

Original Research Article

## Breaking the stereotypical perceptions: A critical analysis of traditional accounts of organizational resistance

Kailun Yan<sup>1</sup>, Xuhui Yan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lancaster University, Lancashire, England

<sup>2</sup>South China Normal University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510630, China

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**Abstract:** This paper critically examines the traditional accounts of organizational resistance, which stereotypically associate managers with control and rationality, and employees with resistance and irrationality. Such views are rooted in four problematic assumptions: organizations as machines with a single set of efficiency-oriented values; control as the primary management tool; managers as always rational decision-makers; and employee resistance as inherently irrational. Through analyzing organizational theory, management meaning, managerial identity dilemmas, and the rationality of resistance, this paper argues that these assumptions are incompatible with the knowledge economy. It proposes that organizations should be viewed as cultures rather than machines, emphasizing human subjectivity and diverse subcultures. Management, rather than simple control, is a complex social process of negotiating and constructing meaning. Managers often face role conflicts and identity dilemmas, making them not fully rational. Moreover, resistance whether from employees or managers is not irrational but a rational response to organizational contradictions, serving as a specific culture that promotes organizational reflection and improvement. The study concludes that breaking these stereotypes is crucial for organizational managers in the knowledge economy to adapt to change and enhance effectiveness.

**Keywords:** organizational resistance; organizational culture; management process; managerial identity

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## 1. Introduction

In the field of organizational behavior, the study of control and resistance has always been a core issue. Traditional views have tended to associate control and rationality with managers and resistance and irrationality with other employees. This view holds that managers use their positional power to control the employees with rational means to achieve organizational goals, while employees often resist the control measures due to various reasons, and this resistance is regarded as a behavior lacking rational thinking. This paper argues that there are four assumptions implicit behind this view. First, the organization is seen as a machine, and there is only one set of values and culture within the organization, which emphasize efficiency and goal achievement. Second, control is the main management means of achieving organizational goals. Third, managers always make rational decisions and follow the company's culture, values to achieve their goals. Fourth, resistance only occurs among employees, and employees' resistance is always irrational. However, these assumptions are problematic in current knowledge economy. This paper will critically analyze the traditional view from four aspects: organizational assumptions, the meaning of management, identity dilemma of managers, and the rationality behind resistance.

## 2. Organizations are culture rather than machines

From the perspective of organization theory, the view that associates control and rationality with managers is based on the assumption of regarding organizations as machines. This assumption can be traced back to Taylor's scientific management theory and Weber's bureaucratic theory (Jackson, 2000:27). In the early days of industrialization, in order to improve production efficiency, Taylor proposes the "principle of standardization", which standardizes the working process, expecting workers to operate as accurately and efficiently as machines (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). Weber (1978) regards the organization as a structured machine, using hierarchical authority system and efficiency-oriented rules to control individuals. However, this organizational assumption is problematic as it seriously ignores human subjective initiative. Actually, human subjective

initiative creates the meaning of human life. Wilhelm Dilthey early pointed out that human life has a temporal structure, where every moment carries the awakening to the past and participation in the future. This process generates human experiences, thoughts, emotions, memories, and desires, all of which form the meaning of life. In this meaningful temporal structure, a person's experience can arouse his own thoughts and emotions, cause his own actions, but also arouse others' thoughts and emotions, lead to others' actions, human life history is a continuous process of this interaction (Rickman, 1961:73-74,97-101).

In fact, with the progress of society, organizations can also be regarded as "culture" "organism", and "brain" (Morgan, 1997). Jackson (2000:29) pointed out that from a cultural perspective, the essential characteristics of an organization depend on the human beings who constitute the organization. Humans can attribute meaning to their situation, and an organization is a continuous negotiation process of human perception of reality. In current knowledge economy, many high-tech enterprises such as Google, Apple and IBM give employees more autonomy, encourage employees to communicate freely and equally, and promote team collaboration to solve problems. Nowadays, the achievements of an organization's basic values, spirit and culture are far greater than its technical or economic resources or organizational structure (Peters and Waterman,1982:280). Thus, it can be seen that it is more realistic to view an organization as a culture rather than a machine.

### **3. Management is a complex social process rather than simple control**

From the perspective of management theory, the ultimate purpose of control is to ensure that the organization achieve its expected goals. However, it is inappropriate to simply regard management as the manager's control over employees since employees are not machines but humans with self-awareness. This self-awareness is manifested in the freedom and ability of human beings to rethink, learn, foresee and choose actions (Checkland,1999:116). This unique ability creates the organized complexity of human organization that machines do not have. In the real organization, human self-awareness forms unique values and worldviews. Similar values within the work groups form many subcultures. Martin (1992) points out that organizational culture is not single and unified, but composed of a variety of different subcultures, which comprise the values, working styles and behavior habits of different working groups. As a result, the organization can be regarded as a complex entity made up of various cultures and meanings.

Since organizations are so complex, does it mean that organizations don't need management or everyone can manage themselves (Grey,1999:561-585)? Obviously, this is unrealistic. On the contrary, organizations need more management to deal with the organized complexity. So how do managers deal with organized complexity of human organization? Follett (1941) emphasizes that management is the art of getting things done through people. She argues that the challenge for managers is not how to get control of people but how to organize and coordinate people to manage the situation (Follett, 2013:24). It is clear that managers should not simply impose the meaning they have identified on employees, but understand and construct various meanings through interaction and communication with employees (Gowler and Legge, 1983:197-233). It can be seen that management itself is not a simple control activity, but is a process to explore, negotiate and construct the meaning of human purposeful activities in the organization. Therefore, management itself is a complex social process (Linstead,1997:85-98).

### **4. Managers are not always rational**

In the context of knowledge economy, many organizations have begun to shift their management strategies from rational control emphasizing rules and efficiency to normative control focusing on values and loyalty (Barley and Kunda,1992:363-399; Cushen and Thompson,2012:79-92). In terms of normative control, organizations impose their own defined meanings on individuals, and achieve expected goals through identity management. In this process, individuals define their roles and identities based on the meaning embedded in the organization's mission, values, and tasks. However, an individual's identity in an organization is a diverse, dynamic, and constantly evolving process. Actually, managers in an organization are not always able to clearly define their role and identities, and it is difficult for them to define employees' identity.

In real organization, managers often encounter role conflicts (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). This is particularly evident for middle managers in an organization. Middle managers as executors of organizational

goals, they need to strictly control employees to ensure the efficient completion of organizational goals. Meanwhile, they also act as team leaders, motivating employees, caring them development and creating a good team atmosphere. If these roles are not handled well, it may lead to irrational decision-making. This situation is similar to the role of parents in a family. On the one hand, they should take responsibility for supervising their children, and on the other hand, they need to accompany their children in growing up and tolerate their various shortcomings.

In the process of establishing identity for managers, organizations often internalize organizational goals into managers' own goals to achieve control. However, managers come from different backgrounds with diverse values and professional experiences, and they may not fully identify with the identities designed by the organization. For example, when the organization's goal of maximizing short-term profits is inconsistent with a manager's goal of pursuing personal professional achievements, this conflict will put managers in a dilemma, making it difficult for them to fully engage in the roles expected by the organization. It can be seen that managers often confront role conflict and identity dilemma, which makes them not completely rational in the decision-making process (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

## **5. Resistance is a specific culture with rationality**

The traditional view holds that there is a relationship of control and resistance between managers and employees, which is caused by the conflicts between both sides in economic interests, work rights and other aspects (Friedman, 1977). When employees disagree with the organization's rules, culture, and values, they often resort to resistance such as silence, avoidance, humorous ridicule, or even direct withdrawal (Fleming, 2013:474-495). Traditional views on organizational resistance tend to associate resistance and irrationality with employees. However, this view is inappropriate.

Firstly, the resistance within organization does not mean that resistance itself is irrational. From the perspective of organizational power distribution, traditional rational control views hold that power is always concentrated in the hands of managers, and employees can only passively accept the control instructions. However, in current knowledge economy, the distribution of power is characterized by decentralization (Clegg, 1989). Especially in the high-tech enterprises, employees with specialized knowledge are increasingly influential in organizations. For example, in a software R&D company, software engineers have significant decision-making power over the development of a project, which is crucial for the success of the project. In such cases, when the manager's decision conflict with the professional knowledge of employees, the employees' resistance behavior should not be simply regarded as irrational.

From the perspective of organizational normative control, there is a psychological contract between organizational members and the organization (Rousseau, 1995:9), and the organization's commitment often has a linear impact on employee performance (Pfeffer, 1994:9-28). When the organization fails to fulfill its commitment to employees, this contractual relationship will be broken. However, this is not always the case. Cushen and Thompson (2012) conducted research on a high-tech enterprise and discovered that despite the company's HRM being lauded as a "best-practice" model, employees showed dissatisfaction and resistance. The reason lies in the fact that the organization's normative structure and financial operations were centered around shareholder interests, resulting in employees' salaries being consistently kept at a low level. Nevertheless, employees still maintained a responsible commitment to their work, and the company continuously exceeded its overall goals. Evidently, employees' resistance to the organization is manifested in subtle ways. Despite the discontent and resistance of financial operations, employees remain committed to their work, which is seen as a rational response.

The resistance within organization is not exclusive to the employee. Some middle managers also will have resistant behaviors when they encounter goal conflicts in the work. McCabe and Gilbert (2020) conducted research on a manufacturing company in the UK and found that many middle managers were skeptical about the STS plan implemented by the company. This plan is to prevent mistake in the work. The company established a mistake-proofing team to specifically collect mistake found in work, and they designed an online form, requiring employees to fill it out in a timely manner. However, many middle managers and employees believed that

this measure waste the time of normal work. As a result, they gradually gave up filling out the form. Ackroyd and Thompson (2016) pointed out that resistance and misbehaviour are two different reactive activities of employees in specific work environments. Resistance is clearly directional and active, while misbehaviour is often passive and covert (Ackroyd and Thompson,2016:194). In this case the behaviors of middle managers can be regarded as a form of pragmatic resistance, which is not against the work itself, but is a proper response to the unreasonable aspects of the organization (McCabe and Gilbert,2020:953-980). This pragmatic resistance prompt the organization to rethink about the problems existing and seek alternative solution. It is clear that resistance does not imply irrationality. On the contrary, it precisely demonstrates that resistance is a specific culture with rationality.

## 6. Conclusion

The traditional view of resistance has serious flaws. This view is based on the assumption of regarding the organization as a machine. However, it seriously underestimates human subjective initiative and ignores the diverse cultures existing within the organization. Human self-awareness gives rise to purposeful activities with rich meanings. The meaning of management is not simply rational control, but to explore, negotiate, and construct the meanings of those purposeful human activities in the organization. Meaning management is the foundation of all activities. Thus, management itself is a complex social process. In organizational management, managers often confront role conflict and identity dilemmas, which make them not completely rational in the decision-making process. Resistance in the organization does not only occur among employees but also among managers. Resistance does not represent irrationality. On the contrary, it precisely demonstrates that resistance itself is a specific culture within the organization, which promotes the organization to rethink and improve existing problems. In the context of the knowledge-based economy, organizational managers should break through traditional stereotypes and actively embrace change.

## About the author

Kailun Yan (2004-), female, Han nationality, from Guangzhou, education: bachelor's degree, research direction: business administration. Xuhui Yan(1972-), male, from Guangzhou, research direction: management science.

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