There have been a number of theoretical papers (Storey, 1989; Gabriel, 1999; Collinson, 2005) that have called for a ‘more nuanced’ (Rosenthal, 2004:602) account of management control and the ‘employee experience’ (ibid) of it. Fineman and Gabriel (1996), for example, argued that ‘compliance and resistance are not either/or responses’ and can ‘coexist in the same form of behaviour’ (op cit:87). Likewise, Collinson (2005) argued that we must ‘treat control/resistance as a dialectic rather than a dualism’ (op cit:1422-23) so as to recognise that employees ‘may engage in ambiguous oppositional practices that embody elements of both dissent and consent’ (op cit:1430). This echoes Gabriel’s (1999) theorising which urged us to consider ‘a struggling, interacting, feeling, thinking and suffering subject, one capable of obeying and disobeying, controlling and being controlled’ (op cit:199). More recently, Ashcraft (2008) has argued that we must consider ‘the constant, slippery interplay of control and opposition’ (op cit:382), a approach which will enable us ‘better understand the ways in which the two are mutually implicated and coproductive’ (Mumby, 2005:21).

This paper draws on these insights and so it does not aim to draw clear distinctions between control and resistance but rather to understand how the exercise of power whether through control attempts or resistance merge and overlap. This is consistent with previous theorizing hence Ashcraft (2005) asserts that ‘resistance and control are both moves of power’ (op cit:70). Moreover, Collinson’s (1994) earlier research drew our attention to such blurring for he posits that resistance and consent are rarely polarized for ‘resistance frequently contains elements of consent and consent often incorporates aspects of resistance’ (op cit:29).
In the early 1980’s and 1990’s several organisations began to build upon the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) in developing their own unique quality systems. One of the most popular and widely known of these systems is Six Sigma, developed by Motorola and successfully adopted by others such as Honeywell (now Gent) and General Electric. Another operating system similar to this is STRiving for Standardization (STS), a system developed and practised by the parent organization (PO) in the following case study company. This differs from Six Sigma in that it reflects a broad based approach; it is less data oriented and revolves around three principle categories: 1 - Process improvement and waste elimination, 2 - Decision-making and 3 - Problem solving. The tools that complement the aforementioned categories impact on diverse issues such as factory floor cleanliness, market feedback analysis, machine/tool preventative maintenance and set up reduction. STRiving for Standardization or STS can be described as a combination of lean manufacturing and quality improvement philosophies.

This paper explores the dynamics between how STS was introduced by a parent organization (PO) as a means to control and regulate the working practices of a subsidiary organization (Silo) and the practices of managerial and employee resistance that emerged in relation to this attempt to exercise of power. By examining the interface between a management intervention designed to standardise work processes and specific instances of resistance that arose in relation to the assumptions, preconditions and processes upon which the intervention is based, we illustrate how control and resistance as an attempt to exercise power are married together in ways that are difficult to unravel without a close understanding of the research setting. It points towards complexity and an interweaving of relations which is often obscured when accounts refer to singular forms of resistance (e.g. distancing, cynicism) that are represented as emerging in relation to various management interventions. By contrast, we are concerned to explore the interrelationships between the intervention and resistance.

A focus on ‘more subtle or hidden disruption’ (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 685) as an alternative modality of resistance (Fleming and Sewell, 2002) at the level of the individual has become well established among scholars who are interested in how resistance endures despite the absence of more overt forms of workplace conflict (Collinson, 1992, 1994; Iedema et al., 2006; Fleming, 2007; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Symon, 2005; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1999). Burrell (1984) suggests that we should begin from a position that views resistance as ‘ambiguity and flux’ (op cit:102) or as implying ‘fluidity, interpenetration and
reversals’ (ibid). There has been little research which has sought to explore such ‘interpenetration’ and so our central research question is to ask how our understanding of control/power and resistance be enhanced through examining the interface and relationships between them?