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Atelier Recherche

Lundi 16 mars 2008
9h15 – 11h15

1. “Interactive control systems and cognitive theories: revisiting Simons processes of learning with Piaget”
   Intervenant : Hélène Löning
   Discutant : Caroline Lambert

2. "From dirty work to dirty dust. An ethnographic study of the shadowy activities of management controllers”
   Intervenant : Caroline Lambert
   Discutant : Eve Chiapello

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Interactive control systems and cognitive theories: revisiting Simons’ processes of learning with Piaget

Since his seminal papers, Simons has been extensively cited in management control literature. Notably, scholars interested in the link between strategy, management control systems (MCS) and performance rely on Simons’ typology of MCS—beliefs, boundaries, diagnostic, interactive—as a conceptual framework. We argue that using Simons’ work in this way is limited and notably neglects the notion of learning. Simons views MCS as structures producing meaning and stimulating organisational learning. In this paper, we draw from Piaget’s theories of cognition (Piaget, 1930, 1931, 1934, 1935, 1949, 1966, 1968) to carry out content analysis of Simons’ writings (1987, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1995, 2000) using four categories stemming from our interpretation of Piaget’s thinking: the role of MCS as a language, the interactive nature of MCS, the link between strategy and control, and how MCS deal with uncertainty. Above and beyond revisiting Simons’ work, we highlight Piaget’s potential contribution to the management control field by exploring how MCS provide structure that, by means of the very constraints it imposes, enables emancipation and knowledge creation.

Keywords: Simons, Piaget, learning, cognition, knowledge, interactive control systems
Introduction

Since his seminal papers appeared in *Accounting, Organizations and Society* (1987, 1990) and in *Strategic Management Journal* (1991, 1994), Simons has been extensively cited in management control literature. Most often, the literature merely refers to the link between MCS and strategy in a context of uncertainty (see, for instance, Nørreklit, 2003; Nyland & Pettersen, 2004; Davila & Wouters, 2004; Jensen, 2005); occasionally, it has questioned the founding principles of MCS (Nørreklit *et al.*., 2006; Ahrens & Chapman, 2007).

From among scholars who have taken the reference to Simons further emerges an empirical literature focusing on the link between strategy, control and performance. It relies on Simons' typology of MCS—with its key features such as beliefs, boundaries, and diagnostic, interactive—as a conceptual framework. Several scholars emphasize the negative effects of using MCS diagnostically (Henri, 2006; Marginson, 2002; Tuomela, 2005; Bisbe & Otley, 2004). They sometimes analyse the hybrid use of interactive and diagnostic systems, its conditions and its effects (Ahrens & Chapman, 2004; Tuomela, 2005; Henri, 2006). One of the limitations highlighted in these empirical studies focusing on managerial practices stems from weakness in validating constructs, notably ICS (*Interactive Control Systems*) (Bisbe *et al.*, 2007). A second type of research paper analyses the impact of Simons' work on MCS literature. These studies underline how useful Simons’ work can be in observing MCS—and therefore managerial activities—in practice (Hansen *et al.*, 2003; Modell, 2005) and how far from a contingent approach to MCS Simons’ work actually is. In particular, they remind us that, for Simons, strategy does not determine control systems (Langfield-Smith, 1997). In this paper we emphasize the learning dimension that, in our view, plays a significant role in Simons' work and yet is under-represented in the way his work is used by others. However, Simons asserts « the necessity of structure to produce meaning, a concept fundamental to theories of information and language » (Simons, 1990, p.141), and the need to “opening up the meaning of management control to a broader notion that builds upon guidance rather than coercion, and on learning as well as constraint” (Simons, 1990, p.142). Such an assertion suggests to us that there are good grounds
for revisiting his work in the light of theories of cognitive learning.

Our research question is therefore as follows: what reading of Simons can we propose with reference to theories of cognitive learning? Our purpose is to suggest a reading that brings to the fore both the contribution and the limitations of Simons’ work not yet highlighted in the literature. With this goal in mind, we base our approach on the structuralist theories of cognitive psychology that provide a considerable contribution to our understanding of intelligence building and knowledge access. We ask what insights the work of Piaget in particular could give to take us beyond a merely normative use of Simons’ work. In this paper, Piaget’s work provides a conceptual framework enabling us to propose an alternative reading of Simons’ works (1987, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1995, 2000).

In bringing to light the imports of both Piaget’s and Simons’ conceptual frameworks, our aim is not to revisit Simons in a radical way, i.e. by adopting a critical or postmodern approach to the subject. Rather, our purpose is to shed light on aspects that are underdeveloped and underutilized both by Simons himself and by his ‘disciples’ in management control—anyone relying on his writings as an analytical framework for MCS. Piaget and Simons share the same structuralist vision of the world: Piaget openly displayed his structuralism (1968, p.109-110) and Simons was raised in the cradle of structural-functionalism that has epitomised the management sciences in North America over the past forty years. Consequently, a Piagetian reading of Simons is neither a radical nor a critical approach: epistemologically, both scholars belong to compatible approaches, their worldviews are not contradictory and they can dialogue.

Using Piaget’s categories as a basis for analysing Simons’ writings not only produces findings that show clear similarities between the two scholars’ works, but also allows us to suggest improvements to Simons’ models. Our findings are organised around four themes (categories) drawn from our interpretation of Piaget (1930, 1931, 1934, 1935, 1949, 1966, 1968): the role of MCS as a language to represent the real world; the interactive nature of MCS as a source of
developing knowledge; the link between strategy (theory) and control (action); and finally, the way in which MCS deal with uncertainty. Because they provide a framework for analysis, Piagetian theories clarify several assumptions that are implicit in Simons’ work. Such clarification enables us, with each category, to identify how Simons’ work impacts MCS research as well as to spot a number of its contradictions and limitations. This analysis both highlights the similarities between Piaget's conceptual framework and Simons’ writings and the differences between the two structuralists’ viewpoints. More broadly beyond the work of Simons’ and ICS concept, we draw attention to how the Piagetian approach impacts the discipline of management control. Our analysis of Piaget's writings suggests that MCS provide structure that, by means of the very constraints it imposes, enables emancipation and knowledge creation.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we present and illustrate the main elements of Piagetian thinking and establish the relationships between theories of learning (in the sense of cognitive development) and control. We then lay out our method for analysing with piagetian categories the main texts of Simons (published academic papers and main works). In the third part, we provide the findings of content analysis of Simons texts using the conceptual framework drawn from our interpretation of Piaget. The paper ends with a discussion about the implications of our findings in the field of management control.

PIAGET’S THINKING

WHY CHOOSE PIAGET?

From a broad range of cognitive learning theories, the theories of Jean Piaget appeared to us interesting on several counts for analysing the writings of R. Simons. Piaget and Simons belong to the same structuralist paradigm. A Piagetian reading of Simons’ works constitutes a critique ‘from within’ that is appropriate, in our view, for drawing out aspects of Simons' writings that until today remain under-explored. A second reason is that, in our minds, Jean Piaget’s works are on the whole underutilised in
Management control. Management control has moved towards a notion of “guidance & organizational learning” rather than of “compliance, command & control”, both in the statements of Simons [« The necessity of structure to produce meaning? a concept fundamental to theories of information and language » (Simons, 1990, p.141), and the need to “opening up the meaning of management control to a broader notion that builds upon guidance rather than coercion, and on learning as well as constraint”], and also, more broadly, with growing criticism of budgets and budgetary control. And yet, today, the discipline has barely touched upon theories of learning or thinking relating to the profound changes being seen in the practices of controllers, managers and organizations with regard to control. Organisational learning is widely discussed, but the cognitive scientists who have spent decades researching the issues of learning and cognitive development are rarely consulted. This could partly be the result of limited dialogue between sociological approaches that form the basis of most research relating to organisational learning in control, and psychological approaches that focus on the cognitive and mental patterns of individuals. There can be no organisational learning without the cognitive development of individuals (which in Piaget’s eyes, as we will see, holds socialisation as both its means and its end). Whatever its cause, we set out in this paper to remedy this weak transdisciplinarity.

**THE STAGES OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THINKING AND OF HUMAN COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT ACCORDING TO PIAGET: MOVING TOWARDS AUTONOMOUS AND SOCIALISED INDIVIDUALS**

For Piaget, physical, mental (cognitive) and affective (emotional) developments are indissociable and nurture each other. He studies the growing influences of an individual’s *milieu* through acquired experience from birth onwards. Yet, in his view, individuals are not entirely determined by their *milieu* and cognitive development always takes place in the interaction between the individual and his *milieu*—between what is inherent and what is acquired. For Piaget, logic is not innate; rather, it results from the progressive construction of thinking, and so he sets out to draw up a genesis of human intelligence. In this respect, Piaget is an evolutionist:
he identifies three successive stages of development. In the period prior to language acquisition (0-2 years of age), he talks of “sensorimotor” intelligence. The semiotic or symbolic function emerges between 18 months and 2 years of age and its main characteristic is the emergence of language. “Operational intelligence” can now develop: concrete operations of thinking and inter-individual relationships become progressively more structured with major improvement towards the ages of 7-8. Finally, the preadolescent between 12 and 15 years of age becomes capable of combined thinking and propositional operations—the main features of the “propositional intelligence” stage.

Sensorimotor Intelligence and the Semiotic Function

During the first stage, the infant has neither autonomous thinking nor affectivity linked to representations, but it is during this essential period that:

“The child develops (...) the set of cognitive substructures that will serve as a starting point for his subsequent (...) constructions” (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.5)

Following simple reflex present from birth and first habits the first differentiation between means and goals emerges:

“In an act of intelligence, on the other hand, there is the pursuit of a goal set from the outset and then the search for the appropriate means, with these means being provided by known patterns” (habits) (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.9)

Then follow more complete acts of practical intelligence. For instance, the infant grabs the tablecloth to get an object on the table; he is capable of finding new means not only through exploring but also by performing combining operations, or having insights: this is acquired experience transforming into knowledge.

No category is given to the infant at the outset; his initial universe is centred on his body and on his own actions, consistent with complete and unaware "egocentrism". Between the ages of 0 and 2, the infant goes through a gradual and broad process of de-centring to become capable of situating himself as an object among other objects. He makes the crucial discovery of object permanence; he acquires a conception of time by understanding changes of state; he acquires a conception of space by performing movements that constitute space. Causality, or causal
structure, leads him to understand that the nature of an object is the source, the place and the result of various actions.

Towards 2 years of age, a second stage begins with the emergence of a fundamental function—the semiotic or symbolic function—that marks his capacity to represent something (to himself and to others). The progressive acquisition of this function, and notably of language, serves to “liberate” the real world due to the distinction that this function enables between signified (the object) and signifier (representation by symbols and signs). For Piaget, language multiplies the power of thinking in terms of its scope and speed; it provides access to simultaneous representations of the whole and decouples thought from action.

However, according to Piaget, language is not the essential factor underlying logic learning for the infant; logical-mathematical structures exist and develop independently from language (in parallel):

“Language does not constitute the source of logic, but is on the contrary structured by logic […] The roots of logic are to be found in the general coordination of actions (verbal behaviour included) at this sensorimotor stage […], this patterning subsequently continues to develop and to structure thinking, including verbal, in line with progress in actions until the construction of logical-mathematical operations is achieved—the true outcome of the logic of coordinating actions.” (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.69)

If we attempt to understand what Piaget is saying by applying it to management control, the sensorimotor stage of the construction of thinking is a situation akin to the cybernetic control type or, for Simons, a diagnostic system: there is dissociation of means and goals, but the control system remains closed. Furthermore, the semiotic (or representation) function is present in “accounting language”, which enables us to detach ourselves from the real world and, with management accounting or budgeting, to provide a representation of what is happening in the firm. As abstract systems for representing the real world, management and accounting systems free the manager from this real world, thereby enabling him to kill off products, close down factories or lay off workers merely on the basis of figures and of economic “reality”.

**Operational Intelligence and Concrete Operations**

For Piaget, between the ages of 2 and 7, a de-centring occurs from the family universe towards an
inter-individual and social universe, enabled by communication and leading to the emergence of inter-individual coordination. Towards 7-8 years of age, concrete operations of thinking and inter-individual relationships are established with a shift from the stage of action to operations. Concrete operations as described by Piaget consist of classification, seriation (increasing or decreasing sizes, transitivity), end-to-end linking, and even double-entry matrices (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.74). In parallel to these concrete operations, the child also acquires command of such notions as numbers, space, time and speed.

This stage is epitomised by an inter-individual process of socialisation—simultaneously cognitive, affective and moral. Developing his self-awareness leads the child to oppose others while at the same time trying to win over the affections and esteem of others. For Piaget, this process of progressive socialisation is in line with the individual's tendency towards autonomy. From 7-8 years of age onwards, a shift to the broader coordination of action (operations) occurs and active participation in rule-based games and board games can be observed (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.92). For instance, after 7 years of age, games of marbles become structured with group observation of common rules understood by each player, and language becomes socialised (*i.e.* designed to exchanged information); in contrast, before the age of 7, each player plays as he chooses, no one loses and everyone wins at the same time; and “egocentric” language, made up of collective monologues, predominates.

This progress in social cooperation enables new moral relationships grounded in mutual respect and leading to relative autonomy. For example, the rules of a board game explained by an adult are intangible because they are “sacred” for the youngest children whereas, for 7-8 year-olds upwards, there is a growing understanding that the rules are the product of social agreement and that they can be negotiated. At the same time, moral feelings and judgments emerge: the growing power of the conscience born from parent-child relationships and tied to the love/fear dichotomy leads the child to internalise duties and interdictions, thus constraining his behaviour. This is called heteronomy (as opposed to the autonomy of values developed later in adolescence).

The stage of concrete operations echoes the basics of management control. For instance,
management control is based on the broad coordination of actions and on the construction of rules (of the game)—a social product to which we choose to conform. Concrete operations predominate in control tools and management instruments, which addition or multiply “concrete facts”. For the management control function, exchanging information is both crucial and intense and is structured around the “collective game”. Finally, organisational control is grounded, both from a moral and an affective standpoint, in a heteronomy of moral judgments in relation to the firm whose values and interdictions are “internalised” by managers along the lines of a love/fear dichotomy that is rarely—or only unsuccessfully—called into question... As Piaget suggests with respect to the cognitive development of individuals, the empowerment of managers is both an outcome and a method, and the means and the ends are often confused. Numerous contemporary critiques of budgeting echo this limitation, such as the instance when completing a reporting within deadline becomes an end in itself and no longer a means, or when budgeting becomes a ritual devoid of meaning—just a certain number of pages to fill out without really knowing why...

**Propositional intelligence**

The main characteristic of the final stage of development, occurring at the onset of adolescence, is a liberation from the concrete present and a shifting of attention to the non-current and the future: adolescence is the age of grand ideals and the dawn of theories. The precondition for this stage is the transformation of thinking than enables the individual to handle hypothesis and reasoning with propositions decoupled from concrete and current observation: this is the beginning of hypothetical-deductive or formal thinking, a prerequisite for the development of combining thinking and propositional operations. Children between 12-15 years of age begin to command notions of proportion, double-loop learning systems (walking on a moving walkway), hydrostatic equilibrium, and notions of probability (correlations, probable compensations, infinite numbers), that all result from assimilating chance and combinations. To handle propositions and hypothesis, it is necessary to be able to combine them verbally: here, we observe a more precise and agile handling of language. An adolescent at this age has now developed a mindset for induction and for experimentation. Like in previous stages, affective transformations are equally
strong. The world of values can also emancipate and the *milieu* becomes predominant (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.116). These ideals or supra-individual values allow moral autonomy to grow exponentially: the adolescent is capable of constructing theories and can now concern himself with choices for the future.

For management control, this stage of propositions and combining thinking correlates to the introduction of uncertainty and risk into management models, which has become a major concern for top management, designers of control tools and indeed all stakeholders. From the standpoint of thinking, combination and hypothesis are supposedly introduced into management systems courtesy of the multiplying possibilities of information systems (language), notably with respect to communication and relationships. Are not scenario-based methods moving in this direction? We detach ourselves from concrete facts to imagine what might happen along the lines of more or less probable—but always possible—scenarios. Like the child-adolescent, the manager has to “learn how to walk on the moving walkway” (double-loop learning) and, on the moral side, to “emancipate himself from his parents”. He develops the idea that he will not stay in the same organisation all his life. This is accompanied by managers’ growing moral concerns: the issues of ethics and sustainable development pervade professional journals, business school classes and thought-provoking articles on management. Blind obedience is slowly losing ground as even board members begin to feel vested with social responsibility and, enjoying better protection than middle-tier managers, sometimes go as far as leaving the firm and even blowing the whistle. In firms, environmental and social indicators have been set up in management systems to respond to the need to legitimize the firm by giving account to wider society. Here, we can clearly see the tension between the individual’s values held independently from the corporate values and grand ideals articulated through control.

With his evolution of human thinking and intelligence, Piaget provides us with a theory regarding the stages of construction of a society progressing towards greater knowledge and enhanced inter-individual cooperation. Piaget's stages are ordered in seamless succession; each stage results from
and integrates the previous stage. However, deeply anchored in the 1920s, such a theory is in essence evolutionist and normative because it presupposes “progress” towards a “better” place—an assumption which would later be called into question in the aftermath of the Second World War. It outlines interesting modes of knowledge to compare with those seen in management control, but in terms of its basic structures rather than in its specific stages. We cannot analyse the keys to learning nor access the permanent, underlying principles of cognitive processes using these stages.

**PIAGETIAN CATEGORIES**

Beyond the evolutionist approach, it seems important to look for the structures that, for Piaget, transverse these different stages and that constitute the basic ingredients of learning. Several of Piaget’s categories, in his suggestions for education, appear to us to link into management modes likely to foster organisational knowledge and learning. For instance, the principles of teamwork, of self-government, of experimentation and of the absence of the thinking-action duality echo the overarching problematics of management and control. We have identified or presented below four “Piagetian” categories: the disciplinary power of the semiotic function (the capacity of language to express and represent); action and interaction as the bases of learning; experimentation as a mode of constructing thinking; and operations and combinations as sources of logic.

**Expressing and representing**

For Piaget, the semiotic function enables logic to develop and grow and corresponds to a fairly precise stage in cognitive development (towards two years of age).

“[The semiotic function is] a basic function […] which consists in being able to represent something (a “signified”) through the means of a differentiated “signifier”: it can be language, a mental image, or a symbolic gesture.” (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.39)

It goes hand in hand with the development of inter-individual relationships and organised sharing
and makes “interaction” more structured, more formalised and, as a result, more “effective” in increasing knowledge.

“The acquisition of language […] ensures contact with others that is more powerful than mere imitation and thus enables growing representation to expand its powers by relying on communication.” (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.43)

It also makes the emergence of group work possible. Such a function reminds us of certain roles played by management control tools—mechanisms representative of managerial rationales—that can make dialogue possible between different actors within the organisation. MCS offer a language that imposes on and structures subsequent exchange.

**Acting and interacting—the basis for increasing knowledge**

Piaget emphasizes the interest of active methods of learning. Such methods are based on both *inter-action* (teamwork) and *action* proper and independent from individuals (experimentation).

Growth in knowledge takes place through an expanding “socialised self”.

“Life in a group is the indispensable condition for individual activity to have discipline and to avoid anarchy: the group is both the stimulant and the organ of control.” (Piaget, 1935, p.157 in 1998)

“For moral realities to be constituted, normative discipline is needed, and for this discipline to be constituted, individuals must enter into relationships with each other.” (Piaget, 1930, p.27 in 1998)

Active pedagogical methods echo management modes from the Human Relations theories (cooperation, teamwork) and from the 1980s (self-management and self-government). Piaget provides scientific arguments to partisans of these methods.

“Instruments must be created that enable us to understand the world. To achieve this, a space of freedom is required—a space that only self-government and teamwork can provide.” (Piaget, 1998, p.24)

Active methods focusing on the child’s psychology lead to a convergence of goals. Through teamwork cooperation develops, which contributes to reducing egocentrism and provides individuals with the opportunity to reconcile their individual interests with a common discipline.

“The discipline proper to self-government [creates] an internal or ‘organic’ solidarity that is all the stronger for the differentiated personalities that all pursue the same goal and feel responsible for the permanence of the social link.” (Piaget, 1934, p.135 in 1998)

“This new mindset […] is a norm or a set of norms that leads each individual to situate himself in the group perspective and through this fact to transform his egocentrism into objectivity.” (Piaget, 1931, p.81 in 1998)
Similar to firms over the last two decades, the object of control is the individual’s mind (as a member of the group). The “high-modern” organisations of the 1980s-1990s (Giddens, 1991) get the best from their employees not by managing group relationships to maximise satisfaction nor by rationalising management to ensure efficiency but by giving free reign to individual attempts at autonomy and creativity (Miller, Rose, 1990, p.26). Productivity, quality and innovation are fostered through the active commitment of the employee guaranteeing an alignment between personal desires and corporate goals. This identification with the organisation’s goals is, for some scholars, the result of controlling the employee’s thoughts or feelings (Hochschild, 1983; Van Maanen, Kunda, 1989; Alvesson, Deetz, 1996; Perlow, 1998).

**Experimenting—a way of constructing thinking**

Throughout his work, Piaget emphasises that it is through action, through experimentation, that an individual constructs his thinking. This basic principle profoundly questions the dualities that epitomise the managerial world—thinking/action and theory/practice. Piaget cannot see how thinking could be enhanced, constructed and structured any other way than through action and experimentation.

“The ‘active school’ is based on this idea that the subjects to teach a child should not be imposed from the outside, but must be discovered by the child himself by means of true research and spontaneous action. […] Oral teaching must come after and not before the experience is lived. […] The role assigned to every lesson by modern pedagogy: to provide an answer to a question previously raised.” (Piaget, 1930, p.40-44 in 1998)

Such a viewpoint pushes back the assumptions of “traditional” schools of strategic planning, which view management control as the “implementing” of a strategy defined, formulated and pre-existing control. In the firm, there are not those who think and those who act, those who set a clear and well-thought strategy and those who execute it. Action and thinking mutually strengthen each other and their relationship enables learning: such a view is much closer to theories of “emerging” or fabricated strategy –management as a pratice, which see management
instruments and the perspective they provide as powerful catalysts of strategy that is constantly under construction.

**Combining, calculating and operating**

Operations are reversible transformations (inversions and reciprocities), which do not transform everything in one go but always start from an invariable pattern. They prefigure interactions between individuals: two blue marbles will be exchanged for one red marble.

> “Contrary to most actions, operations always include the possibility of exchange, of inter-individual as well as individual coordination.” (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.73)

Operations mark the shift from simple action to a system of actions with possible exchange. They go hand in hand with the development of inter-individual relationships and organised sharing.

For Piaget, concrete operations are a structure that corresponds to a fairly precise stage of cognitive development (towards the age of seven). Yet, acquiring this structure continues during subsequent stages of cognitive development (the stage of propositional operations).

> “Each new mental structure, by integrating previous ones, succeeds in both partially freeing the individual from his past and heralding new activities to come. [...The combining operation provides] this opening up of values to new possibilities for which the subject is already preparing himself because he manages to anticipate using his new deductive instruments.” (Piaget and Inhelder, 1998, p.116)

Piagetian operations are likely to find two echoes in organisational theories. First, calculation developed in MCS cause and structure interactions between different actors. For instance, a meeting about budgetary control may give rise to debate regarding the way in which variances have been calculated. Second, operating mechanisms structure managers’ individual thinking and their managerial rationales. Concrete operations remind us of the cause and effect models that underpin MCS. As for propositional operations, they suggest models of predicting and integrating uncertainty that are sought after in control.
THE METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

PIAGET’S CATEGORIES AND THEIR TRANSFERABILITY TO THE CORPORATE WORLD

Our research consisted in using the above identified Piaget’s categories for analysing the content of Simons’ writings. The following four categories tied to Piaget’s “techniques” or means of learning (1930, 1931, 1934, 1935, 1949, 1966, 1968) have been used: expressing and representing (language); interacting; experimenting (through action); and combining, calculating and operating.

Basic questions need to be raised and answered about the transferability of Piaget’s thinking—first, from school to the organisation and second, from the child to the adult. The transferability from school to the firm of the methods put forward by Piaget stems from the fact that they pertain to interactions between individuals. They both apply to an organizational collective setting, whatever it is. If we take the example of the method of self-government:

“It seems that self-government is sufficiently malleable to be used in any form of social or political organisation.” (1934, p.137 in 1998)

As for transferability from the child to the adult, a study of the child’s thinking enables us to learn about the adult’s thinking because both are autonomous. Piaget asserts that:

“(…) the child’s thinking functions like an adult’s; it shows the same special functions of coherence, classification, explanation and comparison.” (Piaget, 1998 p.16)

Furthermore, Piaget himself provides confirmation of such transferability, in his opinion, through his research into the “genesis” of thinking and of human intelligence: his project aiming at an understanding of the child’s cognitive psychology pertains to genetic psychology; he even views childhood and adulthood as “the individual shortcut” in the drawn-out history of the human species; as we stated earlier, Piaget is an evolutionist. Indeed, it is in this respect rather than in the absence of transferability that the danger lurks: it may be seen as dangerous and normative to suggest that managers/individuals “grow up” in the firm and go through various stages of development like children growing up in society…
THE DATA OF OUR WORK: SIMONS’ TEXTS

Following some previous research work (Bourguignon, Malleret & Nørreklit, 2004), we opted to analyse not some practices but some theories of management control, which in the event are the most frequently cited works of Simons. A literature-based analysis allows us to avoid the methodological traps and hurdles of observing performance management practices. Reading MCS practices in the light of Piagetian theory would have brought us face to face with problems relating to the diversity of such practices and their absence of comparability. It is therefore more relevant to compare a theory of knowledge to a theory of MCS rather than to practices that are necessarily contextualised. By studying the ideological differences emerging from our examination of theories, we can delve into the mindset that drives control practices. We avoid the need to disentangle the features of MCS from the features of their local contexts.

“Literature is considered a relevant source for any attempt to study the ideological differences between the tableau de bord and the balanced scorecard because they reveal the spirit of these management control methods. [...] Alternatively, one might use case studies. Such studies, however, reveal aspects of both the ideology of a specific company and the ideological assumptions of the measurement systems, which may make it difficult to disentangle the two. In addition, local studies may create a rather fragmented picture [...], whereas a literature-based analysis, such as the one suggested, offers a more general framework.” (Bourguignon, Malleret & Nørreklit, 2004, p.113)

We have analysed the content of six different texts written by Simons [AOS (1987 & 1990), SMJ (1991 & 1994), Levers of control… (1995), Performance Measurement... (2000)] by coding them according to Piaget’s categories. Our choice of these works—four papers and two books—was dictated by the results of bibliographical searches based on their frequency of citation in management literature. Two data searches carried out in December 2007 using Science Direct and EBSCO listed 69 research papers citing Simons. These 69 papers referenced 13 of Simons’ works, from which we selected the six cited most often. In total, 156 references are made to his works in these 69 papers. The diagram below shows the spread of these references.

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We can observe that more than one third of all citations refer to *Levers of Control*, his seminal work in 1995. Moreover, additional analysis of these 69 papers shows that 30 of them (43%) only cite one of Simons’ writings—*Levers of Control* (1995). Numerous scholars make only a simple reference to the link between MCS and strategy in the context of uncertainty, a topic for which Simons appears to have become an often quoted scholar (see, for instance, in accounting literature: Nørreklit, 2003; Nyland & Pettersen, 2004; Davila & Wouters, 2004; Jensen, 2005, Nørreklit *et al.*, 2006; Ahrens & Chapman, 2007; in literature on information systems: Gallivan & Depledge, 2003; and in the literature on organisation and management theory: Ireland & Hitt, 1999; Burgelman & Doz, 2001; Datta *et al.*, 2003). However, we decided to analyse the six references cited considerably more often than the others.

**A READING OF SIMONS USING PIAGETIAN CATEGORIES: OUR FINDINGS**

Using Piaget’s categories as a basis for analysing Simons’ writings not only produces findings that show clear similarities between the two scholars’ works, but also differences which allow us to suggest further refinement to Simons’ work. Our findings are organised along the lines of the categories previously laid out. Four themes structure our reading of Simons:

- MCS: a language for representing the real world;
- The interactivity of MCS, a source of knowledge development;
- The link between strategy and control: the indissociability of theory and action;
- Coping with uncertainty in MCS.

Piagetian theories clarify several assumptions that are implicit in Simons’ work. Such clarification enables us, with each category, to identify how Simons’ work impacts MCS research as well as to spot a number of its contradictions and limitations. This analysis both emphasizes the similarities between Piaget's conceptual framework and Simons’ writings and the differences between the two structuralists’ viewpoints.
MCS: a language for representing the real world

Like language for Piaget, MCS and accounting fulfil two roles: first, they enhance action in its scope and rapidity (which is the main objective of diagnostic MCS and management by exception); and second, they foster socialisation and communication. These languages are designed to increase exchange in a socialised context understood by all actors and to transform initial egocentrisms into “objectivity”.

“Formal management control systems provide a common language. (…). Information is shared and interpreted. Action plans are tested. New strategies emerge.” (Simons, 1990, p.141)

One of Simons’ specificities lies in identifying the prerequisites to accomplishing these roles. Simons strongly stresses the idea that, in order to interact, people have to speak a common language and he points out that there may be problems of ambiguity in language whereas Piaget ignores any communication difficulties tied to potentially different semantics.

“The information contained in an ICS must be simple to understand. If debate and dialogue are to be productive, everyone must be working from the same data and have faith in its accuracy. (…) They provide simple and unambiguous data; there is little uncertainty or debate about how the numbers were constructed or their internal validity.” (Simons, 2000, p. 220)

Simons also recommends being attentive to problems of potential distortion in language. There exists a risk of wrong interpretation if we do not possess the right words/indicators. Indicators are malleable for the same reasons as words and equally open to the risk of “rhetoric”: Simons mentions the creation of budgetary slack and how “gaming the system” consists in improving the indicator rather than managing activity (Simons, 2000, p.213).

For Simons, once these prerequisites are met, accounting language carries out two functions that correlate to two types of language. First, a “coercive” language—diagnostic control systems (DCS)—fosters automatic piloting that multiplies the power of management by automating certain tasks/activities and freeing up managers’ attention for other activities. Second, an “emancipating” language—interactive control systems (ICS)—structures interactions and enables action and therefore learning.

“Language theorists differentiate between rules that constrain and those that open up new realms of activity (Campbell, 1982, p. 128). […] This distinction is analogous to that between programmed and interactive controls. Campbell (1982) illustrates the power of fixed rules in producing unpredictable amounts of complexity as information and meaning is generated. The necessity of structure to produce meaning, a concept fundamental to
theories of information and language, is echoed in the way that managers use structured, formal process interactively to motivate organizational learning. (Simons, 1990, p.140)

In Simons’ view, language is both a technology and a structure of thinking—a tool of socialisation but also an element structuring managers’ debate and action.

In Piaget’s works, however, language is only a technology. To learn, the individual’s activity takes precedent over discourse. Action is the true driver of learning. Piaget emphasizes the idea that language does not precede and does not structure logic; it only enhances it. In his view, the source of logic is found in action and in operations; language only has a function of representation and is not a structure of thinking.

Tied to their structuralism is one limitation of both scholars: the implicit assumption that the using of language does not interfere with or change it. To them, language seems to be an objective reality external to individuals. For Piaget, language is not constructed by individuals but is an external element acquired by them; for Simons, MCS exist independently of the usage that managers make of them. Simons is undoubtedly one of the first structuralists to focus on MCS practices and usage, but he does not go to the end of this logic and continues to view MCS as existing in their own right and unconditioned by how they are used.

**The interactivity of MCS, a source of knowledge development**

Both scholars view the development of knowledge as possible only through interaction and the gradual shift of the individual’s focus from the self to the group: collaborative work, teamwork, interaction and coordination of exchange are essential to learning. For Simons, constant debate and dialogue regarding budgetary assumptions is the very basis of ICS enabling the firm to face strategic uncertainties.

“Data are interpreted and discussed in face-to-face meetings of superiors, subordinates and peers […] Managers of these businesses spend a great deal of time debating and adjusting profit plans during the year. […] The interactive control system is used to stimulate face-to-face dialog and build information bridges among hierarchical levels, functional departments, and profit centers.” (Simons, 1991, p.50, 55, 61)

His very definition of ICS incorporates the dimension of dialogue in a “face to face meeting”:

“Top managers can make any control system interactive by: (1) ensuring that system is an important and recurring agenda to discuss with subordinates … (3) participating in face-to-face meetings with subordinates” (Simons, 1994, p.172)
“Debate and dialogue that are the hallmarks of ICSs” (Simons, 2000, p.219)

By definition, ICS are aimed at learning. Such learning arises from the diffusion of strategic goals and therefore from managers in the organisation having better knowledge of how to integrate these goals; it also stems from dialogue and the systematic development of action plans to implement these strategic priorities.

“The purpose of making a control system interactive is to focus attention and force dialogue and learning throughout the organization. […] Top managers used the revised planning process to teach the organization the agenda for strategic renewal. […] The guidelines required subordinates to respond directly to the new top manager by developing action plans relating to the new strategic themes. […] Top managers also asked subordinates to respond through the planning process with specific details” (Simons, 1994, p.171, p.182)

Simons promotes interaction and collective problem solving, for instance in the context of quality circles, self-organised production teams or performance assessment systems based on customer satisfaction (Simons, 2005, p.10). Yet, he also continues to base his ideas on the principle—traditional in management control - of individual accountability (accountability and responsibility accounting). Indeed, the individual is “accountable for his results” and the MCS allow employees to take the initiative in decision-making to enable them to achieve these results (Simons, 2005, p.10). Accountability therefore occurs in collective contexts but remains on an individual basis.

For Piaget, in contrast, the shift from the individual to the socialised individual presupposes self-government by the individual and, as a result, self-assessment. Simons does not go as far as to adopt these principles of self-government. In his approach, goals and rules are set and made externally to the individual.

“Organizational design is the principal mechanism for legitimating authority and power through formal rights. In a cascading process, each manager in the organization stipulates the rights of subordinates to (1) receive information, (2) set specific goals for subordinates, and (3) influence the decision of others. With rights, of course, come responsibilities” (Simons, 2005, p.18).

For Simons, learning arises from interaction but assessment remains individual whereas, for Piaget, there exists a utopia of collective assessment. In his view, introducing individual assessment undermines the very foundations of a system of self-government. He mentions two problems tied to this kind of assessment: the difficulty in measuring individual performance in a
situation run cooperatively and the return to heteronomy (fear/affection of the master) implied in individual recognition. Piaget’s thinking brings to light the contradiction inherent in Simons’ work between learning in collaborative interaction and principles of individual assessment. However, despite his practical suggestions to the teachers, Piaget has never overcome this contradiction in practice.

The link between strategy and control: the indissociability of theory and action

Regarding the link between strategy and control, our reading of Piaget underlines the importance of experimentation and the indissociability of theory and action.

First, the use of MCS cannot be separated from their structure and their functions and, a contrario, no theory of MCS is possible without taking into account the practices and usages of these systems.

“The difference between diagnostic and interactive control systems is not in their technical design features (...) The distinction (...) is in the way that managers use these systems. […] ICS are defined by how senior managers use these systems. (...) This intensive use and focus stands in stark contrast to the management by exception that defines DCSs” (Simons, 2000, p.208, 216)

Second, MCS contribute to emerging strategy; far from being simple instruments of implementation, they help in elaborating and orientating strategy design. They are “meeting points” between theory (strategy) and action. Simons goes beyond the classic contingency whereby MCS are determined by strategy of which they ensure deployment. He shows that MCS in turn influence strategy in a continuous process. In the same way that theory and practice interact for Piaget, formulating strategy and implementing control (execution) interact for Simons.

“Management control systems are not only important for strategy implementation, but also for strategy formation. Separating strategy formulation and implementation results in an artificial dichotomy that equates strategic planning with formulation and management control with implementation. The findings from the current study underscore the shortcomings of this approach by demonstrating the power of management control systems in empowering organizational learning and interactively influencing strategy.” (Simons, 1990, p.128)

“Thus emerging strategy can be an indirect result of bottom-up action plans and experimentation. […] We discussed how strategies can emerge spontaneously in organizations as employees experiment and replicate small successes in their attempts to create value. This is strategy as emerging patterns of action. ICS provide the principal means by which managers can guide this otherwise serendipitous process. Many of the best
strategies come from unexpected ideas that originate with employees close to customers and markets. (…) ICS are used above all else to adjust emerging strategy on a real-time basis.” (Simons, 2000 p.217-220)

The idea of emerging strategy corroborates Piaget’s ideas on the importance of experimentation through action and on the indissociability of theory and action. Nevertheless, although strategy and MCS do interact, they both remain clearly differentiated in Simons’ writings. He appears to vacillate between a theory of emerging strategy and a theory of intended strategy—a point on which his writings shift around and show a lot of ambiguity. Some of his writings are grounded in the classic postulate of control serving to implement strategy, thus revealing all his ambiguity:

“The data collected in this study confirm the importance of formal management systems as levers of change. […] Finally, management control systems appear to be vitally important in building credibility and selling a new strategy to various constituents.” (Simons, 1994, p. 185, 187)

“Questions about [the strategy-control] relationship arise, however, when strategy is viewed as an incremental and emergent process” (Simons, 1991, p.60)

On this point, Piaget goes much further than Simons by asserting that we cannot dissociate theory and action, suggesting that strategy and control are two sides of the same coin. Piaget underlines the need to act in order to learn. In his view, theoretical knowledge is indissociable from action (induction); we learn from experience; and experimentation arises from action and cannot be reduced down to passive listening to discourse. Following this logic, we may go as far as to ask whether knowledge development and organisational learning—traditionally domains reserved for strategy—do not arise first and foremost (even solely?) from control (the domain of action).

Coping with uncertainty in MCS

Regarding the issues of uncertainty in MCS, Simons’ writings can be revisited in the light of Piaget’s notions of concrete operation versus combining operations. As we have seen, Piaget ascribes to a logic of “evolution” in which the child is capable of combining and probabilistic thinking by the age of 12; for Simons, to a lesser extent, control tools must “evolve” towards ICS until they enable the integration, even the “management”, of uncertainty into the model. One point the two scholars have in common lies in the fact that the child or the manager
(respectively) takes action in the face of perceived uncertainty. Perceiving uncertainty depends on the subject’s very actions and decisions he has previously made—strategic decisions by the top manager for Simons, and experimentations by the child for Piaget.

Importantly, Simons sends out a call for developing an inductive and an experimental mindset of an apparently predicative and probabilistic nature in order to deal with strategic uncertainties, *i.e.* contingencies that at some point are likely to turn into threats or opportunities.

“[Management control systems are] agendas for the discussion of uncertainties that arise as the firm attempts to create competitive advantage […] They motivate the organization to be fully informed concerning the current and expected state of strategic uncertainties.” (Simons, 1990, p.128)

ICS relate to propositional models. They go beyond the operating stage of “classic budgeting”:

interactive budgeting introduces probability, combinations, and implications, *etc.*

“Budgets are the focus of a great deal of debate among operating managers and are used, not as purely financial documents, but rather as agendas to discuss tactics, new marketing ideas, and product development plans throughout the organization and ultimately at the top management level. To focus the debate on strategies rather than financials, the plans and budgets are reduced at the top management level to four numbers only (estimated unit sales, revenues, net income and ROI) and to the tactics that will be used to achieve these numbers.” (Simons, 1990, p.134 -135)

ICS enable managers to integrate uncertain changes into management:

“Substantive refinements to the strategy in this period included an acknowledgement of the changing role of certain distribution outlets, better market segmentation, the introduction of new products, the sale of peripheral businesses, and the announced intention to expand into new geographical markets. Many of these changes had emerged from the learning provided by the interactive control systems.” (Simons, 1994, p. 180)

Whereas DCS are operating instruments, ICS enable managers to expand knowledge because they provide access to the stage of propositions and combinations. In Piaget’s terms, concrete operations consist in gathering data, comparing them to each other, spotting the similarities, series, invariables, causality relationships, and creating classifications, whereas propositional operations introduce chance and uncertainty (probability, combinations, implications, *etc.*). Because they are grounded in programmable operations, DCS can be “made in routines” (by identifying key and recurrent variables in performance) whereas ICS cannot be made in routines (due to the continuous introduction of new variables).

“They can use them [DCS] to put the organization on automatic pilot. (…) Managers receive periodic exception reports from staff accountants. If everything is on track, the reports can be reviewed quickly and managers can move on to other issues. If, on the other hand, significant deviations are identified, then – and only then – do managers need to invest time and attention to investigate…” (Simons, 2000, p.104)

“In the previous section, we used an automobile speed control system as an analogy for the management by exception that is the hallmark of DCSs. However managers need a different kind of system to grow the business
and search for new ways (. ..) They need a system more like the one used by the National Weather Service to search
and identify patterns of change. (. ..) All this information is fed into a central location where data is gathered and
analyzed to predict the likely affects of changing conditions. Based on predicted changes, action plans are
adjusted.” (Simons, 2000, p.214 and 215)

Using Piaget’s categories to analyse Simons’ writings enables us to bring out similarities between
the two scholars but also to suggest potential improvements to Simons’ models. Our findings
highlight the structuralist assumption whereby organisational strategy exists independently of
control systems that apply and transform it. Analysing concepts specific to Piaget allows us to
examine the impact of Simons’ works as well as to bring to light some contradictions or
limitations therein. Yet more importantly, it allows us to question the broader field of control.

**DISCUSSION: DISCIPLINARISATION AND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT**

The following discussion aims to focus on the impact of the Piagetian approach on the wider
management control discipline. We present two major imports from Piagetian theory for
understanding learning processes in the field of control: its emphasis on the individual’s
psychology in the learning process, and its explanation of the principles of self-government as
vectors for internalising organisational rules.

**The individual at the heart of the learning process**

By focusing our attention on the psychological dimension, Piagetian theory offers import in the
field of control, which in the matter of learning has tended to focus more on the organisational,
even inter-organisational, levels of analysis. Piaget reminds us that the development of
knowledge stems from the individual.

“The child must be led from the individual to the universal. And the only way to achieve this is […] to use the
child’s psychology.” (Piaget, 1931, p.81 in 1998)

Piaget sets out to portray the child’s cognitive psychology. He breaks down how proper action
gradually develops the cognitive and perceptual capacities of the individual.

If we look at Simons’ findings in this light, his explanation of the processes and mechanisms
whereby managers make choices from a range of possible options is clearly insufficient. Simons
does not provide us with the means to understand cognitive processes whereby top managers identify strategic uncertainties. Simons refers to Herbert Simon’s concept of limited attention, but unlike the latter, he never delves inside the “black box” that constitutes the top managers’ minds and pursues his analysis at the level of the firm instead. He emphasizes the fact that uncertainty is situated first and foremost in the perceptions of top managers; and yet, even in the empirical study conducted with ten top managers in the months following their appointments (1994), he does not explain the operation of “reduction” that takes place between the set of perceived potential uncertainties and those that are “actually” perceived by top managers (those they “choose” to perceive and manage). Several scholars underline this analytical weakness:

“Learning, for Simons, is described as a process by which management signals to subordinates about its strategic intentions. [...] What about the mechanisms by which top management also learns? The model seems to perpetuate an image of top management as an omniscient and omnipotent navigator of the seas of uncertainty.” (Gray, 1990, p.146)

“Simons does not consider how managers’ perceptions and other information processing characteristics affect these choices” (Langfield Smith, 1997, p.223)

The incursion of cognitive theories suggests the need to develop empirical research designed to bring to light managers’ cognitive processes.

**Internalising organisational rules**

Piaget differentiates between two forms of respect that determine relations between authority and legitimacy, a fundamental dialectic of control. Unilateral respect “implies inequality between the one who respects and the one who is respected” (Piaget, 1930, p.28 in 1998): in the corporate world, this would be the subordinate’s respect for his hierarchical manager, or a newcomer’s respect for a more experienced colleague. It implies a constraining relationship. In contrast, mutual respect arises from contacts between individuals “who consider themselves equals and who reciprocate each other’s respect”. This type of respect entails cooperative relationships. Although Piaget recognises that the mostly widely adopted education procedure relies exclusively on unilateral respect (the adult/the hierarchical superior imposes the rules and enforces them through mental or material constraint), he recommends pedagogy grounded in mutual respect
This distinction between unilateral and mutual respect leads us to understand how an individual succeeds in internalising the rules that govern the group in which he operates. According to Piaget, rules set and improved with cooperation from the very individuals who must comply with them will subsequently be “scrupulously followed”, whereas rules imposed by an authority (an adult, a top manager, etc.) “remain hollow words despite being obligations” (Piaget, 1930, p.30 in 1998). The former entail “reciprocity and deeper obedience to the rules” whereas the latter sustain “superficial obedience” (Piaget, 1934, p.130 in 1998). Piaget suggests a definition of autonomy in the context of a group, which seems very relevant when applied to corporate control:

“since the rule is imposed on the individual by group pressure, being autonomous does not mean liberating oneself from this pressure but rather understanding the need for it and accepting it freely.” (Piaget, 1930, p.35 in 1998)

For the management control discipline, this suggests that self-control and peer-control alone lead to true integration of the firm’s rules and to learning. For Piaget, it is the principle of self-government that underlies this view of autonomy as the internalisation of rules. Concretely, self-government can be exercised by delegating autonomy with respect to how rules are defined, assessing how they are applied, and refining sanction in the event of deviation from the rule. Through these methods, the individual develops and integrates a sense of responsibility and aligns his own personal interest with the common good (convergence of goals). This cognitive approach to autonomy and self-government leads us to question the role of hierarchy in the learning process. In Piaget’s vision of self-government, the master mentors and guides, adopting a mindset similar to the maieutic (Piaget, 1949, p.189-191 in 1998). However, Piaget raises the question:

“Is it possible to convey through the intermediary of teaching, which is itself based on unilateral respect, the moral of cooperation, of mutual respect and of autonomy that most educators recommend?” (Piaget, 1930, p.42 in 1998)

In an organisational context of self-control, the manager “coaches”, acting alongside and not in place of his subordinates. In the same way that the role of master poses a problem for Piaget, the
status of the manager poses a problem to control, because his very existence contradicts the ideal of self-government. The manager/coach decides and assesses the extent and nature of the autonomy granted. He also runs the risk of issuing paradoxical injunctions to his subordinates (“Be autonomous!”, Le Goff, 2000): moreover, if the individual obeys, he is not acting autonomously, by definition. Similarly, “accepting responsibility cannot be forced upon the individual by decree” and trust cannot be conferred by mandate (Argyris, 1998). Can we actually talk of autonomy when it comes to management?

Conclusion

Beyond its analysis of Piaget’s import for Simons—bringing to light some interesting aspects of his work and providing a critique “from inside” that calls for improvement of his conceptual framework—this paper also highlights how Piaget contributes to the broader field of control. First, through his study of child cognitive psychology, Piaget breaks down information processing and “intelligent” knowledge development; this process specifically arises from the development of self-awareness—of a self distinct from others, objects or people. Cognitive theories emphasize the individual in the learning process whereas in control, literature pertaining to learning has broadly concentrated its efforts on analysing the organisational level. This intrusion of Piagetian theories solicits MCS research to develop thinking on learning mechanisms at play on an individual basis: for instance, how do top managers define “perceived” strategic uncertainties?

Second, Piaget shows that categorisation, structuring, and the progressive dichotomy between the object and the subject are necessary stages in the child’s cognitive development. Far from being exclusively instruments of alienation, structuring and self-discipline are as necessary to cognitive development as self-confidence born of the assurance of being loved. In firms, the implementation of management tools (budgets, balanced scorecards, etc.) used in an interactive way as recommended by Simons also brings about “emancipation” in the sense of Piaget, for whom there can be no autonomy possible without structure set in place by tools. These tools
enable increasingly complex information processing, help reduce uncertainty, and result in learning (greater “intelligent” knowledge). However, Piagetian theory highlights that MCS can only bring about emancipation under two conditions largely ignored or ambiguous in Simons’ work: (1) if they provide autonomy of judgement and latitude to question underlying organisational values, which is far from the case today when management tools are widely used as means of legitimating these values and presenting them as givens; (2) if they are not used as simple tools for formulating and implementing strategy top-down but rather, increasingly seen as fostering experimentation in managerial practices as well as being vectors for emerging strategy. On this point, we refer back to Piagetian learning principles stating that theory and action are inextricably bound together. Theory and action are two sides of the same coin and learning is only possible in the reflexive effort performed following individual experimentation. It is only in this reflexivity that the individual learns and also that theory can move forward, thus generating knowledge production. Applied to the field of control, this perspective translates the shift from a top-down model of control (a strategy is defined and the control system applies it) towards a model in which strategy and MCS interact in practice.

Finally, the self-government recommended by Piaget calls into question the role of the manager in relation to the autonomous, or empowered, employee as well as the very validity of a performance measurement system based on individuals rather than groups. However, our reading of Piaget raises these questions without providing an answer. Perhaps it is here that the structuralist paradigm reaches its limits: how to reconcile the existence of external structures that model the individual with internalised self-government?

Broadly speaking, Piagetian perspectives do not enable us to envisage more holistic models of control. We think in particular of structuration theory approaches to accounting and control that question the ontology of managerial practices in relation to organisational discourses (Giddens, 1986). Some suggest that, like strategy, discourse already consists of a practice in and of itself and that the analysis of discourse itself is revealing of the way in which control and accounting organise and constitute the world. A critique of Simons, and indirectly of Piaget, grounded in a
non-structuralist paradigm could therefore complete the findings of this paper and shed new light on the role of MCS in building intelligence and creating knowledge.
**Bibliography**


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From “dirty work” to “dirty dust”. An ethnographic study of the shadowy activities of management controllers

Abstract

In this paper, based on an ethnographic study, we show how management controllers craft their jobs through their daily practice and try to stretch their occupational identity. We adopt an original posture, developing a ‘negative ontology’ of practice, identity at work and professional competition. We argue that studying what individuals hide or despise in their daily activities enriches our understanding of both identity at work and power relationships. The underlying argument is that values and concepts such as identity and power materialise through interactions and practices. These practices include any activities that make individuals proud, but also a wide range of activities they despise and try to delegate, manage, and reduce—what Everett Hughes refers to as their dirty work.

We develop this analysis through the study of the management controllers of TechCo, a medium-sized French industrial firm in the aeronautics industry. In particular, we demonstrate that, within a given occupational group, several individual trajectories and strategies emerge. Although all management controllers try to avoid or delegate what they consider to be dirty work, they have differing views of the positioning of their profession. What constitutes dirty work for them depends on this view—its definition is situated. We argue in this paper that the two phenomena are related: considering some tasks as degrading implies a specific orientation of the profession; in turn, proposing a particular positioning for the profession entails defining what constitutes dirty work. Management controllers use accounting as a means of rendering invisible—or less visible—the least prestigious elements of their profession, by shifting the attention of others towards the more rewarding actions. Our case study demonstrates that the accounting eye is therefore focused on, and draws attention to, not organisational failures but whatever makes controllers proud.

Introduction

Accounting has been described as constitutive of, as well as constituted by, its social and organisational context (Burchell, Clubb, Hopwood, Hughes & Nahapiet, 1980). The visibility metaphor has been used to highlight the role of accounting in constituting, and not just reflecting, social reality (Hines, 1988; Morgan & Willmott, 1993). The selection of what is accounted for shapes organisational participants’ views of what is important. Accounting language influences meanings and interpretations, and thus helps to create a specific conception of organisational reality (Dent, 1991). By rendering visible certain aspects of
organisational practices, the “accounting eye” reshapes knowledge and reforms the organisation, visibility becoming reality (Hopwood, 1987).

In this paper, we focus on analysing and understanding accounting in action. There is an ambiguous relationship between the abstract discourse of an accounting potential and the specifics of accounting practice in organisations (Hopwood, 1987, p.212). By paying attention to plays of light enacted by accountants through their own practice, in particular when producing and tailoring accounting information, we analyse the accounting eye by highlighting accountants’ eyes.

Accountants’ eyes depend on their daily practice (Ahrens & Chapman, 2007). Accountants tie their everyday actions to broader rationales (Ahrens, 1996; Ahrens & Chapman, 2000). However, these are loose relations. Global ideals have an influence but determine neither practices nor the direction of their evolutions, since actions are based on significations and interpretations, and therefore on a form of creative enactment (Ahrens, 1996; Jazayeri & Hopper, 1999). The practice of management accountants is therefore flexible and does not follow a rigid script (Ahrens & Chapman, 2000; 2007), and accountability emerges from a shared understanding that is constructed during enactment (Boland, 1979).

Accountants’ work is first and foremost relational. “Their work is rather produced as an interplay between the aspirations and expertise mobilized by accounting departments, and the responses of top-management and line functions to their actions” (Mouritsen, 1996, p.285). Relationships between management accountants and operational managers are not naturally peaceful, stable and easy-going. Divergences of interests and power of the individuals and groups present must be considered to fully understand the very nature of these relationships (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988).
Researchers have regularly drawn attention to the competition that opposes accounting with other functions in the firm (Neu, 1991; Robson, Willmott, Cooper & Puxty, 1994; Richardson, 1997; Caramanis, 2002; Gendron, Cooper & Townley, 2007). They show, for instance, how accountants succeed in extending their jurisdiction by standing in opposition to the dominant group in the organisation, such as engineers (e.g. Armstrong, 1985; Dent, 1991; Vaivio, 1999; Briers & Chua, 2001) or sales representatives (e.g. Fligstein, 1987; Ezzamel & Burns, 2005).

Most of these studies focus on conflicts arising during clearly identified changes, such as the introduction of a new management tool (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988; Briers & Chua, 2001; Ezzamel & Burns, 2005) or the emergence of a new strategic or organisational orientation (Dent, 1991; Oakes, Townley & Cooper, 1998; Townley, 2002; Ezzamel, Willmott & Worthington, 2004; 2008). Most often, they illustrate the ultimate victory of accounting after a period of conflict and futile resistance (Scapens & Roberts, 1993; Ezzamel, 1994; Ahrens, 1997; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian & Samuel, 1998; Ezzamel et al., 2008). Fewer studies address organisational struggles as an ongoing process, revealing itself through situated, daily contests of accountability (Ahrens & Chapman, 2002).

These struggles and contests are integrated into different social scenes implicating different audiences (Goffman, 1959). By creating areas of light and shadow, accountants can influence the perception and the attitude of significant others—such as operational managers—and therefore influence their view of themselves (Roberts, 1991). At a wider level, they will attempt to modify the image that various audiences have of their profession. Whenever these attempts prove unfruitful or are perceived as sensitive, it is also possible to choose the person who, from among the various audiences present, will be most likely to have a positive image of the profession (Hughes, 1951b).
To improve their status, the members of a profession can try to modify its positioning in relation to other professions (Hughes, 1958; Abbott, 1988). They can also move within their profession, either moving up or sideways. A “moral\(^1\) division of labour” then emerges, both between members of a profession but also between different professions, which does not necessary plot onto the technical division of labour (Hughes, 1956). Each individual will thus identify the tasks which bring most prestige and try to delegate others—tasks that form part of the “dirty work”—in order to give a more respectable image to their profession (Hughes, 1951a).

Such an analysis of work, that focuses on tasks generally considered degrading, has seen little use in organisational analysis. Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) were among the first to introduce the concept of dirty work into the theory of organisations. However, whether they use the term dirty work or stigmatized work (Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss, 2006), they only partially unveil the concept such as it is understood by Everett Hughes, according to whom any occupation is marked by some form of dirty work. In their view, “Dirty work refers to occupations that are viewed by society as physically, socially or morally tainted.” (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark & Fugate, 2007, p.149). Consequently, they do not focus on dirty work inherent in each profession; instead, they identify stigmatized occupations—dirty jobs—whose members are called dirty workers. They outline a separation between dirty professions and others and therefore distance themselves significantly from the definition suggested by Hughes (for a similar observation see Dick, 2005). Indeed, in his analysis of dirty work, Hughes always compares highly prestigious (“proud”) professions with more “humble” occupations to show how similar they can be (Hughes, 1970).

Dick (2005) reintegrates the link made by Hughes between dirty work and the notion of role to show that the definition of dirty work is situated: “I want to argue that what is

\(^1\) The “moral division of labour” does not refer to any morality/immorality of the tasks, but rather to the symbolic dimensions that are associated with any task.
designated as ‘dirty’ within any specific role differs according to the perspective of the observer, illuminating the boundaries and landscape of different moral and social orders and how these overlap and compete” (Dick, 2005, p.1365). Dick analyses discourse in an attempt to understand the way in which different people see dirty work. She demonstrates that the definition of dirty work depends notably on the separation conceptualised by Goffman (1959) between front regions and back regions: depending on the zone, discourse about dirty work is different. However, we should note that, in her view, even if there is no occupation that is dirty in itself, tasks may exist that are universally seen as dirty:

“While the surgeon, for example, will cut into the human body and remove or handle bodily organs or fluids, the removal and disposal of the ‘remains’ of the surgery is delegated to a lower status employee, like the theatre nurse. All higher status occupations, in fact, tend to delegate physically dirty tasks to those lower in the occupational pecking order (Hughes, 1958).” (Dick, 2005, pp.1366-1367)

Yet Hughes warns against precisely this idea: some professions cannot delegate all the dirty work to be accomplished:

“It has also a division of labor notorious for its rigid hierarchy. The ranking has something to do with the relative clean-ness of functions performed. (…) But if there is no system in which the theme of uncleanliness is so strong, likewise there is none in which it is so strongly compensated for. Physical cleanliness of the human organism depends upon balances easily upset; the physicians and his co-workers operate at the margins where these balances are, in fact, often upset. To bring back health (which is cleanliness) is the great miracle. Those who work the miracle are more than absolved from the potential uncleanliness of their tasks; but those who perform the lowly tasks without being recognized as among the miracle-workers fare badly in the prestige rating. And this gives us a good case for rubbing in the point that the division of labor is more than a technical phenomenon; that there are infinite social-psychological nuances in it.” (Hughes, 1956, p.64)

“Delegation of dirty work is also a part of the process of occupational mobility. Yet there are kinds of work, some of them of very high prestige, in which such delegation is possible only to a limited extent. The dirty work may be an intimate part of the very activity which gives the occupation its charisma, as is the case with the handling of the human body by the physician. In this case, I suppose the dirty work is somehow integrated into the whole, and into the prestigious role of the person who does the work.” (Hughes, 1951b, p.82)
These details brought forth by Hughes are essential to our analysis of work using the notion of dirty work. The members of a profession may find themselves unable to delegate the dirty work, especially if it is at the heart of the definition of their profession. In this case, it becomes necessary to manage the dirty work, while continuing to ensure the tasks considered degrading. Whenever it is not possible to delegate one’s own dirty work, one option is to create a façade and to conceal it and to make it invisible (Hughes, 1951a). Tasks that are carried out but for which responsibility is not taken constitute a form of stigma—each must perform what Goffman (1963) calls “controlling discrediting information”.

In this paper, using an ethnographic study, we try to analyse how management controllers create the visible and the invisible within their organisation. As we show, within a given group—the management controllers of a given firm—several individual trajectories and strategies emerge. In particular, they try to avoid or delegate what they consider to be dirty work. Using the case study of TechCo, we show that management controllers may have differing views of the positioning of their function and of what constitutes dirty work for them. The two phenomena are interlinked: considering some tasks as degrading implies a specific orientation of the profession; in turn, proposing a particular positioning for the profession entails defining what constitutes dirty work. In both cases, the claim becomes collective when the solidarity and cohesion between individuals makes it a shared perspective.

When it is not possible to delegate dirty work, it is then a matter of making it invisible at the very least. Dirty work transforms into “dirty dust”, which must remain in the shadows. Transforming dirty work into dirty dust enables all discrediting information to be concealed. This also presents an opportunity to pass judgement, to decide on the status of the information and therefore to retake control of practice and to rediscover a form of autonomy. Finally, it is an opportunity to create cohesion within the group. It then becomes the participation in
dealing with dirty work that creates the feeling of belonging, thus influencing the identity of the group and the positioning of the function.

Accounting is therefore used by management controllers as a means of making invisible, or less visible, the least prestigious elements of their occupation but shifting the attention of others towards the most rewarding actions. Those tasks that make them look like bean counters must be hidden because they cannot be delegated. The accountant’s eye is therefore focused on, and attracts attention to, not the organisational failures but on what makes controllers proud.

We adopt an original posture, developing a negative ontology of practice, identity at work and professional competition. We argue that in order to gain a richer understanding of power relationships and identity at work, a promising avenue lies in the study of what individuals hide and despise in their daily activity. The underlying argument is that values and concepts such as identity and power finally materialise in actions and practices. These practices include activities that make individuals proud, but also a whole range of activities they despise and try to delegate, manage, and reduce—their dirty work.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. After presenting the case study and the methodology chosen, we set out to define the social identity of management controllers at TechCo. To do this, we must first understand their shared viewpoint and the way in which they are perceived and pigeonholed by their audiences. We can then present the particularly novel attitude of one of the management controllers. By contrasting the practices of this individual with those of the others, we can see divergences emerge in their situational perspectives, and therefore different identification trajectories followed by the management controllers at TechCo. We conclude with a discussion of our findings.
Field Study

Financial officers at TechCo

TechCo is a French industrial firm in the aeronautic sector, medium-sized (a little under one thousand staff) and a subsidiary of a diversified international group (more than ten thousand employees, with sales of 1.8 billion euros in 2005). Its structure is divided into three divisions, each corresponding to a type of products (Division X manufactures fuel circulation systems; Y specialises in oxygen masks; and Z produces components for aircraft control panels). The divisions are themselves divided into three departments: production (sometimes including a purchasing management and a logistics management), industrialisation (design office and works methods), and design (Research and Development). Two divisions are located in the Greater Paris area, on the same site as the Headquarters, and the third (Division X) is based in South-east France (Fig.1).

Please insert Fig.1 here.

At the time of the field study, the financial management was made up of 21 members. The CFO, who came to the firm a year before the observation period, supervises the Head of Accounting (who came two years ago and manages a team of twelve people including a head accountant), the head of management control (who manages a team of three management controllers and two management assistants) and the vice-CFO. Each controller specialises in one department:

- Eric is the controller of DY: a graduate from engineering school and subsequently business school, he worked for two years in a Big 4 audit firm before joining TechCo three years ago;
- Paul is the controller of DZ: a business school graduate, he worked for three years, including two in Spain and in Latin America, in a company known for the power of its management controllers before being dismissed by the CFO;

- Severine is the controller of DX: also laid off by the CFO of the same company as Paul, she works in DX in the South of France.

   Fabrice is an *expert comptable*, the French equivalent of chartered accountant or CPA. After working several years in external auditing and then as a management controller, he joined TechCo as the controller for DY. Three years later, he was appointed vice-CFO and supervised the management controllers. Subsequently, Veronique was recruited to replace him in the DY controller position. She was then appointed head of management control—which suggested a promotion for Fabrice, since the CFO was close to retirement—and Eric was recruited to replace her. When the CFO retired, Fabrice was turned down for the position: the CFO was replaced by an external candidate experienced in mergers and acquisitions. Fabrice became vice-CFO. He acquired the title of director but lost any team management function: the management controllers and assistants now report to Veronique and not to him. He continues to ensure a part of the monthly reporting.

   With a two-year diploma in management, Claire is a management assistant. She has been working at TechCo for more than thirty years. When she worked with Fabrice, she carried out certain tasks that are generally reserved for management controllers. Since she has been under Veronique’s supervision, she has gradually had to limit herself to the official tasks of management assistants, notably inputting analytical accounting data entries. Sandra, who came to TechCo two years prior to the observation period straight from a two-year management diploma, is also a management assistant. The management assistants are the only members of the “management” section of the financial department not to have managerial status.
Throughout this period, the management controllers of DX and DZ did not change. During the period of observation, Severine was recruited and her predecessor was demoted to an accounting position. Three months earlier, Paul had been recruited to replace someone leaving for retirement. The order of seniority of the management controllers is therefore as follows: Fabrice, Veronique, Eric, Paul, Severine.

Research methods

Our field work is based on an ethnographic approach (Sanday, 1979; Van Maanen, 1979). Notably, it is based on the enquirer being present in the workplace of those under observation for a prolonged period of time. The main method associated with ethnography is the direct observation of practices. In the event, it was participant observation, and therefore understanding through practising, which was employed (Becker, 1958). Since the goal was to better understand the viewpoints expressed by different actors, being fully immersed in daily routines and concrete work situations was a necessity (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988; Dent, 1990).

One of the authors was recruited by the vice Chief Financial Officer (vice-CFO) of TechCo. For a period of four months, his official mission was to help in the implementation of fully integrated Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software. In particular, the observer was to focus on “purchasing flows” and on the company’s “reporting flows”. With respect to the first, the goal was in fact to translate into the form of “workflows” the set of tasks performed in the Purchasing Management, but also to ensure that all information regarding the suppliers would be input correctly into the new programme. For the reporting flow, the

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2 In fact, the project, supervised by the vice-CFO and the Chief Information Officer (CIO), consists in harmonising the information systems of all the subsidiaries in the division and to set up the accounting module of the software used in production.
goal was to prepare specifications for the tailoring of reports, enabling management controllers to continue to produce the “reporting book” on a regular basis.

This project therefore gave him the opportunity to meet all the members of the Financial Management (within which his office was located), several members of the Information Systems Management (all those working on the project), as well as numerous operational managers (notably members of the Purchasing Management). The position of the observer, integrated into the Financial Department but distanced from issues of career and influence by his status, enabled him to build close ties with the management controllers. However, the standards of the new information system did not perfectly map onto the organisation in place: it was therefore necessary to choose, for each task, between modifying the organisation and making specific IT developments. As a result, the observer had an opportunity to see operational managers and management controllers meeting formally as well as informally. Fairly quickly, he could see how operational managers see management controllers, how they categorise them. Furthermore, his position as a ‘young graduate’ with little experience and much to learn allowed him to ask a certain number of questions, and to force his interlocutors to explain explicitly practices which they usually consider self-explanatory.

Using an ethnographic approach enables us to see contradictory rationales and divergent viewpoints appear (Ahrens & Dent, 1998). Although the formal discourses of controllers – for example during meetings – emphasise consistency and harmony, arguments and disagreements appeared in many situations. Hence, the goal is to bring out this divergence and bring to light the similarities and differences between points of view.

In the beginning, the observer’s sole goal was to better understand the daily work routine of management controllers. The approach was therefore mainly inductive (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The posture adopted thus bore the mark of interpretive sociology: it was a matter of understanding the meaning that actors give to their actions (Weber, 1922) and
building a subjective definition of the work done by actors in their daily interactions (Hughes, 1958; Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). This position justifies the choice of taking a qualitative approach aimed at ‘in-depth’ understanding of practices, and observing control practices in situ (Tomkins & Groves, 1983; Ferreira & Merchant, 1992). Within the bounds of reason, the observer tried to tie what he was observing with what his interlocutors were saying (Van Maanen, 1979), and compare (and occasionally even confront) the discourses of various people to strengthen the credibility of each piece of information.

The data gathered consist of a systematic description of the premises, situations and practices being observed, and a transcription of formal discussions (during meetings) and informal conversations (in the corridors, in front of the coffee machine, during lunchtime) that the observer was a party to. With this purpose, a field journal was kept and updated daily. For instance, during each meeting, the room (its size, furniture, decor, any office equipment), the people (those present, their dress code, positions around the table, those invited but absent), and the discourses (order of speaking, contents of discourse, the tone of voice adopted, not forgetting jokes and small talks) were systematically described (which posed no problem, given that generally everyone took notes and the observer was in fact in charge of writing up the minutes). Likewise, after each meal, the observer noted down what he had remembered of the discussions and the behaviour of people. After the observation period, telephone conversations and several revisits to the field of research enabled the observer to obtain complementary data.

The collective identity of management controllers at TechCo

At TechCo, all the operational management positions are filled by engineers and the firm’s strategy is based on technical innovation and excellence. Consequently, even though financial issues are at the heart of decision-making, they seem too important to be left to the management controllers (Levy-Leboyer, 1979; Suleiman, 1979; Lane, 1995). The latter all
consider technical innovation to be the main historical lever of their firm’s success but still think that they can provide assistance to engineers through financial analysis. They therefore feel sidelined under the pretext that engineers alone possess the necessary competencies to make decisions.

To begin with, we must therefore understand their subjective viewpoint and present all the elements that lead them to define their collective situation as unfavourable. Notably, we will see that management controllers focus specifically on their taking part in operational decision-making and that they reinterpret a number of signs and symbols as bearing witness to their marginal position in this process.

**Diagnosing a marginal position for controllers**

As the gatekeepers of internal control, management controllers believe they should be involved in this process, notably with respect to validating estimates. At TechCo, however, their participation appears to be purely symbolic as the following extract from the field journal illustrates:

> Tuesday 5\textsuperscript{th} July 2005
> I [the observer] am in the office of Paul [management controller of Division Z], who is talking to me about the procedure for validating investment requests. Everything is done by e-mail. He finds that some put in the minimum and there isn’t really any format. He also complains about the fact that the mail is sent to everyone at the same time. So the CEO can give his agreement before he has checked the calculations. [In his former company], by contrast, it was sent to him first and once he had validated the calculations, it was sent to the decision-makers. And for a very large investment, he could take up to six months to validate it. Here, on the other hand, when he phones the person who has sent the investment request, this person is surprised. Apparently, his calls aren’t welcomed.

The management controllers appear *a priori* to be involved in the process of validating investments, since they appear on the list of individuals concerned, and their opinion is taken in account. However, their participation remains symbolic and optional since it is possible to have the request validated before they have been able to state an opinion. Indeed, in practice, the controller is not in a position to give his opinion on an investment decision if someone of higher status, such as the CEO, has previously validated it. This device brings to light the
ambiguity surrounding the position granted to management controllers. They lay claim to a jurisdiction that is granted to them on paper but refused in practice.

The marginal position of management controllers appears during meetings organised by operational managers. The controllers sometimes complain about not being called to meetings often enough. Indeed, for them it is a preferential way to access information but also a sign of socialisation and of recognition on the part of managers. And yet, when they are invited, they show a certain reluctance to take part and criticise the role that is reserved for them. This is what comes out of the following discussion:

Monday 25th April 2005
During the meal, Eric [management controller of Division Y] explains to me [the observer] that there is a meeting this afternoon:
E: Every two months there is what is called “a committee” for each department, with the main directors of the company. Department heads must present the current situation. They spend ten minutes presenting the accounts, then two or three hours on the rest, such as big projects in progress and that kind of thing.
Paul [management controller of Division Z]: [In my former company] it was quite the opposite! (laughs)
E: But it’s pointless going to these meetings. There’s no point making us come. (Surprised expression from the observer.) Well, when we’re there, it’s more for… For example, when we get to the difficult points, they [operational managers] prefer to raise an accounting problem. In short, they throw it back like a hot potato! And when they’re done, we move on to other things. That’s their way of not having to explain themselves on a point that causes a problem. So you see, it’s not very useful. We’re there to take the hits instead of operational managers. Once, during a committee meeting, the CEO asked what PENL [produits expédiés non livrés – products sent out but not delivered] are. All the directors started to get annoyed, saying they didn’t understand why this kind of thing existed. The CFO lowered his head and went all red, and so I had to explain it. He said: “Yes, I saw that when I arrived. I found it strange, but we are working on getting rid of them”.
P: That’s scandalous! No, but really. Everyone knows what it is, but it suits them to pretend they don’t. They want it just to disappear, but it’s their job to do that. While ever they don’t change the organisation, it will have to appear in our accounts!
E: Yea, the CEO knew very well what it was when he asked the question. We’ve talked about it enough! And then, you see, often they pretend not to understand anything about finance, but as soon as it’s about their bonuses, all of a sudden they understand everything very well!
The observer: And before the committee meeting, do you go to see the operational managers to prepare for it?
E: No. Anyway, we present the accounts to them every month. It’s not worth it. But between what we tell them and what they say afterwards, there’s a massive gap!

This discussion between two controllers brings out a form of resentment with respect to engineers. The short amount of time spent on analysing accounts during meetings is, according to the controllers, a clear indication of the non-strategic character of the financial dimension in the organisation. They consequently perceive their work to be of limited utility.
They can also be used to move attention away from problems that operational managers wish to conceal: rather than justifying organisational choices, the latter dodge tough questions by presenting them as accounting aberrations. Such hypocrisy is seen as a sign of disdain: “Everyone knows what it is, but it suits them to pretend they don’t”. The controllers therefore feel powerless when faced with the bad faith of the operational managers: their limited room for manoeuvre becomes visible and obvious. This situation reinforces their feeling of marginality, even of exclusion, in the decision-making process.

Beyond the particularly visible and symbolic elements that are investments and meetings, the controllers think that their work on a daily basis is insufficiently recognised. The behaviour and attitude of operational managers and each of their actions—even the least significant—feed into the knot of clues indicating the devaluing of the controllers’ status. This is what emerges during a discussion between two management controllers:

Thursday 2nd June 2005
Paul enters Eric’s office with a printed e-mail in his hand, then cries with slight annoyance:
P: He told me 220 and I’m already at 320!
E: Well, that’s just a stupid mistake. You’re going to have to call him. Do you want me to do it?
P: No, it’s all right, I’ll do it. (He leaves)
E [talking to the observer]: They’re just doing any old thing. But you have to concede that they don’t know anything about finance.
I gradually work out that he’s talking about operational managers. There are often “misprints” in their tables. When the controllers ask for information, they are sometimes sent data that they consider to be incoherent and that they have to correct themselves. In this case, Paul had asked for an estimate of expenditure for the financial year (what he calls the “estimate at year end”) and received an amount below what had already been spent.
E: But the department heads, the top-level directors and the level below, they know finance. But you see, only because they’re interested in the result. It’s like the Unions. They know the labour law like the back of their hands!
The observer: And that was a technician who sent the info?
E: Yes, a mail was obviously sent to the director who said, “Go and see so-and-so” and sent the info back. And afterwards, we receive figures that don’t mean anything! […] You see, it’s like the PBM. (A look of incomprehension from the observer.) It’s a thing we put in the reporting. It relates to hours. But you see, they’re indicators that no one looks at. We do tables every month that only interest operational managers but they’re not going to get to see them.

The end of the scene allows us to identify the first symbol of disdain: the existence of ‘dead documents’ or ‘dead devices’. Management controllers are often involved in providing information or in building tables that no one uses. Neglected de facto, these tools must nonetheless continue to be filled out on a regular basis. This pointless work, this ritualised
information, cannot even be exposed: the managers ask them to provide figures, not to give their opinion on their usefulness or relevance.

This extract also illustrates the issues associated with the hierarchical level of their public. Controllers systematically communicate with managers who are highest in the formal hierarchy. The latter are a priori more susceptible to financial issues, but it is also a way for controllers to position themselves as interlocutors of senior management. Unfortunately for controllers, their requests are often delegated and handled by lower-level managers “who don’t understand anything [about finance]”. By relegating these questions to a subordinate level, they signal they consider these tasks as dirty work. In doing so, operational managers demean the status of controllers. Furthermore, they implicitly denigrate the importance of the competencies they need to mobilise by viewing the financial information requested as pertaining to layman’s knowledge and to common sense.

Another manifestation of how the work and status of controllers are undermined appears in the accounting errors made by operational managers. Often particularly clumsy, these errors are interpreted by the controllers as yet another sign of contempt. Controllers do not even mention the likelihood that the operational manager may not have understood or may have misinterpreted what was being asked of him; in their eyes, it patently shows a lack of attention and involvement, and consequently disinterest alone can explain the error.

Finally, the eviction of financial managers is materialised in the geographic choices of their office locations. These choices, presented as purely pragmatic, provide a strong symbol of the relative importance of each department in the organisation. This is revealed in the story told by Fabienne from the accounts department:

Friday 10th June 2005
12:30 p.m. I (the observer) come back to my office. I talk with Fabienne (supplier accounts manager). She tells me that senior financial management has often been moved around different buildings.
Fabienne: You’ve got to think that nobody loves us! We didn’t stay for long in the same place. Except in building W where the archives are now. We weren’t supposed to stay there for long because it was filthy, the carpet and everything was filthy. But we stayed for ten years.

Senior financial management sees itself as being shunted around then relegated to offices that are so uncomfortable that the move is sold to them as provisional. In the end, the department was left there for ten years – cut off, abandoned and out of sight.

At TechCo, two camps are clearly opposed: engineers and controllers. Yet this conflict does not preclude a certain form of cooperation but it must remain in the shadows. To be able to justify themselves to their hierarchy, operational managers must understand and appropriate for themselves accounting data, at least in part. To do this, they will call on management controllers. This “presenting of figures”, this joint construction of analysis, is carried out on the fringe of the formal meeting: the compromise must remain unseen. Cooperation only takes place in the wings, enabling the COO to maintain a façade during board meetings, i.e. when the main board members are present and so when the spotlight is particularly strong. Even if everyone knows that the image put forward is false, they all accept to perpetuate the fiction.

Managing dirty work and creating dirty dust

At TechCo, the management controllers seem to show a desire to become internal consultants, and therefore to participate in the decision-making process. As members of a staff function, it is nonetheless difficult for them to define in an autonomous way the concrete tasks that would enable them to become internal consultants. From this moment forth, the centre of their attention and their effort becomes the minimising of dirty work. Their positioning therefore leads them to consider that certain tasks divert them away from their goal. Other tasks even appear to be incompatible with the role of internal consultant, because they
symbolise their exclusion. It is this set of tasks that constitutes a structural definition of “dirty work”. It is mainly made up of tasks of gathering and processing data and making it reliable. The management controllers’ goal then becomes one of managing this dirty work and trying to reduce or delegate it. The diagnosis of their marginal position influences their view. Indeed, multiple signs of operational disdain become as many motives for frustrations and reinforce the demeaning character of certain tasks. With the example of participation in meetings, we have seen that even what is considered rewarding can become dirty work. The definition of dirty work is therefore situational and emerging: understanding it depends on the context of the interaction and on the controllers’ everyday practice, on their feelings as much as on their values.

In particular, data restatements uncover an informal division of labour between financial and operational managers. Seeking to save time, operational managers may let some errors slip into the system, generating extra work for the financial managers:

Tuesday 21st June 2005
9:30 a.m. Fabienne calls Claire, talks to her about a file that is problematic, and then hangs up. She exclaims: “They know nothing! It’s not normal! They should be doing this, not Claire. It’s not right.”

The observer: There are things that accounting should do, but that Claire is doing?
F: No, Purchasing. They should be doing it. It’s about receiving [some goods]. They don’t know how to do what is needed.

If financial managers want their data to remain reliable, it is they who must correct the errors of others. This “after sales service” for information is perceived as demeaning and constitutes a significant part of their dirty work (Hughes, 1956). Restating errors made by operational managers forms part of dirty work because they are interpreted as sign of disdain.

Another part of dirty work is the restating of accounting errors that controllers have themselves made, the particularly dark and hidden side of their activity. It is always difficult to accept one’s own errors and any time spent correcting them is systematically perceived as a waste of time with no ‘value added’. Yet, from the controllers’ standpoint, such restatements are all the more dangerous because they cast doubt on the reliability of accounting data. It is
then the accounting system as a whole – supposedly neutral, systematic and objective – that is called into question. Restatement work should not exist and so must remain absolutely invisible to the audience: it points to unacceptable internal failures.

Several reactions to this task can be observed. In the following extract, the viewpoints of Paul on the one hand and other team members on the other reveal the existence of two differing strategies for managing this dirty work:

Friday 10th June 2005
10:25 a.m. In passing, I see Sandra and Claire [management assistants] in Eric’s [operational management controller for Division Y] office. They have a ‘variance’: Eric is holding some sheets of paper, Sandra is holding others, and they are comparing figures. Normally, they should have the same figures but several differ. I ask them to explain.

Eric: There’re figures that don’t add up.
Sandra: I saw that by accident last night. But I must say that, er, I’m surprised that Veronique [the management controller concerned] didn’t check all the figures globally.
E: No, but each person should check their part…
S: Yes, well, no one has done that! This morning, Claire and I went to see Paul [operational management controller for Division Z]. You know what his answer was? ‘Well, I didn’t make these entries!’ Can you imagine? It’s not his problem!

Paul had already explained to me that problems were often tied to errors in analytical accounting entries. I also know that it is the management assistants who make these entries. Paul explains to me that in his former company management controllers never had to correct accounting entries. Furthermore, in his opinion, no accounting entries should be input manually.

In the end [after correcting several errors] a variance of 1000 euros remains:
Eric: Well, it’s not very serious. The firm’s not going to collapse because of 1000 euros!
Sandra: Anyway, thanks for helping me with these variances. Fortunately, you don’t have the mindset of ‘I didn’t make this entry so I shouldn’t have to correct it!’

In identifying the error, Sandra feels duty-bound to correct it. This puts her in a delicate position of feeling guilty: having uncovered the problem, it is she who becomes responsible for solving it. So she looks for a scapegoat and pins the ‘blame’ on her hierarchical superior (‘I’m surprised that Veronique [the management controller concerned] didn’t check all the figures globally’). Sandra’s feeling of guilt is amplified by Paul’s refusal to help, to whom she attributes the mindset “[he] didn’t make this entry so [he] shouldn’t have to correct it!” She takes this reaction as a betrayal. So she solicits Eric and shares with him the burden of restating the figures, of the dirty work. They are all mobilised in managing the dirty work,
viewed as a necessary evil: taking part in a demeaning task becomes a sign of wanting to belong to and to show solidarity with the group.

From his perspective, Paul argues a radically different viewpoint. He adopts a position of principle with regard to how the control systems work: “no accounting entries should be input manually”. By refusing to help, he displays his disagreement with an organisation he deems dysfunctional. Inputting accounting entries manually is tantamount to throwing a spanner in the works of a system that should guarantee the objectivity and reliability of the data it produces. Refusing to restate figures equates to qualifying the error as unacceptable and forcing ‘the organisation’ to modify its procedures so that such errors no longer occur. Moreover, for a controller to restate accounting figures is, in Paul’s opinion, akin to undermining internal control. To fulfil his duty to employ accounting data to support decision-making and to assign accountability, he cannot have constructed the data himself. He cannot be both judge and jury.

The positioning of the function as a partner is incompatible with the carrying out of these tasks, which consequently form part of the structural dirty work.

But his refusal also allows him to delegate what he views as a part of the dirty work. Yet his behaviour cannot be qualified as individualist as such: his behaviour responds to a collective issue, to a desire to defend the strategic positioning of the function. Restating information and dealing with simple accounting entries would mean getting their hands dirty with financial ‘grease’, fulfilling tasks that are demeaning and ultimately accepting the role of bean counters (Hopper, 1980). To enhance the identity and consequently to improve the positioning of the function, Paul seeks to distance himself from the accountant and move towards the role of in-house consultant.

The previous extract enables us also to see how management controllers manage dirty work. Eric takes on the burden of a part of the dirty work, but stops when he deems the
variance ‘to track down’ as being residual. If the error becomes insignificant, it can be ‘forgotten’ or even concealed, because “the firm’s not going to collapse because of 1000 euros!” An error sufficiently small to be made invisible is transformed into ‘dirty info’, into ‘dirty dust’ that must be swept aside or that will disappear of its own accord.

A symmetrical situation may, however, lead management controllers to reclassify dirty work as dirty dust. When a variance appears, the person who spots it may realise that restating it will require an enormous or unmanageable amount of additional work. It is also likely that the variance points to a visible loophole in deontological guidelines or in the system overall: the controller will have to justify his past errors that have, today, resulted in a variance emerging. In this situation, the management controller’s work is focused on making this dirty info disappear and on transforming dirty work into dirty dust, which he will then be able to sweep discretely under the carpet where it will remain unseen.

Classifying information – differentiating between what is an error that needs restating and what is merely a speck of dust – is a task that belongs to management controllers. In deciding upon the status of an item of information that may need restatement, they exercise their judgement, which allows them to reassert a form of autonomy. They thereby succeed in reframing their identification.

At TechCo, the management controllers identify themselves with internal consultants, and seek to help operational managers in their decision-making. However, the latter only expect one thing from them: discrete support to conceal errors. Downstream from the decision-making process, controllers do not take part, but must face a posteriori the consequences of choices made by others. In this situation, they are unable to claim a share of the responsibility, which is the main source of being credited with getting work done.
Reinterpreting the attitudes and the behaviours of operational managers, they see themselves relegated to the role of simple accountants.

To improve their standing in the company, they therefore set out to fulfil more worthy tasks and to climb the decision making ladder by presenting themselves as an operational support. The support they provide to managers then becomes the more highly valued task. On the contrary, gathering and processing information and making it reliable constitute their structural dirty work. Tasks symbolising the disdain of operational managers are added to this structural dirty work and bring out a contextual dirty work.

However, as mentioned above, all aspects of symbolic loss of value, as well as controllers’ behaviours, stem from both individual issues – building a highly valued identity – and collective issues – proposing a gratifying position for the function or simply adhering to the principles of solidarity within the group. Thus, Paul came to TechCo having been significantly marked by his experience in his previous company where he was seen as a ‘strong controller’. He therefore has a view of what should be the organisational positioning of the management controller and, as a result, defines the dirty work that should be delegated. In stark contrast, as we see below, Fabrice – who has more seniority at TechCo – admits the failure of this positioning and so must suggest another position, entailing a new definition of dirty work.

The Identity of a ‘Deviant’ Management Controller

   Fabrice’s very novel view enables us to see several divergences within the group emerge. Indeed, his approach sometimes contrasts sharply with that of other management controllers. Comparing his posture with Paul’s allows us to suggest two polarised identities
for management controllers before determining how the others are situated at some point between these two solutions.

A former management controller for Division Y, Fabrice is today vice-CFO. Nevertheless, he also participates in monthly reporting in cooperation with the other management controllers. His career background and current position may therefore lead to his sharing in the identity strategy of other management controllers, as we describe it above. However, as we see below, he opts to position himself differently.

Fabrice, a qualified chartered accountant (‘expert-comptable’ in France), is also very interested in IT and notably in solving problems that require complex logical and technical thinking. As a result, he likes to simplify lines of code written by IT programmers by introducing new formulae and functions – enabled, for example, by Excel spreadsheets. Throughout the observation period, his favourite ‘game’ consisted in posing an IT problem to the observer, letting him look for a solution, and then providing him with one that was more straightforward or quicker. Indeed, rarely seeking to put accounting issues in layman’s terms or to adapt them to problematics that interest operational managers, he is perceived by some as using esoteric language and having a vision that is unhinged from organisational realities.

Fabrice, the most senior controller in the firm, considers that the role of business partner is untenable at TechCo because managers are unlikely to follow his advice. He also rejects the identity of in-house consultant, because that implies putting himself at the service of operational managers, an unworthy position in his eyes. He prefers to influence them and to steer them through the very design of the accounting and IT systems. By delving into the accounting and IT systems, he is able to position himself upstream of the decision making process and to take hold of the IT tool to constrain managers. His definition of dirty work is
therefore different to that of other controllers. This is what emerges into the following extract from the field log, which describes a meeting about the project to harmonise procedures:

Wednesday 29th June 2005
A meeting in a room in the sales department. There are four windows and a large oval table with nine chairs. Cupboards, a small table where cups and a pot of coffee stand, and a screen where a video projector displays a computer desktop.
There are eight of us. There are two buyers from Division Z and three buyers from Division Y. There are also Victor [head of IT applications for the finance department] and Fabrice [vice-CFO]. Midway through the meeting, Victor’s phone rings. People are calling him because the IT system is stopping them from sending orders. In fact, the accounts system has just been modified and a number of accounts have been blocked to prevent operational managers from making orders using the wrong accounts. But niggled by doubt, Fabrice has opted to block as many accounts as possible in order then to unblock those that are needed. So some people cannot make orders. Fabrice therefore goes into the IT system and checks the account that is causing the problem, erases a line of code and makes a sign to Victor that the problem has been solved. (Participants at the meeting can see what Fabrice is doing because the computer he is using is connected to a video projector). (…)
In discussion, buyers from Division Y explain that their manager refuses any variances. If, during a delivery, the price differs from the one set when ordering, the order must be cancelled and another made. So the variance should not occur. As for the buyer from Division Z, she systematically validates variances. But the others explain that their manager is absolutely intransigent on this point.
F: ‘We mustn’t do the work twice. The important thing is not that there are no variances, but that there are no problems in the future. It shouldn’t occur because a variance only appears when the work is done badly. So we forbid any variances and people must learn to work well. Let’s take travel expenses. They should appear on a separate account. But people making the orders don’t always do that, so we see variances appearing that shouldn’t occur.’ (…) According to the three buyers from Division Y: ‘Everyone thinks that we are four trains behind schedule. And that’s because the [director of purchasing] wants perfection! Well, in fact, we don’t show her everything. We don’t cancel orders and redo them, as she asks, and we make it so that nothing appears, so that she leaves us alone. For example, some expenses fall under [a specific line in the budget] called “expenses accessory to purchases”. And that is a line that is not monitored by [the director of purchasing].’ Fabrice appears to think deeply, then, slightly hesitating, suggests putting everything in this line, which no one bothers to look at. But the risk, he points out, is ‘ballooning the expenses’.

This scene illustrates well the trajectory followed by Fabrice. We see from the start that he does not hesitate to write or to erase lines of computer code, i.e. to take on a part of what would be defined by other controllers as dirty work himself. When he decides to block the accounts used by operational managers, he forces them to call him in. He therefore becomes more visible in the organisation: everyone finds out that he has changed the system and so that he has the power to stop people from working whenever he so wishes.

Preventing others from acting makes his power visible. Subsequently, by dealing with the problem rapidly, he demonstrates his competency and his capacity to come to their help.
He therefore uses the system to highlight his own role in the organisation. However, he can also turn the problem around and use the system to shed light on what he considers to be organisational errors. Thus, when the purchasing managers from DY explain that their director refuses any variance, he decides to follow a different policy: for him, the variance must appear, because it is the symptom of a more serious illness—“a variance only appears when the work is done badly”. In his view, the variance should not exist but it should appear to urge managers to solve the operational problem highlighted.

And yet Fabrice knows that he cannot impose his view on the purchasers, who brandish the threat of subverting procedures: “in fact, we don’t tell her everything”. He allies himself to them, without his superiors’ knowing, to get the information he wants. He suggests that they use a specific line that is not consulted by the purchasing director. The variance remains invisible for the operational reporting line but becomes visible to him. Dirty is therefore not simply swept under any old rug.

As we have seen, one part of the management controllers’ dirty work is tied to errors made by operational managers. These errors appear in the accounting system forcing the controllers to restate the information. Here, Fabrice positions himself as the one who built the accounting system. Realising that the purchasing managers can get around ‘his’ system, Fabrice opts to ally himself to them in order not to lose control of the information. In doing this, he diverts information from the operational reporting line. He now knows where to look if he wants to get the information, and can deal with the problem himself, i.e. ensure that people are working correctly.

Fabrice is therefore forced to adopt a relatively flexible position: he is aware that it is the rigidity of the system that encourages users to bypass it. Fabrice knows that he cannot determine the behaviour of operational managers through tools. He must therefore bargain with them to define the deviations of the tool that he may deem acceptable. Occasionally, he
must even be satisfied with just listening to them and taking note of their practices if he wishes to know and understand the information they produce.

In the extreme, the set of his concerns may be considered by some to be dirty work, reminding him of his function’s marginal position. The following scene illustrates this situation:

Friday, 10th June 2005
After the meeting, Fabrice explains to me [the observer] that the director of Division Y will not agree to use the software for signing purchasing requests. Fabrice explains that it is precisely to make people accountable that it has to be done. He will tell me later that the director of Division Y refuses to get his hands dirty carrying out such a lowly chore.

The attitude of the operational director is particularly revealing. When Fabrice tries to remind him of his responsibilities, to make him explicitly accountable for organisational control, the director rejects this symbolic task and shifts it on to people lower down in the hierarchy. From the manager’s standpoint, taking part in control thus equates to “getting his hands dirty” and taking accountability is seen as a “lowly chore”. This ‘refusal to take responsibility’ is therefore yet another affront to Fabrice: his concerns are viewed as unworthy and contemptible. More importantly, Fabrice would like to use the information system to enforce internal control procedures. From his vision of the elements needed to maintain internal control consequently flows a view of necessarily sharing responsibility. He therefore feels he is endowed with a mission to define and allot responsibilities, which he is refused. This refusal is translated into Fabrice’s inability to define for himself the content and the goals of his own work.

Fabrice’s viewpoint is therefore very different to that of the other management controllers. He accepts, even values, a part of what is considered by others to be “dirty work”. In fact, it is the very identity of internal consultant that he rejects because he has observed the failings of cooperating with operational managers. Instead, he attempts to
constrain them through the information system and therefore to position himself as an expert in accounting and IT issues. He seeks to take on the role of guarantor of organisational control. As designer of an information system, Fabrice naturally orientates the formal procedures in force. Additionally, he can use this position to make himself visible in the organisation in a timely manner and to make the errors of others invisible. Finally, by allying and cooperating with the system’s users, he succeeds in knowing the informal arrangements and therefore to have an understanding of, and ultimately an influence over, the daily practice of operational managers. For Fabrice, the goal is then to show to the other management controllers that this new positioning is more rewarding than that of internal consultant. A controversy then emerges within the group of management controllers.

Conflict of identity and controversy within the group

One scene in particular enables us to see diverging viewpoints within the financial department appear with regards to the role and identity of management controllers. During the period of observation, the DIS reached an agreement with the financial department to set up a ‘data mart’ to consolidate accounting data after each monthly account closure. An IT manager therefore sent to all members of the financial department a list of software data fields contained in the system in order to find out which would be required for building the data mart. This request consequently forced financial managers to state their views of what constitutes a good system explicitly. Personal and organisational issues, as well as coalitions and interactions, clearly emerged in the ensuing debate:

Thursday, 9th June 2005
[Morning, in the office of two IT managers]

Fabrice: What I want is to force people to ask themselves what each item refers to. I don’t want them [management controllers] to tell me ‘we want the same thing as before’, but instead, ‘we want to look at general expenses and general expenses relate to aggregates from element five [in the new accounts system that Fabrice has just drawn up].

[1:45 p.m., having coffee in the company canteen]
The accounting director, to Fabienne [supplier accounts manager]: No, but we have to start thinking seriously about it [the data mart]. Given that we’ve still done nothing about it...

Veronique [head of management control]: Well, I’m going to provide the information that interests me, I’m going express the needs, but I’m not going to make a list of software data fields. We should explain to the DIS what we want and they can sort out how to translate it into computer language.

Friday 3rd June 2005
[In the office of Paul, management controller of Division Z]

Paul: Yea, Fabrice has shown me the data fields and asked me which ones I wanted. I replied: ‘All of them!’ But yesterday I heard that it’s urgent, even that it’s already too late, according to Victor [head of IT applications for the financial department]! But the answer’s always ‘no’ from him anyway. I’ll draw a diagram and I’ll give it to him like that. Tough luck! And anyway, it shouldn’t be the [financial department] doing that. Operational managers should be asking for the statements that interest them. I’m not the one who chooses how we do them: I launch them, but I do it for them, so it has to match what they are expecting. Furthermore, the various departments don’t work in the same way, so they’ll ask for different things. That’s quite normal.

This particular issue enables us to represent the relationships. Fabrice seeks to frame decision making by providing operational managers with targeted information, which forces him to intervene in designing the system. To do this, he must delve into the IT system, but also wants the other financial managers to follow him and does not understand their reluctance. He then sets out to impose his field of expertise – the crossroads between finance and IT – as well as his language, which is notable in the accounts system that he has designed himself. The head of management control’s response is straightforward: she’s not a computer technician and so cannot go into the system. It is the DIS, seen as a service provider, which should ensure the translation from financial language to IT language.

Paul goes further in his criticism. In his view, the very expression of needs does not fall into the domain of management controllers: it is the role of operational managers. According to his definition of the situation, the operational manager should select the information he needs and the controller only intervenes to provide the information required. Consequently, selecting the relevant information cannot be carried out upstream, by staff functions outside the business, but instead must result from close collaboration between operational and financial managers. It is on the basis of this premise that he is able to identify himself as a internal consultant. He can then turn to an IT programmer to obtain the technical means to respond to operational demand.
Here, we clearly see that the trajectories followed by Paul and by Fabrice are aimed at the same outcome – taking part in the decision-making process – but trace diverging paths. Whereas Paul moves to the level of decision making itself, wanting to ‘help’ a manager take the ‘right’ decision, Fabrice prefers to move upstream of the process to influence the manager by imposing on him relatively rigid frameworks. For Fabrice, information is not to be requested by an operational manager: instead, he should decide what is relevant and impose the information on operational managers. For the latter, information is therefore no longer something to be requested with a view to enlightening decision-making; instead, it is to be forced upon them.

From Paul’s viewpoint, this trajectory is unimaginable: whereas Fabrice sees himself as a translator, Paul only sees himself as an intermediary. For him, moving into IT tools constitutes dirty work and also means distancing himself further from operational work. Whereas Fabrice places value in technical expertise and solving complex problems, both IT and finance-related, Paul opts for operational cooperation and collective decision-making. In turn, Fabrice rejects this position since it allows only partial involvement, and because it assumes slow consensus building. It is therefore the integration of operational managers in decisions to be made that constitutes for Fabrice dirty work. To avoid it, he prefers to make important decisions alone, even if they only relate to the information system and not to operational management. For Fabrice, Paul’s viewpoint is influenced by his past experience far from the specificities of TechCo: his recent arrival explains why he holds on to the illusion of one day becoming an internal consultant.

Fabrice’s positioning is criticised by the other financial managers. For instance, when he is attempting to solve an IT problem with Victor relating to the financial department, the director of accounting leaves the room furious. On returning to his office and taking the
observer to one side, he exclaims: “No, I really don’t understand Fabrice. Whose side is he on?!” In his opinion, Fabrice is playing the IT department off against the financial department, a direct reference to Fabrice’s desire to move into the IT system. And yet, not everyone follows Paul’s position: it is seen as another radical position. Veronique and Eric adopt intermediary positions, perhaps due to the fact that they don’t have sufficiently strong views regarding which position to adopt. More hesitantly, they position themselves between the two extremes represented by the practices of Fabrice and Paul. As a result, Veronique does not want to get involved with the IT system, but when asked by Fabrice, she is prepared to provide a “needs assessment” whereas Paul considers it to be outside his role.

Discussion

In this paper we develop a negative ontology of practice, identity at work and professional competition. We argue that studying what individuals hide, despise or refuse to do is as revealing as analysing their claims for jurisdiction or what makes them proud. These hidden practices indirectly participate in constructing personal identity at work. Individuals, interpreting their situation as excessively different from their idealistic expectations, might not have a clear idea of who they are, but definitely know who they do not want to be, and what they do not want to do—what they consider as their dirty work. We also argue that professional competition can be studied through discourses but is also revealed through practices. In this perspective, dirty work constitutes a fruitful avenue for researchers. Definition and games of delegation of the dirty work act as a number of signals that represent and materialise the state of professional competition. Finally, we show that this negative ontology, focused on how accountants try to avoid the tasks they associate with a disgraceful identity, revealing what they would like to hide and forget—the “breach in the façade”—, is also a way to better understand where accounting does not go, why and how organisational zones remain in the shadow.
At TechCo, engineers hold all operational management positions and the firm’s strategy is based on technical innovation and excellence. Management controllers therefore feel sidelined under the pretext that engineers alone have the necessary competencies to make decisions. The marginal position of management controllers emerges notably during meetings organised by operational managers, in which they feel like they play a minor role—that of bean counters (Hopper, 1980)—and even feel used as instruments to shift attention from certain operational problems. On the daily basis, each interaction with operational managers is an opportunity for management controllers to observe a form of disdain for their work, a sign that their status is losing value. Each example, however innocent it may seem, adds to a growing list of indications suggesting their marginalisation. The controllers are thus led to resurrect devices that may only be described as dead since they are no longer used by anyone. They address their requests to budgetary managers but the latter rush to relegate this work to subordinates whom the controllers believe do not possess the competencies. Repeated and sometime crude errors from operational managers are also reinterpreted as an ostensible sign of disdain. In fact, engineers consider all demands coming from controllers as a dirty work that prevents them from focusing on what they see as their core activity. However, operational managers can accept to cooperate with controllers. But these contacts, synonymous with compromise in the minds of operational managers, must be made in the shadows away from prying eyes. Everything must take place in the wings in order to maintain the façade in the spotlight.

The feeling of having a marginal position influences the view that controllers have of their profession. At TechCo, multiple signs of disdain constitute numerous motives for frustration for controllers, and modify their definition of what constitutes dirty work. Gathering, processing and making data reliable are tasks traditionally seen as undervalued for anyone wishing to become an internal consultant. Here, the feeling that operational managers
display a certain disdain for controllers’ work reinforces the demeaning character of the least noble part of their activity. Even what is widely considered prestigious can become dirty work: this is the case, for instance, of participation in meetings in support of the group’s board members. The definition of dirty work is therefore situational and emerging: its construction depends on the context of the interaction and on the daily practice of controllers, on their feelings as much as on their values.

It then becomes a matter of management controllers managing the dirty work. Unable to delegate, they seek to make it less visible. Thus, they seek to reduce errors to dust. This transformation of dirty work into dirty dust entails three consequences. It helps to protect the value associated with practice: it is a matter for the controllers of hiding the potential shortcomings of a system and of practice that are supposedly infallible. All discrediting information is thus reduced to dust in a hunt for variances. It is also an opportunity to pass judgement and to decide the value of the information, and consequently to take back control over their practice and find a form of autonomy. It is also an opportunity to create cohesion within the group, although this effect is not necessarily conscious. Collective participation in efforts to transform dirty work into dirty dust, a sign of solidarity between members of the group, creates the feeling of belonging and influences the identity of the group and the positioning of the function. Those who refuse to “get their hands dirty”, whatever the reason given, are seen as traitors.

And yet, more in-depth analysis of the different interactions offers a glimpse of individual divergences and of heterogeneity within the group. Thus, Fabrice illustrates the positioning of a ‘deviant’ controller. With long and strong experience in the organisation, he has decided to draw a cross over deliberative cooperation with the engineers. He therefore attempts to influence their decision making by constraining their activity through the information system. In doing this, he accepts a part of what is viewed by others to be dirty
work, invisible and demeaning. All his efforts consist in using his mastery of IT and accounting languages to make himself visible in a timely manner and indispensible in the organisation, but also to spotlight the errors of others. Fabrice therefore reinterprets operational errors, which typically create dirty work for management controllers, as a means of dialoguing with them. The challenge for him is then to demonstrate to the other controllers that his vision is more rewarding that that of internal consultant, which provokes a controversy within the group.

Management controllers therefore use accounting as a means of rendering invisible—or less visible—the least prestigious elements of their profession, by drawing the attention of others towards the most rewarding actions. Certain tasks, which draw them back to the image of bean counters, must be hidden because they cannot be delegated. The accounting eye is therefore focused on, and draws attention to, not the organisational failures but on whatever makes controllers proud.

Since the practice is situated and the values tied to a local context, it becomes possible to imagine professional groups with an identity that is neither stable nor homogeneous. Even though occupational identity is partially formed by major trends (Ahrens, 1996; Ahrens & Chapman, 2000), we can also see divergences emerge within the professions and occupations themselves. Indeed, individuals belonging to the same occupation may have multiple values and interests, and therefore follow diverging identification processes, which contradicts the assumption of relative homogeneity within a given profession (Bucher & Strauss, 1961). Rather than assuming homogeneity and stability within a profession, a promising avenue lies in studying how some of its members manage to create a feeling of homogeneity, a fragile and drifting compromise that allows them to define the legitimate picture of the whole profession—and thus to become dominant.
It is therefore an interplay between light and shadow, the visible and the invisible, that takes the stage (Morgan & Willmott, 1993). Each will define the most rewarding tasks and relationships according to his or her own logic and seek to spotlight them. They thus want people outside their profession to recognise value in their work and consequently in themselves (Hughes, 1951b). The following stage is for the members of a profession to go beyond a simple offer to define for themselves the needs they satisfy and the audiences that they wish to address (Hughes, 1970). The TechCo case study teaches us that this is not achieved by seeking a particularly gratifying position alone but also by avoiding and rejecting the darkest sides of the activity. Identity is forged by defining dirty work, a bundle of tasks considered too ungrateful and of relationships experienced as degrading to be assimilated into the work of the management controller. One contribution of our paper is to show that when moving between the visible and the invisible, from the study of light to the study of shadow, it becomes possible to draw out the values proper to the group under scrutiny without considering these as given (Becker, 1963).

It is the shift from dirty work to dirty dust and its different modalities that enable the management controller to define his objectives and the quality criteria of his work. Playing with the light and shadow also enables him to influence the other members of the organisation while maintaining his own autonomy (Vaivio, 1999; Dechow & Mouritsen, 2005). The positioning of each person will then influence the choices of his colleagues, the relationships and interactions into which he must integrate, and therefore the jurisdiction of his profession. TechCo’s case allows us to see a link emerge between the individual desire to manage dirty work and the jurisdictional issues of a profession. Each professional group seems continuously to fear that a competing profession may take over a part of its tasks (Bucher & Strauss, 1961; Abbott, 1988). Delegating certain tasks relating to dirty work equates to taking the risk of losing jurisdiction. Taking on certain lowly tasks may enable one to win a new
jurisdiction (Ezzamel & Burns, 2005). A significant challenge consists in keeping a structural zone of influence and power, such as what is guaranteed by belonging to a specific profession, while presenting a rewarding image of the profession. It is therefore important to take into account the study of tasks, and notably those considered as relating to dirty work, when analysing competition between the professions.
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Figures.

Fig. 1. TechCo organisation chart