



# Resistance: Faces of power and how identity is reflected



## Authors:

Natasha Winkler-Titus<sup>1</sup>   
Anne Crafford<sup>2</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, Business School, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Department of Human Resources Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Studies, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Natasha Winkler-Titus,  
natashawt@sun.ac.za

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**Purpose:** Burn to be heard, #Blacklivesmatter, #COVID-19. These slogans have sharpened society's focus on inequality and resistance to injustice. Power in organisational management literature has predominantly been confined to power dynamics related to organisational structure or hierarchy and applying an identity lens has been limited to subjective forms of power. This study applied the typology of Fleming and Spicer, who identified four forms or faces of power, explaining resistance and articulating forms of potentially hidden disenfranchisement. The research aimed to expand on Fleming and Spicer's discourse on power in organisations and resistance against this power.

**Design:** The explorative nature of the research question called for the application of an interpretive lens – through qualitative research – using the grounded theory approach in a case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in the process we set out to explore.

**Findings:** It was found that domineering power-constrained people and a subjectified identity led to a state of patency. Through a collective identity and discursive resistance, manipulation gave rise to coercion.

**Practical implications:** Understanding how systemic as well as episodic forms of power are present in the organisation and experienced by different stakeholders will help leaders avoid negative unintended consequences of power and potential marginalisation.

**Value:** Fleming and Spicer described systemic and episodic dynamics as two broad constructs of power but questioned how and why one dimension may dominate the other. By explicating the interplay between power and resistance, through an identity lens, this study explains how different forms of power are effective at different times.

**Keywords:** resistance; power; collective identity; patency; episodic power, systemic power.

## Introduction

The chilling rallying call 'Burn to be heard' traversed social media platforms during mobilisation of protesters in the higher education sector in South Africa. Damage to infrastructure sustained during the 2015–2016 uprising was estimated to have exceeded R600 million and forced the affected educational institutions to make change decisions. Arson is an expression of resistance and is one example of a mechanism used by social actors to make their voices heard. This is substantiated by Martin De Holan (2016), who declared, 'There is no complex society without social tensions, and one form it takes to manifest itself is resistance' (p. 95). Resistance is bolstered by the hope that the unlikely victory of the powerless over the powerful may be achieved (Courpasson, 2016). But how well do we understand the mechanisms that trigger the unfolding of resistance and the chances that protesters' hopes will translate into victory?

Resistance has been explored both as physical action and as discourse, including silence and aspects of resistance have been studied such as the scale of resistance, the direction or goals of resistance, resistance as political action and identity in resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Courpasson (cited by Martin De Holan, 2016) studied resistance in the workplace and emphasised how it can be applied as a positive and creative mechanism, providing a sense of belonging to those resisting. Another research angle was the collective aspect of resistance through discourse (Lilja & Baaz, 2015), action and the construction of a collective identity defining resistance and resisters, specifically emphasising the centrality of power, discourse and identity (Hardy, 2016). Fleming (2016) extended the views on resistance beyond postmodernism, accentuating the costs involved for those who resist power. Three motivations, alone or in combination, are central to resistance: economic, social and ethical and prompt a group to action when they have come to a

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decision that things need to change (Fleming, 2016). However, not all experiences of oppression culminate in active resistance and those who resist, as Hardy (2016) indicates, need to construct an identity as resistant that makes them belong to a worthwhile cause. An ethos of belonging and collaboration is required and takes many forms and involves many different activities (Courpasson, 2016). A common theme in studying resistance is the presence of power relations that are unfavourable to the resisters (Martin De Holan, 2016). However, the author warns us not to succumb to a romantic belief that every person who resists is noble, as well-documented movements also have a well-documented dark side (Martin De Holan, 2016). Resistance and power are locked together in an ongoing iterative, recursive dialectic (see e.g. Foucault, 1982; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007) and are increasingly intertwined (Fleming & Spicer, 2008). While management aims to control actual work practices, 'the tensions created by this very control push certain actors to resist and consequently to reconstitute the social conditions in organisations' (Courpasson, 2011, p. 9). Power, therefore, should be studied in relation to acts of resistance (Wilmot, 2017), which form part of the struggle (Fleming & Spicer, 2008).

Concern has been raised that a complex conceptualisation of power has not been encouraged in management theory (Barley, 2007; Deetz, 2008) and Hardy (2016) called for a greater understanding of the very meaning and mechanics of resistance. We departed from this backdrop, as we aimed to understand how power and resistance unfold in, through and around an organisation, ultimately forcing management to make a decision of change in favour of a marginalised group. Based on interviews with a variety of stakeholders both within and outside the organisation and on document analysis and observations, we explored the processes setting the conditions for and influencing the consequences of #Outsourcing must fall (#OMF), a social movement aimed at reversing the practice of outsourcing.

This paper lays the foundation for a deeper understanding of power and resistance and their relationship with processes of collective identity in a case of social resistance. Drawing on the faces of power, as outlined by Fleming and Spicer (2014), we consider how and why forces of power and resistance may emerge and how they operate through discursive identities and related discourses. The interplay of systemic and episodic forms of power provides greater insights into subjects like domination, manipulation and exploitation, which scholars have found to be sidelined in favour of issues such as management effectiveness and organisational performance (Hudson, Okhuysen, & Creed, 2015). A greater understanding is required of the interplay between power and resistance and specifically the time-related elements of this interaction (Alvesson & Szkuclarek, 2020), and this is where this study makes a contribution. Power relations are subjectively experienced, and thus the microprocesses through which power is enacted and resisted are of great importance and require in-depth, qualitative research (Wilmot, 2017).

The value of this study lies in looking both within and outside the organisation to explore the interplay between power relations and identities. We show how the systemic power of domination was exercised by management over a long period – 17 years – and how marginalised workers experienced a form of subjectification as a result of this power. We then explain how episodic power provoked actual resistance and – in a short period of 10 days – forced management's hand in favour of the marginalised workers. Aligned with the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), we turned to literature only after theoretical categories began emerging in the initial data analysis phase. The study extends our understanding of power and identity relations by conceptualising the faces of power and their relationship with various identity positions to explain how conditions of exploitation come to be and how these are resisted. In so doing, we contribute to an understanding of the relationship between power and resistance and, in particular, the meaning and mechanisms of resistance (Hardy, 2016) and temporal elements of this interaction (Alvesson & Szkuclarek, 2020). Although authors have planted the seeds of micro- and macro-emancipation (Ashcraft, 2008; Huault, Perret, & Spicer, 2012) leading to resistance, we explicate the types of power and how, in this case, only through macro-emancipations, the overt, episodic form of power created successful resistance.

## The setting – Describing the case

In 2015, students at higher education institutions in South Africa led a countrywide protest targeting the unaffordability of higher education. The intensity of this mobilisation took the nation by surprise. Transformation in higher education moved to the heart of national discourse through #FeesMustFall (#FMF) social media campaigns (Habib, 2016). The revolt saw the uprising of the 'missing middle', an established common-sense classification referring to students who are too poor to afford higher education, but not poor enough to qualify for government or public funding (Fernandes, 2011). It was the plight of this 'missing middle' grouping that formed the central focus of the #FMF movement. The act of revolt and violence did not stop there: subsequently contract (blue collar) workers in outsourced services at prominent higher education institutions were drawn into the movement. The #OMF movement saw the students and workers mobilise and, joined by outside protesters, pressure management into a decision to insource contract workers. The movement, initially sparked in traditionally white universities, emerged in October and November of 2015 in 18 tertiary educational institutions across the country (Lockett & Pantorelli, 2016).

Over many years, outsourced workers in South Africa, including in the case organisation of this study, experienced exploitative labour relations, financial exclusion and structural racism (Johnson, 2001), and this clashed with the expectations of South Africans in the post-Apartheid era. Apartheid was a system of institutionalised or systematic racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa between

1948 and 1991. The revolt of the students in 2015–2016 was influenced by socioeconomic conditions and political ideologies in the national context playing out on campus, and this discontent resonated with contract workers who had experienced similar frustrations over many years, culminating in some form of collective recognition. During the 1990s, the commodification of higher education (Johnson, 2001) led to the outsourcing of non-core services at various higher education institutions across the country – tallied by Johnson (2001) as up to 20 tertiary institutions. Much pressure was brought to bear over almost two decades to have contract workers insourced – with no success. The demand was usually met with management logic that insourcing was not financially viable. This logic was challenged in 2015 when students mobilised, putting the affordability of higher education as well as the insourcing of vulnerable workers on the national agenda in a way that had not happened before (Habib, 2016).

The biggest mass uprising since the demise of Apartheid in 1994 threw higher education into crisis, playing out in a national context of economic downturn and sociopolitical instability. Political parties and ideological groups asserted themselves by projecting their own agendas onto this social struggle and the movement fractured into a cacophony of ideological and protest voices, each with its own educational and political demands (Habib, 2016).

The case study centred on one of the larger and most established higher education institutions in South Africa and indeed on the continent, where, despite this standing, the resistance led to the enforcing of a change decision in a very short time. The outcome of this resistance comprised the experience of anarchy in the workplace, the financial impact of additional operational and labour costs, structural changes, a review of strategy and operational plans and new leadership requirements. The case study presented an opportunity to explore resistance and power. The collective identities of resisters created through the mobilisation provided the bedrock to situate identity as a power position.

## Conceptualising the problem

Power is a key concept of both the social sciences and organisational and management theory (Courpasson, 2011). For this study, power was viewed as patterns of perceived need expressed in relationships and thus inherently relational (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Wilmot, 2017). Therefore, power is not something that resides within individuals but instead is constructed and performed during social interactions (Clegg, 2014; Geppert & Dörrenbächer, 2011). Nevertheless, while people are inherently interdependent, need is rarely equal and therefore patterns of power relations are always considered to be skewed (Lo & Ramayah, 2011). When considering the interplay of power and resistance in the study of this case, we found that Fleming and Spicer (2014) accounted for both in their description of the ‘faces of power’ and thus could assist us in understanding more about both

concepts. We now conceptualise power and thereafter give an overview of resistance.

## Fleming and Spicer’s faces of power

In conceptualising power, this study commences from a 2014 paper by Fleming and Spicer (2014), the aim of which was to ‘review and evaluate the conceptualisations of power in management and organisational studies’ (p. 240). In so doing, the authors summarised the various perspectives of power and presented a typology that provides a comprehensive framework with which to analyse the use of power in resistance. Fleming and Spicer’s (2014) four major perspectives or faces of power, namely formal/coercive power, agenda setting/manipulation, ideology/domination and subjectification/regulation, provide a useful framework for this study and are defined here:

- *Coercion* is the direct exercise of power to achieve certain political ends by getting someone to do something (Fleming & Spicer, 2014) and is often described as a direct mobilisation of power.
- *Manipulation* refers to the exercise of power by positioning boundaries related to the consideration of a matter as well as shaping the agenda and manipulating the rules (Fleming & Spicer, 2014), for example, political manoeuvring (Kanter, 1977) and the mobilisation of bias (Mello, 2015).
- *Domination* as a form of power is established through the normalisation of ideological values that become hegemonic. The result is the shaping of people’s perceptions, cognitions and preferences so that they accept their role in the natural order of things, allowing the power to go unchallenged and hierarchical relations to appear inevitable, natural and acceptable (Fleming & Spicer, 2014, p. 243).
- *Subjectification* refers to the internalisation of practices, techniques and procedures as people’s lived sense of self and identity (Foucault, 1982). Thus, power is achieved through defining the conditions of possibility underlying how people experience themselves as people and producing the type of people they think they naturally are.

This presents an intersection opportunity for power and identity as the human subject is not a given but produced historically; that is people are constituted through correlative elements of power and knowledge (Townley, 1993).

## Conceptualising resistance

Resistance is perceived as, and argued to be, a form of power that challenges, confronts or contests the limits of control, which is never total (Foucault, 1978, p. 94–96). Although the gaze of organisational scholars may be upon individualistic and cynical resistance, leading to more studies of the everyday struggles or subjectivity of resistant actors (Contu, 2008; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995), it should be noted that collective action remains a common manifestation of resistance, as in the cases of air traffic controllers in France

(Morris, 2016), garment workers in Bangladesh (Safi, 2016) and glass workers in Turkey (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 2014). It is also evident that both the study and practice of resistance have been changing in response to the socioeconomic and cultural transformations that we experience in different parts of the world (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Harvey, 2007). Resistance in contemporary organisations is generally driven by three motives: practices that undermine economic interests; practices that are socially threatening and linked to collective identity and practices considered to undermine an actor's participation in an organisation based on ethics (Fleming, 2016). While resistance in the work context has been debated over decades, there does not always appear to be agreement on what should be considered as resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017).

While some studies focus on the more explicit nature of workplace resistance (Hardy, 2016), others emphasise subjectivity and an 'inner distancing' from managerial efforts to control (Alvesson & Szkladlerek, 2020, p. 3). Resistance is related to the power mechanisms in organisations and is the effort to 'subvert this power so that there may be favourable effects for those who are symbolically, economically or structurally subordinated in organisations' (Fleming & Spicer, 2007, pp. 30–31). Many studies on resistance in organisations suggest that any type of resistance (conscious/unconscious, collective/individual, overt/covert) to managerial control potentially assists employees to interrogate power and control mechanisms in organisations, which may plant seeds for micro- and macro-emancipations (Ashcraft, 2008; Huault et al., 2012).

Finally, resistance is also complex, as it displays variation in groups and is not always pure (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) as individuals resisting may simultaneously support the structures of domination through accommodation (Weitz, 2001), ambiguity (Trethewey, 1999), complicity (Healey, 1999), conformity (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996) or assimilation (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Variation in groups creates complexity because most studies start by dividing the population into the powerful and the powerless (Miller, 1997). Hollander and Einwohner (2004) refuted this and posited that there are multiple systems of hierarchy, and that individuals can be simultaneously powerful and powerless in different systems. Power and resistance are increasingly intertwined through struggle and more nuanced concepts are required to describe this (Fleming & Spicer, 2008).

## Research design

### Case study

One of the central aims of case study research is to consider the complexity and particularity of the case in its context (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2019). For this study, an interpretivist case study approach allowed for a detailed look at the non-linear power dynamics at work in the process unfolding at the organisation. The relative ease and speed with which the

decision to insource was eventually accomplished, especially considering the dominant logic that insourcing was not financially viable, provided an example of an extreme or unique case of unfolding power and resistance, and aligns with how Yin (2009) defines case study research.

### Data gathering

The detailed understanding of the case required the use and triangulation of multiple data sources (Yin, 2009). Consistent with the requirements of case study research, data were therefore gathered by means of interviews, research and observation (Yin, 2009). Initially, a summative outline of the case history (Yin, 2014) was drawn up and discussed with the management team at Uptown after which unstructured guiding questions were formulated. The guiding questions aimed to probe the participants' views on the change process and how the decision to insource services came about.

The sample of research participants was purposefully selected (Fendt & Sachs, 2008) from various groups of stakeholders to explore multiple interpretations of the change process. Eighteen participants were interviewed, including management members, student leaders, contract workers, members of organised labour and employees from the case study organisation. The interviews lasted anything from 30 min to 2 h but on average 90 min per participant. The interviews, which were conducted over a period of 4 months shortly after the change event, served as the primary data informing the research but were complemented with secondary data input, including information from the organisation's documentation and related media reports (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van De Ven, 2013).

Although the interviews focused on the change event of 2015–2016, but the decision to change to insourcing was made in 9 days, it soon became apparent that the participants located the origin of these in the circumstances of the preceding years, and the case could only be understood in its entirety by considering the process of outsourcing 17 years earlier.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. For each interview, the research objectives were explained, and informed consent was obtained. Ethical clearance for the project was given by the organisation's ethics committee. The multiple perspectives of participants on one focal event allowed for a replication logic where each participant's script was used to test emerging theoretical insights (Yin, 2014). In the findings section of this article, excerpts of participant responses are provided in italics, with the source of the excerpts referenced by means of codes (as explained in Table 1). Only two union representative leaders from the case organisation could be interviewed. However, media commentary, referenced as document A4, cited additional union representatives' comments from a *Daily Maverick* interview (Nicolson, 2016). Also, although only one student representative was available for interview, we applied the commentary from student representatives in secondary

sources. A newspaper article published by one of our participants on 1 February 2016 quoted student leaders from the case organisation. Only one contract employee was available for an interview of 2 h. However, to supplement these observations and fieldnotes, the first author sat in on a contract worker engagement session on 30 May 2016 and obtained additional perspectives of the worker experience.

## Methods of analysis

The inquiry combined induction with deduction in an abductive approach that was consistent with the research goals. The analysis procedure followed the grounded theory approach and specifically the constructivist grounded theory guideline advised by Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory methodology provided a systematic procedure to collect, analyse and conceptualise rich qualitative data for the purpose of furthering the theoretical development of concepts (Glaser, 2017).

Firstly, we conducted the interviews and researched details of the hashtag events to enable us to develop a thick description of the case (Geertz, 1973). Data collection and analysis were done concurrently, as proposed for a grounded theory analysis approach (Charmaz, 2006). Following the description, transcripts from interviews and other data sources were coded using ATLAS.ti (Friese, 2016). Coding remained as close as possible to the actual data and words

used by the participants, focusing on words that reflected action. The initial codes were refined to second-order focused codes and used as building blocks towards theoretical development (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2019). The nomological network in Table 2 presents a summary of the concepts and categories developed during the initial phases of coding and analysis. Following this process, theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) assisted in specifying relationships between categories to weave the narrative together and ultimately develop the findings contributing to theoretical insights.

The 18 participant accounts of the case and documentary evidence allowed for an iterative process of data analysis in which concepts and their categorisation established or confirmed linkages between categories. The data were initially analysed in phases to describe evolving linear patterns and, over time, temporal brackets unfolded sequentially. This aligns well with similar studies on resistance that presented a longitudinal process of multiple resistance attempts and tactics (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). We analysed the unfolding process, initially describing the evolving linear process, but, as our understanding grew, temporal brackets became apparent and we started finding relationships between categories.

The initial process of (first-order) coding generated 122 codes. Thereafter, axial coding generated 12 codes that were expanded to 18 during the ninth interview and remained consistent throughout the remaining interviews, giving a level of comfort on data saturation (Bamford, 2008). For the purpose of this article, however, only 12 of the 18 codes were relevant and were transformed into 12 theoretical concepts, which in turn coalesced around the four power types proposed by Fleming and Spicer (2014). In addition, the power lens accounted for shifts in the various brackets, explaining the movement from one state of affairs to another; the systemic power that created the circumstances and the episodic power (or resistance) that explained the response to the power.

The first author of this article acted as the primary coder, while analyses and meaning-making were cross-checked by the co-author at regular intervals. We relied on triangulation of our data wherever possible to check its validity. Our

**TABLE 1:** Participant codes.

Participant type	Code	Number of types
Managers at the case organisation	IL	11
Employee representative/union leader at the organisation	U	2
Student representative	S	1
Contractor	C	1
Employee at the organisation	IE	3
<b>Document types</b>		
Organisation documentation		
Uptown company website	OD	5
Strategy documents		
Social media	SM	4
Twitter feeds		
Facebook posts		
Websites	WS	21
Blogs		
News articles		

**TABLE 2:** Data structure of emerging themes relating to how power functioned.

Second-order code	Theoretical concepts emerging from the data	Power literature - faces of power	Construct	Exercised by	For what purpose?
Service level agreement	Governance framework	Domination	Domination through commercially viable identity of 'contract worker'	Management	Financial/ Operating model
Contract worker	Normalisation of dominating power				
Agreement	Voiceless outsider				
Disenfranchisement	Disenfranchised worker	Subjectification	Experience of 'modern slave' as a subject position leads to a state of patency	Outsourced workers	Survival
Survival	Subservient identity				
Modern slavery	Patency				
Protesters identifying with the voiceless	Shifting the nature of identity	Manipulation	Through collective identity and agency of the 'missing middle', manipulation ensues	Protesting students	Liberation
Missing middle	Missing middle				
Social context and public opinion	Agenda setting				
Virtual mobilisation	Virtual gangs flying metaphorical banners	Coercion	Coercive mobilisation threatening the regulated academic identity	Protesters	Force a decision by management
Collaboration	Experience of threat			Contract workers	
Reputational threat	Meaning associated with black protester				

reporting includes only data substantiated across multiple information sources (Klarin & Sharmely, 2019). Detailed field notes were kept, which later served as valuable qualitative sources for triangulation and reflection (Bamford, 2008) and augmented the evolving theoretical insight.

## Quality

As qualitative research is often called into question for its lack of rigour, careful attention was paid to all aspects of quality. Multiple data sources were used to ensure trustworthiness and confirmability, and extensive field notes were written. A detailed chain of evidence was developed by means of an audit trail (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; Yin, 2014). To ensure credibility, a case narrative was prepared although space does not permit sharing this here. Data were carefully coded and peer-reviewed over a period. Competing explanations and propositions were discussed and debated (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; Yin, 2014) among the authors and reviewed with a participant from the organisation.

## Findings – How power functions

At the organisation, the #OMF campaign had a visible, driven intent during 2016, but the complexity of the worker discontent and power dynamics existed as far back as the 1990s. The interactions in and around the organisation provided a useful window to the evolution of conditions that would ultimately lead to the #OMF. Below, we seek to explain how power and resistance functioned through identity, enabling power mechanisms and tactics.

We begin by discussing the forms and faces of power that gave rise to the forced change. We found that this change took place over two phases.

### Phase 1 – Systemic forms of influence building the conditions for forced change

The indirect power discussed in this section set the underlying conditions that created an environment ready for change when direct power was exerted.

#### Domination through the commercially viable identity of 'the contract worker'

A key factor in domination was the service-level agreement that the organisation had in place with service companies for the provision of blue-collar type labour such as gardening and security. These companies operated on a commercial model in which they sold non-core services to organisations, which did not want the responsibility of managing labour associated with these functions. While the service companies benefited handsomely from the arrangement, the contract workers themselves were paid very little – to the degree of exploitation – and this had given rise to calls from various sectors to end labour broking. The practice was, however, commonplace in the private sector and among higher education institutions. As such, exploitative relationships of power were made to appear inevitable – normalised in part by entrenched domination systems in the organisation

(Fleming & Spicer, 2014). In addition, consent for the practice was discursively manufactured using the term 'service-level agreement' and the identity position of 'contract worker'.

The existence of an 'agreement' may have been true for the organisation and the service providers but certainly not for the contract workers, some of whom referred to the practice as a form of *modern slavery* (C, 16 August 2016). The contract workers were based at a client site and arrived on campus daily, forging working relationships with people there and having their hours and work practices regulated by staff from the case organisation. Nevertheless, from the perspective of management at the organisation, these people were viewed as contract workers, which gave them an identity distinct from that of company employees. They were therefore perceived as being outside the responsibility of management and not subject to the usual staff management policy and practices. The consequence was that contract workers were perceived, not as embodied persons, but rather as contractual obligations and were thus objectified as such.

One of the standard organisational practices was the possibility of belonging to a union, but contract workers felt they would place their job security in jeopardy if they joined one, and this further entrenched their voicelessness (Johnson, 2001). Despite the lack of formal representation, in-house unions had tabled the discontent of contract workers in the past, but as domination 'shapes what is considered worthy of political attention and effort' (Fleming & Spicer, 2014), they were unsuccessful in bringing about change. Thus, while management realised there was discontent, they shrugged off contract workers with service-level agreements as 'not our problem' (IL5, 25 July 2015), and this justified any further lack of action from the side of management:

'This thing of insourcing when it came to us it was not a surprise. The decision and speed at which the decision was taken maybe was a surprise, but this is an old issue. Cosatu once marched to the Union Buildings saying the government must do away with this thing of labour broking ... I think roughly this was about 10 years back. If the institutional leadership only listened before when we initially raised this matter, we could have potentially avoided this scenario.' (U2, 14 July 2016)

This perspective was corroborated in newspaper articles but more specifically in blogs by Arendse (WS15, April 2017) and Shaku (WS16, 9 May 2016) on lessons learnt from the FMF and OMF campaigns, respectively:

'I started at the university in 2012 and around 2013 our very own union, recognised unions at the university, were saying to us, we want you to look at the contracts, the service contracts that you have with Outsourcing Co G and the likes because we believe people are being exploited. We already had documentation where the unions brought to the fore those specific contracts, illustrating how we pay to the service contracts and how they in turn pay less than a third of that to the employees. Even the issues that the unions raised with us, we had identified, and it was not one of the urgent issues. As important as it was, they had not raised it in such a way that it was deemed urgent. They said to us: "Put it to the back burner as

something we want you to look at eventually". It was not even on our risk register. (IL7, 15 August 2016)

This perspective created a context that desperately required change and provided perfect conditions to be highlighted during the 2015 uprising, which emphasised the pervasive socioeconomic inequality and injustices prevalent in the educational context specifically.

### The subjectified identity of the 'modern slave'

In contrast to the benign identity of contract workers assumed by the case organisation, the exploitative conditions of the service-level agreement were perceived by contract workers as a form of modern slavery, as they grappled with a position of severe disenfranchisement. The identity of a 'modern slave' was constructed around survival and fear and was reinforced by a lack of viable alternatives:

'My interpretation was that of being in slavery and there is nothing that you can do. You can also liken it to slavery or what we had during Apartheid.' (C1, 16 August 2016)

'The sort of fear that exists between workers toward [an] academic leader caused that this discussion could not be brought to the deepest level (IL9, 1 September 2016). People felt that they could be done away with at any given time with very little wrongdoing. They were very vulnerable.' (IL7, 11 August 2016)

An article published and referred to in the *Mail & Guardian* by a participant (IL4) echoed the impact of the socioeconomic context and the experience of the marginalised contract worker as an unintended consequence of the original outsourcing process. Unprotected by a union, the contract workers were vulnerable because their services could be terminated at any time. For this reason, they acquiesced to the directives of the organisation and forced their aspirations and relations with others to comply with the constraints of this identity position. This subservient identity was subjectified through systems of talk and text that constructed the contract workers' social reality at work and regulated their behaviour:

'Before, they had to use other tactics to survive ... To understand the hidden transcript, you have to go below. If you go to a group of oppressed women, oppressed for whatever reason, and you tell them to be strong, to stand up for their rights, etc., you're not telling them anything new – they know all of that. They know what is going on. Their silence is not stupid silence, they are silent because it is wise to be silent. It saves time, it saves lives, it helps them wake up and fight for another day.' (IL4, 21 July 2016)

The above-mentioned comment by a manager of the institution suggests a form of patency or a state of passivity resulting from the experience of being acted on (Reader, 2007). While the contract workers were capable of action, the rational consequences of such actions would be too costly in respect of the ability to care for themselves and their dependents. Thus, the state of patency does not imply a lack of understanding of the injustice but a sombre recognition of their limitations in resisting domination and the wisdom to wait for an appropriate time for defiance. The mobilisation

in 2015–2016 triggered new meaning-making around the plight of the contract workers and they were given a new identity, 'the missing middle' – the process of which we explore in the next section.

## Phase 2 – Direct exercise of power

Against the backdrop of years of domination and subjectification, direct power as a form of resistance was exercised through the mobilisation of the concept of the missing middle, as well as by applying tactics to intimidate and mobilise. At the start of 2016 #OMF, protest action appeared on the radar and the campaign became more violent.

The decision to insource was *pushed to conclusion by the violent nature of protests* but also *at the heart of the decision sat human dignity* (IE3, 31 August 2016). This power was explained through the implicit shaping of issues and the direct exercise of power through social and physical mobilisation.

### Resistance by manipulating the meaning of 'contract worker'

Manipulation refers to the implicit shaping of an issue and achieving power over an organisation using sense-making and symbolism (Fleming & Spicer, 2014) and is usually associated with grassroots activism (Böhm, Spicer, & Fleming, 2008). In the case of the organisation, the meanings associated with identities were used as a mechanism of manipulation. While the #FMF campaign had highlighted the plight of underprivileged students, management was not prepared for the ramifications of a change in the profile of students and the possible consequences. Academia at the institution in question, traditionally white and Afrikaans, had over the years responded to changes in the sociopolitical context by accepting increasing numbers of students of colour, and the racial profile of students on campus had changed considerably. The same could, however, not be said for the profile of academic staff, who remained largely white. Nevertheless, the support staff, many of whom were contract workers responsible for blue-collar work such as cleaning, security and gardening services were also non-white. As one participant suggested:

'[T]hey (referring to black students) walk in and out of campus. What do they see? They see black men and women bending down, looking down. Everyone looking up, standing straight, [is] white. The people cleaning, in the garden and security, look like them. And it resonates with them. The rarest species, in fact, is the black female professor.' (IL4)

The students recognised in the contract workers a parent, an aunt or a grandparent and identified with their plight and exploitation:

'There was certainly some resonance there, some aha moment between the students and the workers ... Maybe both feel excluded, they are aggrieved, outsiders to the universities.' (IL4)

This resonance was confirmed by one of the contract workers, who suggested that:

'The students talked on our behalf. This caught us by surprise. I think it came from the fact that the same students are our sisters and brothers. We represent their parents. They are from the suffering, and they see us and they know what we are earning because their parents are earning next to nothing and this is a struggle.' (C1)

In mobilising the contract workers, the students behind the movement linked the plight of the contract worker (predominantly black) to that of the black student and black child who could not afford access to education. One of the contract workers explained it as follows:

'This thing came about as a result of the high fees that students must pay and most black students cannot afford it. Black kids cannot afford these fees and there have been talks with the current government about this education situation, but it seems those who are in government are not willing to do that. Now, the students saw it fit to take things into their own hands. Basically, it was about access to education for a black child.' (C2, 16 August 2016)

Identification occurred at the level of both race and class, and the students mobilised on behalf of the contract workers, forcing into the educational sphere an agenda not traditionally associated with education. Raising the issue as one affecting the black child accentuated the missing middle identity, something at the forefront of the nation's mind because of the #FMF campaign (Mars & Lounsbury, 2009). This lent it considerable legitimacy and highlighted the perceived social injustice of the outsourcing process. In doing so, the meanings of outsourcing were effectively shifted from a commercially viable, market-driven identity to one associated with the exploitation of, in particular, the black child and student – which was highly visible in the prevailing sociopolitical context (Pratto, 2016). The outsourced workers were now labelled as part of the missing middle, a sociopolitically driven identity that demanded greater equality and fair treatment. The shift in shared meaning allowed for a manipulative form of resistive pressure on management (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), who could no longer deny the voice of discontent echoed across the institutional field.

### **Resistance through coercive mobilisation by threatening academic identity**

The manipulative effect of identities was enhanced by the coercive effect of social mobilisation within the traditionally safe space of academia. Using social media platforms to create virtual gangs and fly metaphorical banners of social justice, this case demonstrated the unifying effect of a social movement, as students of all sub-groupings, including race and levels of economic privilege, were mobilised.

Particularly strategic was the timing of the protest, which was placed on the agenda in an academic time frame at the start of the year when students were returning to campus. This had a coercive effect as it ensured action, particularly as discussion occurred within the boundaries of the higher education setting and the traditional time frames, and the

dominant meanings associated with them. Management was forced to cancel its orientation day for first-year students and questions were raised by prospective students' parents about the suitability of the institution as a place of higher learning. There was the threat that parents would move their children elsewhere, with the consequent loss of income for the institution. Furthermore, the academic environment was considered a safe space, a perception supported by the significant number of security personnel contracted in but who, ironically, supported the mobilisation efforts. Given these events and other tactics of intimidation and violence, the safety of the organisation as an institution of higher learning was brought into question. These issues posed a threat to the university's reputation, forcing management to act quickly:

'The fear of the staff, the intimidation that took place. It all influenced the decision (U1, 14 July 2016). The university cancelled lectures for fear of endangering students (M12, 1 February 2016). Being evacuated from a building is a very visible way of saying 'you are not safe' and you 'need to be removed' and it does impact on your experience of going to work.' (IE3)

During protest action, a statement was released by Uptown that it would shut down for the day 'to ensure safety of staff, students and property', as stated by Uptown website newspost 2213899.

While the tactics and strategies used by the #OMF movement were coercive in nature, it is not clear why these tactics were interpreted as a danger and a threat, as similar uprisings at other previously disadvantaged universities had produced no change. We are of the opinion that it is here that the historical meanings associated with ethnic identity played a powerful role. #FMF campaigns had occurred before at what were known as historically black universities, yet this had brought no change to the status quo. Owing to its conservative past, the case organisation had no history of these sorts of uprisings and, as one of the participants asked: if the activist group were all white, would the attitude of the university have been different:

'When you have black workers and students rising up, you call the police. When you have white workers and students rising up, you call psychologists and other such people to help us understand what is happening here. I see that playing out again and again at universities.' (IL4)

We are suggesting that the meanings associated with black students protesting in a traditionally white space led to the interpretation of the mobilisation as a danger, rather than interpreting it as a need for psychological or other intervention. This exacerbated the perceived threat of the uprising and, in conjunction with the other power mechanisms, brought about a change in possibilities regarding the viability of insourcing.

## **Discussion on theoretical contribution**

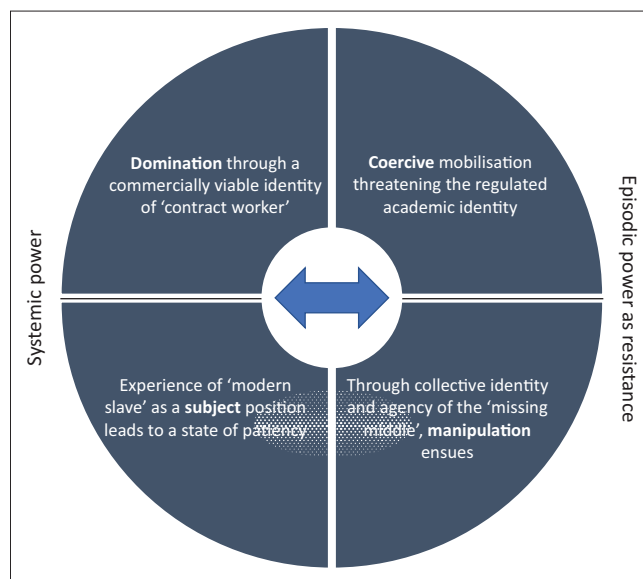
A key contribution of this study is in presenting the interplay of power, identity and resistance as a dynamic process

happening over time, in this case almost 17 years. We demonstrated how various forms of power were applied, analysing how these operated through various identities and their changing meanings, laying the foundation and providing impetus for successful resistance. The consequence of this positive application of power (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006) was improved working conditions for a disadvantaged group of people, allowing them a voice and a measure of control over their own lives. While the typology was originally used by Fleming and Spicer (2014) to integrate different conceptualisations of power, its use in this case demonstrates the functioning of the various modalities in one setting, to provide a broader understanding of power and resistance and their interrelatedness. Power has been theorised both as a property that may be possessed and exercised by a powerful elite and as a relationship that continually shifts and is provisional and unpredictable (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). We suggest that there is a relationship between systemic power, creating the conditions ripe for resistance through the dual effects of domination and subjectification and episodic power conceptualised as resistance manifested through the combined effects of manipulation and coercion. In the case under study, the purpose of manipulation was the implicit shaping of issues while the coercive exercise of power happened through social and physical mobilisation. The so-called Arab Spring and various other uprisings in Europe and the United States following the world financial crisis suggest more general political capacities of individualised collective action (Bennett, 2012).

The current knowledge on power in and around organisations, as summarised by Fleming and Spicer (2014), positions identity predominantly within subjective forms of power. This study extends the conceptualisation of identity-enabling power positions to all the faces of power and demonstrates the use and impact of identity through each of these forms. The theoretical contribution is summarised in Figure 1 and is explained in the section below.

### Functioning of systemic power

In this case study, we saw how the position of outsourced workers was invariably construed by management as that of a contract worker, but by the workers themselves as a modern slave. While the identity position of the contract worker was – from a business perspective – a useful economic tool, its application in the context of labour broking and the specific sociohistorical context made for a very different lived experience by those subjected to it. By framing these workers as contract workers, management drew on a preferred version of this identity position (Brown, Lewis, & Oliver, 2019), adding legitimacy to a practice that had been brought under scrutiny both in the political environment and in the organisation itself. This is not to say the domination was intentional, according to Golsorkhi, Leca, Lounsbury and Ramirez (2009), but rather it was generated through the *modus operandi* of the organisation. Nevertheless, the lived experience of those in this contract position revealed a very



**FIGURE 1:** Theoretical contribution – Explaining the interplay between power, identity and resistance.

different identity label, namely that of the modern slave – which is something Cooke (2003) suggested lies at the heart of modern management practice.

Cooke (2003) argued that, while there is ample evidence of American slavery informing management practice, this has remained unacknowledged and has been written out of historical accounts of management. The unacknowledged presence of slavery as a root of management practice has meant, as demonstrated in this case, that exploitative situations are rarely interpreted as such, allowing the already vulnerable to be further marginalised. Incidents of modern slavery hidden in management practices provide one clue to how discontent may go unrecognised and, if left unattended, could escalate to conditions leading to resistance. The experience of domination also provides an alternative framing of labour broking, a practice that may be desirable in the case of professional and similar types of labour but can easily lead to an abuse of power among the more vulnerable in society.

The experience of the modern slave as a subject position served as an internalised reminder of contract workers' limited scope for agency and their identities remained precarious, centred around survival and fear of dismissal. In contrast to the agency commonly associated with identity, this position resulted in the outsourced workers becoming 'patients', silenced and marginalised, experiencing the consequences of action but with little or no leeway to change their own situation (Reader, 2007). Reader (2007) argued for the term 'patency' as referring to the silenced, passive and 'othered' aspects of personhood. While this often carries negative connotations such as passivity and dependence (Haynes, 2014), Reader reasons that this is a legitimate and necessary counterpoint to the current predominantly agentic view of personhood, particularly to account for situations of harm.

## Episodic power as resistance

While domination relies on shaping ideas worthy of attention, this implies that the context must for the most part support these dominant interpretations and leave them unchallenged (Allen, 2003). In the case under study, the practice of labour broking had come under scrutiny but remained largely unchallenged (Juris, 2008) until the forging of a new subjectification – the missing middle – allowed for a tip in the power balance. As Courpasson (2016) noted, the creative dimension of resistance is not only a matter of subversive tactics but also a collaboration between those resisting and their sense of belonging and identification. Resisters are combatants (Hardy, 2016) who surface in moment-to-moment co-constitutive moves that emerge when their identity is endangered (Harding, Ford, & Lee, 2017). In contrast to the patience engendered by the subjectified identity of the modern slave, the missing middle identity allowed for the considerable agency, given its association with disadvantage and exploitation. This bottom-up approach to social change made use of a shift in sense-making (Weick, 1995), pressurising organisations to address certain social issues (Sonenshein, 2006). These movements were nevertheless reliant on key social networks (Kilduff & Brass, 2010) as a powerful tool in support of the resistance. Social media made actions and opinions visible, exercising another form of resistance and subsequently influenced the actions of management at the institution. Since the Arab Spring, the role of social media in transforming ways of organising collective action has given rise to the concept of ‘connective action’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), which is based on the personalised content and loose connections.

The manipulative pressure was combined with coercive power in the form of well-timed mobilisation that threatened the organisation’s primary academic identity and its status as a safe space for quality education. The exercise of coercive power (resistance) was achieved in three ways. Firstly, through the protests, the students challenged the organisation’s valued reputational resources as a provider of quality education (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974). Secondly, coercion was exercised by means of creating uncertainty in an academic space that had traditionally served white students. Thirdly, coercive power was exercised most effectively through direct presence (Allen, 2003): the visible, vocal intrusion of the university space was perceived as a direct threat.

The reaction of management must be interpreted in the context of the political history of South Africa. As Allen (2003, p. 12) points out, ‘[G]eography makes a difference to the exercise of power’. Historically, uprisings of black people had been viewed as a threat to the Apartheid system and were dealt with by calling the police and, in some instances, the armed forces. Informed by the historically skewed meaning of the traditionally safe, white space (Lefebvre, 1991; McCann, 1999), management interpreted the uprising as a threat and, in response to the combined effect of manipulative and coercive power, conceded with alacrity to the insourcing of workers.

By adopting the perspective of organisational becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2003), which views organisations as sites of continuous change, we can view organisational struggle and resistance as a necessary, creative force, which is legitimately part of organisational life (Wilmot, 2017) and can express moral purpose.

## Practical contribution

The articulation of how power functions presents valuable insights for managers to understand resistance and engage with it in more productive and collaborative ways. Traditional governance frameworks that regulate work may render workers voiceless and dislodge them from their organisational networks. This can be countered by something as simple as a people management policy embedded in the supply chain policies to ensure that the person governed by a contract is not marginalised. This would serve to normalise power relations in cases where managers are not mindful of the hidden power dynamics in the everyday order of things (Wright, 2019).

These experiences and interpretations are context sensitive. The interplay between the institutional fields, that is between the micro and macro levels of an organisation, must be monitored consistently as shifts in either level influence the other. The alignment of the micro-organisational context to the macro-organisational context should also not be limited to strategy, as vision, strategy and culture all inform organisational practices and policies.

Finally, it is essential to ensure that dialogue is open and trusting, that there are mechanisms that will elevate discerning voices and that the complexity of a collective identity is appreciated.

## Limitations and future research

It could be argued that a multiple case study design may have provided a more complete and comparable analysis, especially as the protests occurred at multiple institutions. However, the data saturation achieved and alignment with the theoretical framework (Fleming, 2016) contributed to the generalisability of the findings from an analytical perspective (Yin, 2014). The theoretical contribution of this study could be enhanced towards the development of a conceptual framework.

This study extends and bridges gaps in the literature on resistance, power and identity relating to marginalised workers. We encourage others to explore power and resistance involving other types of stakeholders and workers and in other organisational processes such as the embedding of strategy and managing sustainability.

## Conclusion

In this research, the faces of power are reflected in identity positions to explain mechanisms of resistance in, through and around organisations to contribute to the understanding

of micro-dynamics of power and resistance. Unpacking a case study where the organisation was forced to insource previously outsourced services, we uncovered how forms of power functioned in this process. We established that all forms of power could be at work simultaneously in an organisation. Domineering power through management practices constrained contract workers and a subjectified identity led to a state of patency. Through a collective identity and resistance, manipulation gave rise to coercion (both forms of power). All forms of power can be exerted for a range of purposes, from the morally justifiable to the unjustifiable. Context determines their moral value.

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## Authors' contributions

Author 1 conceived of the idea and collected the data and as the first author also project managed the process to completion. Both authors developed the theory and finalised the contribution. Author two documented the design and methods and also acted as co-supervisor for the original research project. Both authors discussed and contributed to the final manuscript.

## Ethical considerations

The research was conducted under the supervision of the University of Pretoria, where ethical clearance was obtained. Letter attached to this submission. No ethics numbers were issued in 2016, this practice was only requested by the journals later. 22/07/2016.

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## Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this article are not openly available because of confidentiality and protecting the identity of the case organisation and participants.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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