say' and thus refused to 'voluntarily' participate in change-related activities, such as a process improvement team. Nonetheless, his passive, silent act of resistance did not stop him from stating that he was *never* opposed to and, in fact, *always* in favour of change. In DWI members' positionings in relation to change plans and policies, we often witnessed a peculiar coalescence of compliance and resistance. While managers and staff members responsible for designing and implementing change claimed that employee resistance was both ubiquitous and elusive, staff tailored their performance to particular situations and subtly manoeuvred from recalcitrance to complaisance and back.

Scholars have explicitly set out to explore the intersections of compliance and resistance (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005; Pfeiffer, 2016). However, recent debates reframe informal and indirect resistance in dualist terms and subject it to bifurcation. Some scholars have been steadfast in their view of 'foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander... and so on' as 'the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups' (Scott, 1990, p. 29), which may be 'less dramatic but equally real forms of resistance' (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016, p. 4; Prasad & Prasad, 2000). Others consider subtle forms of resistance to be pseudo-opposition and empty posturing (e.g. Contu, 2008; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Such ersatz resistance, they argue, is 'decaffeinated' because it 'threatens and hurts nobody' and 'changes very little' (Contu, 2008, pp. 370, 367). These contrasting readings re-categorize the intentions, practices and effects of subtle resistance as either 'real' resistance or 'mere' compliance. Rather than asking whether such acts are either real and effective or empty and inconsequential, the more pertinent question is how subtle resistance is performed in situ and what effects it produces.

In studies of, among others, humour, cynicism and gossip, existing research has provided empirical evidence of resistance-compliance blends (e.g. Mumby, 2005). However, researchers have yet to systematically explore and describe the different forms and effects of organizational actors' situated use of compliance and resistance (Pfeiffer, 2016). Drawing on ethnographic data concerning DWI members' positionings in various settings, we analyse subtle resisters' situated manoeuvring vis-a-vis planned changes in everyday work practices. We distinguish two forms: frontstage and backstage resistance. Some individual staff members voiced their opposition and openly engaged in subversive activities, yet continued to work compliantly. More often, however, members hid their opposition behind a benign appearance (as evident in Carel's statement 'I'm *never* opposed'). Frontstage, they then performed conformity to planned or instigated changes while simultaneously, backstage, fuelling change proponents' frustrations with their indifference, cynicism, criticism and/or inaction. Both forms of subtle resistance were a pastiche of 'real' resistance and 'mere' compliance. In fact, the forms' resistant potential rested on either an agreeable outward appearance or a cooperative backstage commitment. Resistance thus worked through

compliance, demonstrating that, rather than taking the form of an exhaustive and definitive oppositional stance, workplace resistance to participatory change initiatives can involve situational and strategic manoeuvring in day-to-day interactions.

This paper proceeds as follows: after reviewing literature on subtle resistance, we explain our research methodology and analytical strategy. We then turn to our empirical findings, which illustrate the various positionings of DWI employees in the process of instigating, supporting and opposing a planned change. Subtle-resistance theory implications are discussed in the final section, in which we develop ideas for a situationally sensitive approach.

## Subtle Resistance

Critical organizational scholars have taken a particular interest in the mundane worker-actions that constitute informal or 'routine' resistance (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016). Traditionally, workplace resistance was seen as open, direct and organized opposition to managerial control (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005), for example, wildcat strikes, go-slows, working-to-rule and sabotage (e.g. Burawoy, 1979). Later, critical scholars who studied culture management and electronic surveillance wrote a different script, casting workers in relatively non-resistant, conformist roles. They suggested that widespread compliance and consent result from almost totalitarian normative and technological control, which muffles or absorbs and effectively eliminates worker resistance (e.g. Barker, 1993). In critique of this view, others argued that such control-centric studies underestimate the potential for resistance, suggesting instead the need for a more active search 'beneath the surface of formal organisation and the apparent consent of employees' (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995, p. 615). In response to studies of normative control and compliance, these scholars assumed that resistance under such disembodied, unobtrusive forms of control was difficult to see as it had itself become unobtrusive, hidden and indirect (e.g. Fleming & Sewell, 2002). Moving away from the more 'classic Fordist image of resistance' (Fleming & Spicer, 2008, p. 203), organizational scholars began to acknowledge that resistance is not such a clear-cut and overt matter, but rather complex (Thomas & Davies, 2005), blurred (Ashcraft, 2005) and not always obvious (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). Sparking an interest in humour, cynicism, gossip, etc. (e.g. Mumby, 2005), this brought a variety of more subtle and mundane activities under the rubric of 'resistance'.

In principle, this stream in the literature recognized that more 'quotidian variants' of resistance (Fleming & Spicer, 2008, p. 203) are often implicit, unobtrusive and ambiguous (Knights & McCabe, 2000), and mix resistance with compliance. Such scholars showed, for instance, how employees use careful carelessness (Prasad & Prasad, 1998), humour (Collinson, 2003), cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2008), scepticism (Fleming & Sewell, 2002), nostalgic talk (Gabriel, 1993), alternative articulations of selfhood (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003) or simulation of productivity (Paulsen, 2015) to resist managerial initiatives. Humour, for example, can be used as a means of expressing scepticism, cynicism, alienation and disenchantment (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999 in Collinson, 2003). It allows individuals to express resistant attitudes while at the same time camouflaging the dissent behind a good-humoured appearance (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995): 'It does not work in *either* resistive/subversive *or* conservative ways, but tends to be both at the same time' (Pfeffer, 2016, p. 47). In a similar vein, Švejkian transgressions, such as scrimshanking and flanneling, denote another subtle form of subversion. These behaviours undermine or dissolve organizational power relations in practical ways, while also helping to 'unmask' the ideological absurdities that shore them up (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). At the same time, however, 'good soldier Švejk' manages to remain 'invisible' to superiors (and often to peers, too) by 'doing just enough so that he appear[s] to be doing his duty' (Fleming & Sewell, 2002, p. 863), thereby engaging in a form of organizational 'disengagement': the ability to comply without conforming (Bailey, 1993 in Fleming

& Sewell, 2002, p. 864). Micro-acts of resistance may thus contain elements of acceptance and compliance (Ashcraft, 2005; Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994).

While recognizing the inherent ambiguity and exploring the intersections of resistance and compliance, scholars who were dedicated to putting subtle forms of resistance on the ‘research agenda’ cast their net wide and classified all forms of mundane action as resistance. In their aim to look ‘beneath the surface’ for latent currents, they ran the risk of romanticizing micro-acts of resistance and inflating their ideological content beyond what was due (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016). Bringing together different forms of subtle resistance, they assumed all such actions to be manifestations of the same solid phenomenon, namely, a subterranean potency that served as ‘the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow’ (Scott, 1985, p. 273). It is, as Kondo (1990, p. 221) writes in relation to Scott’s work, a ‘rhetoric ... animated by a wish for clean-cut, clearly defined categories’. From this vantage point, subtle resistance is anonymous and indirect, but real and effective nonetheless.

Such overemphasis led others to reassess the intentions and effects of humour, cynicism and the like, and to critique its interpretation as resistance (e.g. Contu, 2008; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Du Gay and Salaman (1992) had already classified subtle resistance as mere compliance, because, they wrote, employees’ resistance ‘counts for little’ if they continue ‘to be involved in the everyday practices within which the organisation is inscribed.’ In a similar vein, Contu (2008) argued that ‘sweetened’ or ‘decaf’ resistance is perhaps joyful, yet risk-averse and safe (‘resistance without a cost’) and ultimately inconsequential—with no impact on the constellation of power relations (Contu, 2008, p. 370)—if not altogether counterproductive; while voicing resistant intentions, such behaviour fails to produce disobedience, and succeeds in reproducing and reconfirming the status quo. Only within the limits set by a managerial regime is it transgressive. Similarly, Fleming and Spicer (2003) spoke of cynicism in the workplace as an ‘imaginary’ manifestation of power. Cynical employees ‘dis-identify with cultural prescriptions, yet often still perform them. [They] have the impression that they are autonomous, but they still practice the corporate rituals nonetheless’ (Spicer, 2003, p. 157) and perform them as if they agree (Poulter & Land, 2008). While expressing frustration and disillusionment with an organization, cynics shy away from acting upon their critique. Consequently, cynicism’s resistant potential is illusory, merely supporting ‘the fantasy of ourselves as liberal, free and self-regulating human beings to whom multiple choices are open’ (Contu, 2008, p. 370).

The debate between scholars who defend the inrapolitics of informal, routine resistance as being ‘real politics’ (e.g. Scott, 1990, pp. 183–201) and those who see it as a poor substitute for the ‘real thing’ captures subtle subversion in either–or terms. It reaffirms Mumby’s (2005) observation that the field of critical organizational studies is divided around an implicit binary opposition that credits either organizational control processes that effectively create compliance or equally effective employee resistance to such mechanisms of control. A dualist approach to worker dissent results in the neglect of more complex individual positionings and social dynamics (Mumby, 2005; Pfeiffer, 2016). In fact, whether or not subtle resistance is seen as empty posturing or the ‘real thing’, both readings tend to lump its different forms together and to assume similar outcomes—either significant or insignificant. By categorizing intentions, actions and effects as either ‘real’ resistance or ‘mere’ compliance, researchers fail to gain a perception of the situated performance of subtle resistance and its varying effects on day-to-day work processes. Ironically, regardless of whether subtle resistance is thought to be real or empty, the romantic notion of pure resistance that underpins its support or critique seems to obscure our perception of its subtleties. As Kondo (1990, p. 225) put it: ‘To indulge in nostalgic desire for “authentic resistance” might blind us to the multiple, mobile points of potential resistance moving through any regime of power.’

### *The situated performance of subtle resistance*

To ground an approach that is sensitive to circumstance, performance and variability, it is practical to reinvigorate and develop the notion of subtle resistance as an ambiguous mixture of resistance and compliance. Instead of imposing an either–or logic onto interstitial and subterranean resistance, we need an appreciation of its intersections with compliance. As Fineman and Gabriel (1996, p. 87) argue, people obey orders ‘grudgingly, inaccurately, ritualistically or sarcastically’ or rebel ‘even as they appear to be conforming’. Compliance and resistance should thus not be seen as ‘either–or responses’ or as absolute categories. They may coexist. Adopting an identity perspective, Thomas and Hardy (2011, p. 325) also challenged dualist notions and argued that the ‘labelling and fixing of essentialist identities’ is ‘problematic’, because individuals’ compliant or resistant positionings throughout a change process do not fit such ‘neat categorizing’. Middle managers, for instance, may be change agents leading the change effort and change recipients resisting change initiatives at the same time. Instead of adopting or ascribing pre-set roles, participants (executives and staff alike) switch their positioning throughout a change process or combine different positionings.

However, if small, everyday acts of resistance are ‘laced with contradiction, irony, and compromise’ (Kondo, 1990, p. 218), and resistance and compliance are not separate units, how then do they ‘intersect in the moment to moment to produce complex and often contradictory dynamics’ (Mumby, 2005, p. 21)? How are compliance and resistance mutually implicated in subtle forms of resistance? In spite of its claim that compliance and resistance can be close companions, the literature provides few answers. It tends to pool together various forms, acts and effects of subtle resistance to enter into a debate that is characterized by dichotomous simplification. However, implicitly or explicitly, research into informal resistance and infrapolitics acknowledges the situated nature of subtle resistance. Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) notion of contradictions between social actors’ onstage performance in ‘front regions’ and their self-presentation in offstage areas or ‘back regions’, scholars usually assume that subtle forms of resistance thrive behind the scenes. Some associated subtle resistance with empty posturing – and thus with public display (e.g. Contu, 2008), but most use such pronouns as unobtrusive, hidden, indirect or informal to define subtle resistance. In order to create unmanaged space (Gabriel, 1999), actors camouflage their dissent (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995), try to remain invisible (Fleming & Sewell, 2002) or ‘hid[e] behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct’ (Scott, 1990, p. xiii). They stage acquiescence, because – Scott (1990, p. xii) argues – ‘the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful’.

For studying the situated performance of resistance, the frontstage-backstage dimension holds promise. However, making a priori assumptions that subtle resistance is a backstage phenomenon – and additional assumptions that backstage behaviours are more real than outward appearances (or vice versa) – potentially limits our understanding of it. It keeps us from seeing actors taking different positionings in different situations and using front regions and back regions for different purposes and with different intentions – genuine or staged. Rather than regarding cynicism, complaisance, critique, etc. either as authentic or as a thin façade, we treat resistance and compliance as dynamic phenomena that unfold through individual performances in day-to-day interactions. Responding to the shortage of studies detailing how compliance and resistance intersect, we investigate the variety of ways in which organizational actors at DWI engage in compliant and resistant acts. Focusing on micro-practices related to promoting or opposing change, we explore the various ways in which organizational actors at DWI discursively construct resistance and position themselves and others in relation to change efforts throughout a variety of onstage and offstage situations.

## Research Approach and Methods

An ethnographic case study of Amsterdam municipality's social services division (DWI) inspired the theoretical argument put forth in this article. As part of an organizational change programme, DWI management had requested to investigate the impact of 'lean management' on its organization's members. We build on data generated by the second author (whom we call the fieldworker) in her role as an 'at-home ethnographer' (as a DWI employee herself) throughout the initial stages of the change programme in 2012 and 2013, during a nine-month period of fieldwork. The first author was involved in feedback sessions and in the interpretation and theorization of the findings.

### *Department of Work and Income*

Formally called Amsterdam municipality's Department of Work and Income (DWI), Amsterdam's department of social services is, in addition to upholding labour and social assistance laws, responsible for maintaining the municipality's own 'poverty policy', designed to support Amsterdam residents in need of financial and/or social assistance. As a result of the economic recession that began in Europe in 2008, the Department of Work and Income had been forced to deal with new legislation, national and municipal budget cuts, and a shrinking labour market. As one of the largest divisions of the local government, employing approximately 1,850 people (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013), these developments had a significant impact on the organization's work processes. In response, in 2010, the Department of Work and Income decided to implement a different approach, which they called 'the new working method'. With a four-year trajectory (2011–2014), the programme consisted of four goals: (1) increase new jobs among Amsterdam residents, (2) reduce the number of residents dependent on welfare benefits, (3) increase the quality of services provided by the Department of Work and Income and (4) decrease budget expenses (DWI, 2010).

### *At-home ethnography*

At the time of this research, DWI was the fieldworker's place of employment. As social research is inherently grounded in the researcher's interpretations and thus always affected by personal feelings, preconceived opinions, etc. (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2009), a self-reflexive approach is most appropriate (Alvesson, 2009)—and perhaps particularly important in 'at-home ethnography', a method in which 'the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a "natural access" and in which s/he is an active participant' (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159). When a researcher 'works and/or lives in the setting' she studies (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159), she has excellent access to the object of study and is therefore able to produce close accounts of what is being studied. Compared to 'conventional' modes of doing research, however, at-home ethnography also has potential difficulties (Humphreys & Brown, 2002) and calls for some additional efforts. To escape the specific traps facing the researcher's insider position (Alvesson, 2009, p. 169; Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009), we created a certain amount of 'distance'. First, the at-home ethnographer addressed phenomena with which she was not deeply involved: she was previously unfamiliar with both the change programme and the organization's departments she chose to study, allowing her to look at events from a researcher's, rather than a member's, point of view. Second, collaboration between an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in both fieldwork (conducted with the help of a master's student and the occasional field visit by the first author) and headwork (a joint effort of the first and second author) also helped to avoid one-sidedness.

## *Data collection*

The interpretive research process was characterized by a reflexive interchange of findings, using different data sources and methods, research participants' opinions and the researchers' own interpretations. From October to December 2012 the fieldworker developed a general impression of the change programme, focusing on information from policy documents and seven formal interviews and several informal conversations with organizational members. Such insights enabled a narrow focus on specific issues that emerged from the data (e.g. leadership, commitment to the organization, willingness to change). Through document analysis, observation, informal conversations and 26 formal interviews, the fieldworker (with the help of a master's student) worked from January to May 2013 to explore these change-related issues in depth, generating the bulk of the data presented in this paper. Having focused her research activities on a municipal office other than her own, the fieldworker's position as an employee provided her with ample access to diverse internal content—including news reports, emails, (policy) documents, work council newsletters and research reports published on the DWI website and intranet—providing detailed information about the change programme, as well as the organization's political context.

To capture employee viewpoints on the organization's strategic, tactical and operational levels, the fieldworker focused her research activities on (1) the staff involved in the development and implementation of the change programme and (2) team members in two of the operational departments that first started implementing the change programme (some of whom were introduced by their team's manager and some of whom were approached during observations). Lasting between 45 and 75 minutes and conducted in Dutch, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviewer began by assuring confidentiality and explaining the background of the research. The interviews were semi-structured: the fieldworker had a pre-determined list of (change-related) topics to be explored and allowed new topics to be brought up by participants during the interview. She addressed such topics as participants' professional career development within the organization, daily work experiences, advantages and disadvantages of working for the organization, previously experienced change processes, and experiences with the current organizational change processes.

The fieldworker attended several internal meetings and workshops, regularly positioned herself between staff members in the municipality's 'flex offices', and joined employees during coffee breaks and lunches. By observing daily work activities and informal conversations, she immersed herself in her subjects' everyday lives and practices. In notes scribbled down between events and conversations, the fieldworker wrote down not only specific spoken words, but also gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and ways of dressing and addressing, as well as her own (first) impressions of things that were striking, confusing or surprising.

## *Data analysis*

The central focus of the analysis was organizational members' positionings of themselves and others vis-a-vis a planned change programme at DWI. To identify recurrent themes and to develop an overview of the various views and opinions on the programme, we began the analysis by reading and rereading all of our transcribed interviews, informal conversations, field notes and documents. Through a process of clustering categories, we abstracted our reading of the data to a more conceptual level of interpretation, distinguishing themes such as 'pro-change', 'anti-change', 'management style', 'job insecurity' and 'work pressure'. By closely examining how participants positioned themselves vis-a-vis the change process—through the expression of enthusiasm, resignation, indifference, reluctance and the like, and through the articulation of identities, such as that of a designer

or recipient of change, and likewise as a supporter or opponent—we were able to narrow down our perceived themes. Easily switching from one to the other, this analysis showed that staff members at DWI often positioned themselves in between acceptance and resistance. We then began to discern the various ways in which participants, either hiding or displaying their dissent, adjusted their positioning to the issue at hand, to the audience or to the setting. To strengthen our interpretation and to furnish the description with empirical depth and detail, we then went back and forth between raw data and emerging categories. Allowing resistance to be perceived as a contextual occurrence and situated performance, this process led to (1) a description of the organizational context of change plans and policies, and policy-makers' views on resistance to change within DWI, and (2) a distinction between two forms of subtle employee resistance to change: frontstage and backstage resistance.

## Findings

In our reading of the data, resistance in relation to change plans and initiatives within the Amsterdam municipality's Department of Work and Income manifested in three different ways. When promoting change, individuals—in particular the managers and staff members responsible for designing and implementing change—depicted employee resistance as widespread, obstructive and elusive, necessitating training and motivational programmes in order to be overcome. Although those targeted by change—middle managers and employees—indeed engaged in oppositional discourse and subversive activities, they mingled their resistance with compliance. They did so in two distinct ways. Such employees either voiced their resistance openly, while often continuing to work compliantly, or hid their opposition behind a benign appearance. We refer to such mixtures of compliance and resistance as frontstage resistance and backstage resistance (for an overview, see Table 1).

## Overcoming resistance

Those promoting change within the Department of Work and Income tended to frame employee resistance as strong, obstructive and elusive but surmountable. This was also how official channels (somewhat implicitly) reported on resistance. According to the official website (DWI, 2012), change would stimulate creativity, commitment, action and initiative, and move the focus 'from denying, complaining, and criticising towards taking responsibility, ownership, and collaboration'. Rife with postalgic language (Ybema, 2004), pro-change discourse projected a future DWI that was more professional, transparent, flexible, efficient, effective and service-minded. The so-called new working method was presented as the best way to realize these ambitions. Thanks to lean management and 'appreciative inquiry', DWI would, in four years' time, develop into 'a learning organisation' and shift from a 'top-down' to a 'bottom-up organisation' (DWI, 2010). Stories about successful lean management implementation in similar organizations, about improved conversation techniques as a result of appreciative inquiry training and about improved service to clients all conveyed the message that a 'better DWI' was not only necessary and desirable, it was also makeable and controllable. Resistance would be overcome.

In conversations and meetings, promoters of change openly discussed resistance and claimed it was widespread within the organization. Staff were cast as reluctant change recipients, often turning down change initiatives and engaging in opposition, unable or unwilling to cope with the changes. One manager claimed, for instance, that 'some people have been in the same position for so long, they've developed their own little ways of doing things. They just don't feel like changing.' Although they expressed some worries, these managers typically

claimed that resistance was intrinsic to change—a natural response that, if handled well, should be a passing phase in the process. In the words of a lean management trainer: ‘During training sessions, it’s obvious that people are scared of change. It definitely arouses very unpleasant feelings. That’s a fact. [As a trainer] you need to get them through it.’ Transforming the majority of reluctant staff into full supporters, the (self-proclaimed) agents of change were confident that resistance could be overcome by interventions, training and guidance. Viewing themselves as representatives of the change initiatives, they tried to persuade others by using soft power techniques such as positive stimulation and active involvement in ‘bottom-up projects’. By sharing success stories and arranging meetings, presentations, workshops and training sessions to clarify and facilitate processes, they believed that employees would start to appreciate the fact that the change initiatives were improving working conditions and making work processes ‘better’, ‘easier’ and ‘more enjoyable’. Eventually, their change initiatives would produce ‘commitment’, ‘energy’ and ‘eagerness’.

In spite of the dominant claim of bottom-up change, these change agents also believed that, to overcome resistance, change should be managed top-down to begin with (and bottom-up later in the process). A project leader explained why:

The assignment was a top-down decision, but the employees are responsible for figuring out how we go about it. It’s not fair to let people completely drown. Management has to be clear about what’s important, what the priorities are, what’s the focus, and where they draw the line. I expect that of my own manager, too. So that ehm, I think that’s a good division [of labour].

By claiming that ‘employees’ are in need of, and have the right to receive, clear guidelines, objectives and boundaries, the speaker legitimated top-down management. It would be ‘unfair’ to not provide direction. Yet, in order to involve their employees in shaping the improvement trajectories, DWI also drew upon bottom-up management methods. In order to tap into their knowledge as ‘the “experts” who know best how processes should be organized’ (lean management trainer), they created process improvement teams. According to one project leader, these teams inspired employees and increased their ‘intrinsic motivation’. In his eyes, employees were like students in need of a teacher to ‘train’ and ‘motivate’ them.

Alongside qualifications of ‘change recipients’ as the real experts or students who could be transformed into supporters of change, those championing change also spoke of elusive and incorrigible resistance. They felt resistance often remained unnoticed, out of sight and thus difficult to grasp. It was easier when worker resistance was obvious and, in their eyes, incorrigible. They then claimed that dissident subordinates or colleagues would *never* go along with the changes, because they were ‘rusty’, ‘unwilling’, and ‘afraid of change’. As one employee put it: ‘Some colleagues just don’t want to change. They’re comfortable where they are, and they want to stay there until retirement.’ From this vantage point, those who opposed change came to be seen as slightly ‘strange’, hopeless ‘grumblers’ or ‘rusty civil servants’ who could not be motivated to embrace the ‘change fever’. Seen as blocking change efforts, such dissidents’ ‘constant negativity’ annoyed change-oriented members: ‘They slow down the change process, but we’re in a changing environment so we *have* to change. If they don’t want to join us, it’d be better if they’d just leave!’

In sum, self-proclaimed champions of change saw widespread, persistent and disruptive, as well as elusive and incorrigible, resistance among employees. Allowing them to cast ‘the other’ as in need of information, inspiration, direction and restriction, this view of the opposition also allowed them to see themselves as saviours of the organization who catered to these needs with, for example, training sessions, workshops and presentations. Convinced of the necessity to change

in order to create new opportunities for the organization, they felt it was their task to push through the difficulty of winning them over in order to eventually turn resisters into devotees of the new working method.

### *Rampant resistance?*

From the vantage point of those responsible for change, resistance was thus widespread. In interviews and casual conversation, staff members also acknowledged that the changes provoked resistance. Following a different rationale, they framed resistance as the reasonable response to unreasonable change initiatives. Research participants questioned whether change was necessary, rational or desirable. DWI was going through ‘madness’, implementing ‘one [change] after another, very quickly’. In their eyes, change was a never-ending story that resulted in high work pressure, feelings of stress, job insecurity due to budget cuts, and resistance:

Too many sequential organizational changes lead to work-related stress and insecurity about one’s job, which leads to a lack of support for subsequent changes. People are fed up, they don’t feel involved. So *any* new change plan will cause resistance.

According to one member of the DWI work council, the recent adoption of lean management was ‘just another change process leading to feelings of insecurity and resistance’. Similarly, a staff member argued that lean management was ‘yet another change initiative’ that logically provoked resistance:

We have so many changes to deal with, I lose track of them. Now they’re talking about lean management ... they presented it as: ‘You are not allowed to have a picture frame on your desk anymore, the desks have to be interchangeable.’ Well, the first thing I thought about was putting a picture frame on my desk!

Among the lower-level employees, change initiatives were described as ‘illegitimate’, ‘inconsiderate’ and ‘unnecessary’, and defiant behaviour as reasonable and commonsensical resistance to ‘this change nonsense’.

After being alerted to so much resistance in both management and staff discourse, we had expected it to be rampant. However, upon setting foot in the offices and hallways of DWI, we did not see anything akin to a raging crowd. On the one hand, critique did indeed figure prominently in staff-member conversations about change initiatives in flex-offices, elevators, corridors and coffee-machine and lunch-counter queues. Our fieldworker also witnessed instances of individual protest and subversion, and frequently overheard high-pitched or soft and conspiratorial voices expressing mockery: ‘Have you heard what they’ve come up with this time?’; gossip (pointing at a group of managers at another lunch table): ‘It’s them, *they* decided we’re obliged to do that training!’; and anger: ‘I can’t believe they decided to split up the teams!’ Yet, on the other hand, employees often participated compliantly in change-related initiatives and, ironically, also adopted elements of the pro-change narrative themselves; claiming, for instance, that their department ‘definitely’ needed to become more ‘professional’, ‘transparent’ or ‘efficient’.

So, despite frequent talk of strong resistance, staff instead combined resistance with compliance and, in their day-to-day work, contextually adjusted their support for and opposition to change. In our reading of the data, resistance mingled with compliance in two distinct ways, which we refer to as frontstage resistance (cum backstage compliance) and backstage resistance (cum frontstage compliance). Situationally crafting their performance, staff either displayed or disguised their opposition vis-a-vis others (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Change agents' view of resistance and change recipients' frontstage/backstage resistance.

	Frontstage Resistance	Backstage Resistance
Positioning vis-a-vis change	Change initiatives are openly opposed, yet receive offstage support	Change initiatives are openly defended as necessary, yet are met with secret offstage opposition
Positioning vis-a-vis resistance	Open protest and subversive behaviour are corrective efforts to keep management from implementing unnecessary change. Backstage, employees are fully committed	Frontstage, change gets support because open protest is seen as futile and risky. Backstage, change efforts are smothered with reluctance, resignation, ridicule, critique, indifference and inaction
Effects	Signals discontent and unrest; hampers change initiatives; frustrates change agents; resisters receive status, but become targeted by management as troublemakers	Creates a sense of autonomy and identity, and unmanaged space for complaining and conspiring with colleagues; releases from engagement in change initiatives; delays and destabilizes the change process through critique and inaction

*Frontstage resistance (backstage compliance)*

While there was little open resistance at DWI, individual staff members sometimes engaged in direct protest or symbolic acts of resistance. Confronted with, in their eyes, illegitimate changes that affected their daily work, like modifications in routines, regulations or instructions, middle managers and employees sometimes disobeyed orders or voiced their discontents. To send a signal to change agents, they expressed anger or frustration in a meeting, committed minor transgressions (like conspicuously ignoring the clean desk policy), audibly complained to colleagues in public spaces, overtly stayed away from change-related activities or showed up but remained noticeably unengaged. While, for instance, during a lean management trainer's presentation most participants had been listening attentively (or at least pretending to listen), one employee arrived halfway through the presentation, brusquely asking her colleagues: 'What's going on?' Another began noisily making coffee during the presentation, and still others ignored the presentation entirely, working instead on their computer and answering questioning looks by saying: 'I have work to do.'

At times, dissidence was shared openly. Standing at the printer, for all to hear, two colleagues discussed a new demand: 'Do you know how much extra work we'll have to do for that? I'm definitely not going to do it!' Colleague: 'Neither am I! I don't have time for that. How did they come up with an idea like that?' When a team manager asked staff to participate in the process improvement teams, one member bluntly refused ('I won't go there!'), because management 'never listened' to his suggestions for improvement. What's more, some middle managers openly raised objections and engaged in subversive activities. One team manager told his manager and the board of directors that he refused to organize 'week starts' for his team (a cornerstone of the new working method), because he felt its goal was to select and get rid of 'inferiors', while he was trying to motivate them instead. 'Change is all right,' he said, 'but not if heads start to roll. I'm opposed to that. That's where I dig my heels in.' In a similar vein, a manager disrupted the change process by refusing to participate in weekly meetings that were initiated to discuss figures and targets, and to 'weigh' member performance. Over coffee, he told our fieldworker why he stayed away:

The pig doesn't gain weight by weighing. You can weigh it once a month, once a week or once a day, but that won't change its weight. It's good to be focused on results, but the results don't change because you measure them all the time. So it's not about measuring, it's about feeding. ... Development of quality and

skills, that's way more important. Because the better people do their work and the better they can deal with their clients, ... the better the results.

In his eyes, the change programme's recent focus on figures caused unnecessary feelings of stress and pressure, resulting in his refusal to cooperate.

Clearly, those who engaged in open protest and disruptive practices were in 'resistance mode', acting against 'top-down control'. However, such a public display of resistance was frequently mixed with compliance and commitment. Open opponents to change were often known to be hard-working, dedicated staff members or managers whose indignation over the consequences of change for their employees or clients motivated them to protest. In private conversation, they sometimes stated their support of change policies, despite disagreement with particular plans, or they fought against change while continuing to work laboriously ('I have work to do!'). One employee, for instance, railed against change because of the enormous workload it created for him and his colleagues. He was angry with his manager and refused to cooperate. Yet, in the same conversation, he also said he was incredibly tired of working so many hours to get everything done. In a similar vein, another employee stated her refusal to attend a change workshop. A few days later, however, she showed up for the workshop after all. So, despite the urge to express discontent with and to resist change initiatives, those openly opposed to change often still conformed to the resulting increased workload. Characterized by its element of background loyalty, we refer to such open opposition as 'frontstage resistance'.

Although frontstage resistance at DWI had a decaf quality to it, it was more than merely the surface appearance of subversive intent. Frontstage resistance was not necessarily risk-free, futile or ineffective. While most frontstage resisters continued to work hard to meet the demands of an increased workload, their resistant voices openly signalled discontent and unrest to those responsible for change. Moreover, their disobedient behaviour hampered the change process and frustrated change managers. Additionally, their 'audacious' attempts to prevent management from implementing unnecessary and unpopular change also enhanced their sense of self-respect and increased their status among like-minded peers. Frontstage resistance was thought to be risky behaviour. For change agents, a change recipient's reputation as a resister was not a badge of honour. In fact, such resisters ran the risk of being targeted by management as troublemakers who had to be disciplined or eliminated for failing to add value. In its consequences, frontstage resistance proved to be more than a sturdy façade.

### *Backstage resistance (frontstage compliance)*

Despite occurrences of open protest and opposition, frontstage resistance was still rather rare at DWI. The majority of staff members did not voice resistance. Instead, low-level employees and middle managers often displayed an acceptance of change plans and policies, and usually showed up for change-related activities. Confronted with new practices in their day-to-day work, they generally acknowledged the need for change towards a 'less bureaucratic', 'more flexible' organization and routinely claimed to be 'all for change'. In confidential conversations with colleagues or an inquisitive fieldworker, however, staff members often expressed dissatisfaction with planned and initiated changes. Casting themselves as hardworking and dedicated workers who knew what was best for the organization, they questioned the necessity and desirability of the changes and objected to the way they were executed by management. Feeling indifferent, dispirited, sceptical or disgruntled, staff members claimed that changes did 'not make any sense at all', delivered 'no results', did 'not make a difference', or would be reversed shortly afterwards. Secretly, they committed minor transgressions, such as not following new phone instructions, not registering required

data, ignoring print instructions, and explaining their absence with made-up excuses. In meetings or workshops, they also concealed or camouflaged their resentment. For instance, during the lean management trainer's presentation mentioned earlier, some participants pretended to listen. When the trainer was not looking, however, they were laughing and giggling, making eye contact with each other or softly talking to one another. However, while remaining passive and dismissive, they did not engage in outright resistance. Instead, they kept an appearance of friendliness and cooperation. So, again, resistance mingled with compliance. This time, however, staff members hid indifference, scepticism, critique, subversion and inaction behind an appearance of compliance. We term this 'backstage resistance'.

Employees' foreground presentation of self as fully compliant generated both productive and pre-emptive gains. Because change agents focused on those who were openly resistant, giving the impression of cooperation towards new work instructions allowed employees to fly under management's radar and to preserve a positive sense of autonomy in, and self-determined dedication to, their day-to-day work. Meanwhile, backstage resisters minded their own business, refrained from distracting and frustrating engagement in change initiatives, and maintained focus on what was 'really important'. During a dinner party, a middle-aged staff member critiqued the folly of a new work practice by saying in a high-pitched voice, with raised eyebrows: 'We now start the day by standing together to discuss what we're going to do that day. Yeah...' (lifting her eyes and shaking her head in disbelief). She then cheerfully added: 'Well, after 15 minutes it's all over and then we just go do our jobs...' Sounding relieved: 'The *work* is still the same. *That* hasn't changed!' Feigned dedication to managerial plans allowed staff members to maintain true commitment to clients for whom, as one participant put it, 'we do it all for: clients rely on us for financial and social assistance, so we have to do a good job!'

Building on a derogatory image of misguided managers and overzealous change agents who imposed pointless change plans, employees' apparent consent also created unmanaged space to express feelings of resignation and disagreement with either the changes or the way they were executed by management. Moreover, their backstage resistance allowed them to implicitly preserve their preferred sense of self as experts who know what is best for the organization. During an informal conversation in the hallway of DWI, for instance, a staff member told our fieldworker in a soft, low voice, as if he was afraid somebody would overhear him: 'Sometimes I think they [management] don't even know what we do all day.' After a short pause: 'They come up with all kinds of [raising two fingers of both hands, moving them up and down to indicate quotation marks] "improvements" that just create extra work for us.' He sighed and said: 'If they'd just ask us for suggestions instead of making all of the decisions themselves. We do the work every day and know exactly what our clients need and what needs to be done to improve things.'

Perhaps most damaging to the change initiatives, feigning consent did more than simply help employees maintain a positive sense of autonomy and identity; it also allowed behind-the-scenes inaction to counter the new working method. During a Lean 'week start', for instance, our fieldworker observed how team members' targets and results were discussed, and how, when the targets had not been achieved, an explanation followed with intentions of how to improve the results. A few days prior to the meeting, the manager had invited our fieldworker to join the session so that she could experience the employees' enthusiasm for the new way of working herself. Most of the employees did indeed listen attentively, answer questions about how it was possible that some figures had declined or improved, and offer possible solutions to improve the figures. Some leaned back with their arms crossed, heaving the occasional deep sigh, or stared at their phones, letting the others do the talking. After the meeting, two team members and our fieldworker talked in the hallway, where they described the week starts as 'a waste of time' and 'unwanted'. They claimed that most of their colleagues were 'not amused' by this new type of instruction, but that they had not

discussed the issue with their manager: 'We agreed that we'll help each other and work together to improve results, but we all know we're not actually going to do that.'

Camouflaging dissent also helped to avert both material and symbolic 'pains', such as avoiding a prospectless, pointless and potentially dangerous confrontation. Keeping a low profile was a strategy that was better adapted to an opponent that would win an open confrontation. Staff members felt practically powerless in day-to-day municipal decision-making: 'We're simply expected to carry out the tasks assigned to us'; 'It's always been that way'; 'That's just part of working for a governmental organization.' It was believed that a municipal division like DWI is shaped by politicians, rapidly changing legislation, and hierarchical management, leaving regular staff members on the receiving end. DWI management pretended to involve employees, but in actual fact excluded them from decision-making: 'Decisions have already been made. Change activities are only instigated to create a support base.' Some employees found that participation in change initiatives was 'just not worth the effort': 'I've tried many times before to come up with ideas to improve that working method, but they didn't want to listen to my advice, so apparently they know best...' Change throughout a governmental organization was seen as an unchangeable fact, a *fait accompli* that had to be accepted as an inevitable part of working life.

According to participants, their day-to-day experience with change initiatives confirmed that their voice counted for nothing. Over time, they had given up on sharing their knowledge with management because they hadn't felt their contributions were valued or because, they claimed, they hadn't been consulted for advice or listened to. While roundtable discussions and process improvement teams were meant to create a bottom-up process in which 'shop-floor experts' could share their expertise, employees felt their knowledge and input in these teams and meetings were not taken seriously. On the contrary, these initiatives actually strengthened their idea that decisions had already been made without taking their input into account: 'We discussed what could be a solution and management was enthusiastic about our plans, but then at the last moment they withdrew. I don't know what to say about it... It's not the first time it happened.' This staff member had cut down his commitment to the change process, and, like some of his colleagues (see the paper's opening quote), was no longer willing to participate in the teams and meetings. Under the given circumstances, these employees felt their only option was to reluctantly undergo the changes and engage in passivity. Unobtrusive inaction could slow down the process and forestall its implications.

Active participation in, for instance, process improvement teams was seen as pointless, given the way management handled staff members' feedback, but bringing such critique to the managers' attention could be a risky endeavour. Those who refused to participate and 'talked back' were believed to become reputed among managers for being grumblers and troublemakers. And troublemakers were assumed to be held accountable and closely monitored or, as one employee put it, 'simply expelled from the team': 'It even happened less than a year ago, two colleagues were transferred to another team. They didn't tell us why. And *they* didn't want to go. So you have to be careful and watch your step.' The cutbacks that had been announced together with the introduction of change further fuelled fears: 'Of course we're worried about our jobs. Organizational changes and cutbacks... One plus one is two, right?!' Those fearful of losing their jobs felt they needed to conform to management's commands: 'I have a family to take care of. I can't risk losing my job!' To decrease the chance of being made redundant, participants prioritized their daily workload over active participation in change initiatives, which, they believed, increased their chances of job survival. Change inertia was hidden behind an appearance of consensuality and cooperation. When, for instance, it was their turn during the week start and their figures had not improved, they would avoid the meeting altogether or find excuses for not having delivered the targets that were set: 'We'll say that we worked together but that it doesn't show in the figures just yet. Or that we had

other priorities last week.' In the end, employees' sense of job insecurity and the risk of speaking up prompted their preference for backstage resistance over open confrontation.

Despite backstage resisters' efforts to fly under the radar (and despite frontstage resisters' diversions), change agents did begin to notice backstage resistance, because individual members did not deliver on promises made in meetings and collective results fell short of expectations. Some felt the passive opposition of a silent majority slowed down the implementation of the change process. As one manager put it:

They all *say* 'yes', but they *do* 'no'. That has to be it. There's no other way to explain these figures. If they would *do* 'yes', the figures would have improved by now. [sigh] It would be easier if they would just say 'no'. Then you could have a conversation about it [staring blankly].

## Discussion and Conclusion

By examining organizational actors' situated positionings vis-a-vis a planned change programme, we directed attention away from the debate surrounding what might count as 'real' resistance and towards a grounded analysis of how compliance and resistance are produced and performed in workaday life. This has allowed us to show how resistance is not a 'fixed opposition between irreconcilable adversaries' (Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2012, p. 816), but instead part of ongoing negotiations between proponents and opponents – just one prominent character type in an organizational actor's repertoire. In their positionings, actors managed subversive and submissive impressions by switching between critique, scepticism, mockery, gossip, anger and lassitude, and silence, acceptance, compliance and commitment – sometimes within a few days, sometimes within the same conversation. This led us to distinguish and describe two forms of subtle resistance. Many engaged in what we term backstage resistance: performing imposed policies and purporting a will to cooperate in front regions while failing to act upon their proclaimed commitment or acting against it in back regions. Some also engaged in frontstage resistance: presenting themselves as resistant and openly protesting change initiatives, while engaging in compliant behaviours in their day-to-day work behind the scenes.

Briefly revisiting the debate over subtle resistance may help to demonstrate the merit of distinguishing different forms of subtle resistance and analysing situated acts and effects. In the eyes of its critics (e.g. Contu, 2008; Fleming & Spicer, 2003), subtle forms of resistance can be risk-free, ineffective and counter-productive, lacking strategic and subversive potential and creating merely an 'imaginary sense of power' (Richards & Kosmala, 2013, p. 67). Considering mundane acts, such as joking, 'piss-taking', cynicism and the like to be 'real acts of resistance' inflates the meaning of the term if and when such 'decaf' forms are indeed inoffensive and ineffective. Perhaps backstage resisters' camouflaging of dissent is sometimes risk-free and ineffectual, and frontstage resisters' noise-making is sometimes like barking without biting – empty and brave posturing that in the end amounts to nothing more than a 'terrifying silence' (Contu, 2008, p. 376). Within DWI, frontstage resistance could be toothless. However, it also clearly signalled discontent, hampered the change process, frustrated change managers, and could put those who practised it on management's blacklist. Yielding particular perks, the risk of open protest made others careful to maintain a compliant appearance. This created an alibi of sorts, useful for practising lassitude and voicing doubts, indifference, mockery and critique in unmanaged spaces. Allowing a silent majority to preserve a positive sense of identity and self-determination vis-a-vis the folly of change, it also provided them with an opportunity to relieve themselves of the frustrations and distractions related to change initiative engagement, and to delay and destabilize the change process through critique and inaction.

In this way, a focus on the situated performance of resistance allows the appreciation of nuance within the various forms and effects of resistance. It shows that subtle resistance is more powerful and more variable than mere conformity to a status quo. At the same time, resistance within DWI should not be seen as pure resistance – as a ‘building block for ... more elaborate political action’ (Scott, 1990, p. 201). Frontstage and backstage resisters did not set out to fundamentally ‘challenge the extant order’ (McCabe, 2011, p. 444) or to proactively subvert and change power relations (Contu, 2008). Positioning themselves at the bottom of an insecurity-inducing hierarchy, DWI members believed that radical rebellion against the status quo was pointless and hazardous. They were often careful *not* to challenge power relations and/or to continue performing their tasks, often with great dedication. Importantly, however, insofar as frontstage and backstage resistance had strategic and subversive potential, this resided in secret workings behind apparent consent (backstage resistance) or backstage efforts to restore quiet and make up for disobedience (frontstage resistance). Either remaining invisible (backstage resisters) or retaining an impeccable status behind the scenes (frontstage resisters) allowed employees to slightly ‘counter and inflect the visible facts of overall domination’ (Gordon, 1980, p. 257). While either openly questioning or secretly bending the king’s rule, their behaviour still kept the monarch on his throne.

Judging by the frustration expressed by those promoting change, these types of subtle rebellion may be quite effective. While participants cast themselves as powerless change recipients and their opposition failed to halt the change programme, they did manage to de-legitimize and delay the change process. They did so primarily through backstage resistance; that is, by creating unmanaged space (Gabriel, 1999) where they could communicate, complain and conspire with colleagues, and dedicate themselves to their own principles in daily work, while approaching change initiatives with a measure of acquiescence, indifference and critique. Backstage resistance was thus deliberately decaffeinated – frontstage subservience created space for backstage subversion. Unobtrusive rebellion was effective exactly because it was unobtrusive and thus unmanageable. In a similar vein, frontstage resistance’s strategic potential also rested on compliance. The legitimacy of the public display of resistance was dependant on the speaker’s reputation as a dedicated employee, and on his or her capacity to maintain inoffensive and cooperative backstage relationships. Working in tandem to manage an impression, onstage and offstage performance were intimately connected and dynamically deployed.

While subtle resistance created effects, it might itself be an effect of the change programme and of strategies pursued by those promoting it. The self-proclaimed champions of change held strong views about resistance and resisters within DWI. In their eyes, change recipients could be highly resistant, capable of frustrating the process, as well as highly committed and potentially passionate about change. While the first image legitimated taking a firm line against resistance, the second image positioned them as coaches and leaders who had to remove resistance by inspiring staff members. These two images – which together allowed them to define themselves as heroes saving the organization by fighting ‘widespread resistance’ – led to a Janus-faced exercise of power through both normative and rational control methods. Change agents created a benign appearance of the change programme by claiming to create a ‘learning environment’ (in process improvement teams and week starts), while also promoting performance measurement and job transfers to stimulate productivity. DWI management’s benign appearance and harsh measures came to be mirrored in the staff’s response – an equally ambiguous mixture of apparent compliance and hidden resistance. Subtle forms of worker resistance may thus be understood as a response to the subtle exercise of managerial power – where there is soft power, there is soft resistance.

As with all research, this study is not without its limitations. As current studies tend to jumble frontstage and backstage qualities of resistance, our analysis widens the field of vision by detailing how actors stage or conceal their resistant and compliant acts, and by describing different

effects of these strategies. However, ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ are not univocal categories. Helpful as the analytical distinction may be, we often had lengthy discussions about how to categorize an activity, also because staff at DWI constantly manoeuvred around both sides of the ‘curtain’, in between sending a signal or concealing it. A conversation at the printer, for example, could be categorized as a frontstage situation – if the conversation was loudly voiced – or a backstage situation – if it was in a whispering tone. Sometimes participants shifted from frontstage to backstage resistance or vice versa. Depending on the issue or the leniency of their boss, they could, for instance, openly resist the clean-desk policy (frontstage resistance), or merely feign to comply with the targets and results discussed in the week starts while in fact drifting from what was agreed upon in their daily work (backstage resistance). In and of itself, this ambiguity warrants further research in order to examine issue-specific contradictions, situational shifts and strategic compromise. Future studies may find other resistance-compliance blends by looking at ambiguities in ritualized practices (e.g. celebrations that symbolize happy collaboration and underground warfare at the same time), explicit and implicit meaning-making efforts (e.g. control-resistance antagonism alongside widespread consensus on how to handle the conflict) or short-term and long-term temporal shifts (workers switching from one mode to another over time).

Second, our research focused on resistance among members of two operational departments in the Amsterdam municipality participating in the first few years of a change programme. It thus only covers the early phases of an entire change process as it unfolded within two specific departments. Additional research is required to examine subtle resistance in different contexts and settings. As organizational change often sparks dissatisfaction, insecurity and stress while creating an unsafe context within which to express these feelings (e.g. Thomas & Davies, 2005), exhibiting both staged compliance and backstage resistance may not be an unusual response in times of organizational upheaval. Our case suggests that this may be the case in particular (1) in large and hierarchical organizations with a history of top-down control, which (2) are sensitive to economic fluctuations and/or political trends, where (3) management exercises rational control (e.g. performance measurement, lay-offs) in conjunction with normative control (e.g. the manufacture of a ‘learning environment’). Frontstage resistance may prove more typical in egalitarian settings where staff have a sense of control or in hierarchical settings where there is less fear of repercussions. In essence, the study presented in this paper has shown that a research interest in subtle forms of resistance requires a sensitivity to contradictory patterns and to the simultaneity, or the ‘sequential’ and ‘staged’ qualities, of compliance and resistance in organizational actors’ positionings.

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