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The absurd workplace: How absurdity is hypernormalized in contemporary society and organizations

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abstract

This paper examines absurdities in contemporary society and workplaces. Absurdity arises from the absence of rationality, where observed human practices paradoxically veer away from official discourse and institutional rhetoric. Absurdity does not exist in a vacuum but is penetrated by and hypernormalized through internalized societal ideologies. Hypernormalization, or the normalization of absurdity, was originally coined by Russian-born anthropologist Yurchak (2003, 2005) to understand the split between ideological, authoritative discourse and practice in the last decades of the Soviet Union. We extend the understanding of hypernormalization to describe how contemporary absurdities are normalized both in society and organizations. Moreover, we explain how hypernormalization unfolds at collective and individual levels through ideological fantasy and internalization. Fantasmatic investment and internalization enable individuals to manage the absurdities arising from the perpetual gap between authoritative discourse (e.g., companies' commitment to climate action) and actual day-to-day practices (e.g., companies' continued investment in fossil fuels). We finish by presenting three interrelated steps through which resistance, as a mechanism to deal with hypernormalization, emerges: problematization, resistance and imagination. We contribute to the literature by showing how these three ways may offer a way out of hypernormalization in society and workplaces.

Introduction

A psychiatrist who has a 30-minute appointment with a patient, needs another 20-25 minutes to process all paperwork attached to the meeting (Spaans, 2017). There is now so much bureaucracy involved in health care provision, that the time that health care providers spend on their actual jobs is substantially reduced, seriously impeding the quality of care because of the very procedures meant to ensure quality of care. The bureaucracy that needs to be processed to deliver effective healthcare to patients has led to the number one cause of burnout among health care providers (Gunderman and Lynch, 2018), evidenced by the absurdity of healthcare becoming one of the sectors with the highest prevalence of mental ill-health

Meanwhile, in Germany, those from overseas with no legal right to work are forced to work in the abattoirs of the meatpacking industry to earn an income, where they live and work in subpar conditions (Reuters, 2020). Hence, while being one of the wealthiest countries worldwide, Germany fails to become civilized enough to be able to ensure that the basic needs of people (i.e., food production) are fulfilled in a dignified way, without exploiting and abusing vulnerable people (i.e., 'illegal immigrants' who have been used for exploitation). It is therefore absurd to witness the gap between the overall wealth of a country and the way it treats the most vulnerable and deprived people in society.

Finally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers in universities across many countries have been forced to continue to teach their students face-to-face, while exposing themselves and the students to the risks of getting Covid-19. Ironically, teaching sessions were often forced to take place online because teachers and students had to self-isolate after having been exposed to Covid-19 positive students in the classroom. While the health of staff and students were put at risk when universities wanted to continue face-to-face teaching, absurdity exposed itself as both options were *worse*: face-to-face teaching exposed teachers and students to the risks of contracting Covid-19, while online teaching increased loneliness to such an extent that many students and some reported tutors were struggling with their mental health and personal wellbeing.

These are just some examples of absurdities that people face in contemporary society and workplaces, and are exemplary of the current era, where absurd practices are being normalized, and accepted by society, organizations, and individuals. Absurdities are widespread across society and workplaces, and their ubiquitous nature and scale point to a strong connection to the notion of the normalization of absurdity. In this paper, we define a social practice as absurd when it is perceived to be illogical and inappropriate, *and* when reality is fundamentally dissociated from its publicly and organizationally-officially proclaimed stance. While there is no strictly 'objective' assessment of a social practice to be considered as absurd, the absurdity always resides in and is construed in the 'eye of the beholder'. While we define absurdity and describe how social practices can be recognized as absurd, such perception is always socially constructed. Therefore, perceptions of absurdity can be individual or collectively shared, but at the same time, denied by others and treated as entirely normal or banal. Hence, while perceptions of absurdity are subjective, they can be disavowed and hypernormalized into something that is rather 'normal', taken for granted and even mundane. Therefore, absurdity and hypernormalization represent two sides of the same coin which are continuously interactive and mutative (Bal et al., 2023). In the remainder of this paper, we will speak of absurd practices with the inherent assumption that their absurdity is perceived as such by a group of people.

Absurdity may have profound consequences for the well-being and functioning of individuals and societies. Despite some earlier sparing efforts to address absurdity in society, thus far, the literature has largely refrained from discussing absurdities in contemporary work and organizations, and thus neglecting the possibility to understand how absurd practices emerge, function, are normalized and maintained, and are contested (see for exceptions Loacker and Peters, 2015; McCabe, 2016).

To do so, the current paper explores the concepts of absurdity and hypernormalization (Yurchak, 2003, 2005) to explain how the absurd becomes normalized not only in its original context of society but more specifically within its underexplored context of contemporary work and workplaces.[1,2] Hypernormalization was coined by the Russian-born anthropologist Alexei Yurchak to describe the late Soviet era (1950s till the fall of the Iron Curtain). In particular, the complex relationship between official enunciation and 'unofficial' ideological rule in the late Soviet era was understood by Yurchak (2005) through the hypernormalization of language. The split between these two (i.e., between what is publicly proclaimed and its actual manifestation) was maintained to such a degree that official enunciation became absurd and an end in itself (Yurchak, 2005). Hypernormalization, therefore, served an important ideological function, along with serving the maintenance of oligarchical power and authority (Yurchak, 2005; Žižek, 2018). The lenses of absurdity and hypernormalization have the potential to advance our understanding of the banalization of absurdities in contemporary work and workplaces, and therefore how absurdities are normalized through the creation of a fantasy of normality (Žižek, 1989). However, so far, there has been very little research on absurdity and hypernormalization in workplaces.

This paper offers several contributions. First, absurdity has been rather absent from work, workplace and organizational literature (see e.g., Loacker and Peters, 2015; McCabe, 2016; Starkey et al., 2019 for exceptions). This paper enhances understanding of the dynamics underpinning absurdity at work. It explains how workplace practices which are perceived to be absurd become normalized, legitimized and a seemingly essential feature of social functioning. Second, using the concept of hypernormalization, the processes through which the absurd emerges, functions and is maintained and contested can be explored. Hypernormalization can be understood to fulfil two main functions: it serves those in power by the maintenance and acceleration of an uncontested status quo through pretense that an organizational practice has become socially legitimized as normal and

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1 Author names appear in alphabetical order.

2 This paper was written at the same time the authors wrote a book on the absurd workplace and its hypernormalization (Bal et al., 2023). The authors were careful in avoiding textual overlap between the paper and the book. While the book and the paper share the same intellectual basis, the book can be seen as an extension of the ideas presented in this paper and includes a variety of case studies on absurd workplaces.

unchallenged rather than as absurd. Moreover, hypernormalization performs an ideological-fantasmatic function through which society can be shaped in specific ways that serve goals of dominance and control (Seeck et al., 2020; Žižek, 1989). A better understanding of how and why people accept the absurd as normal also elucidates the ways through which the absurd can be de-normalized and therefore contested. In this paper, we use the theory of Žižek around ideology-as-fantasy-construction (1989, 2001; Freeden, 2003; Seeck et al., 2020) to understand the functioning and dynamics of absurdity and hypernormalization, thereby elucidating the collective and individual psychological mechanisms that underpin the very processes that serve to maintain the absurd. Understanding the ideological underpinnings of hypernormalization may shed light on possible ways out of hypernormalization, thereby not merely offering a theoretical contribution, but also offering more practical ways for individuals and collectives to overcome the detrimental effects of the normalization of the absurd in their daily and organizational lives. In particular, we address three interrelated aspects through which hypernormalization may be overcome: problematization, resistance, and imagination (Bal, 2017; Pfaller, 2012).

Absurdity in work and organizations

The Oxford Dictionary (2019) defines 'absurd' as 'wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate'. The term originally stems from the Latin 'absurdus', or 'out of tune'. A social practice, such as bureaucracy, is perceived to be absurd when it conflicts with reason and logic, *and* when it is inappropriate (Arias-Bolzmann et al., 2000). Absurd practices transcend formal logic or reason (Loacker and Peters, 2015) *and* tend to be harmful, as they undermine the dignity of people (Bal et al., 2023). Absurdity may also assume a co-existence of multiple logics which jointly become paradoxical, and where the result is no longer rational but where logic itself falls apart. For instance, in bureaucracy, although organizational rules and procedures are designed and enacted to provide consistency and fairness, such official enactments may conflict with the professional autonomy of employees. This state of affairs results in absurdity when employees spend their majority of time on filling forms such that they are unable to effectively conduct their core tasks, and consequently burn out due to high work pressure.

A second dimension of absurdity pertains to the discrepancy between pretense and reality (Mintoff, 2008; Nagel, 1971). Absurdity arises out of the discrepancy between officially propagated public discourse (De Cleen et al., 2021) and everyday practice experienced by people. It is important to clarify our use of these terms. *Discourse* refers to formulations of the symbolic network in which social bonds can be expressed (Žižek, 1989), and as such represent the totality of public speech, cultural symbols and enunciation present and observable in society and workplaces. *Reality*, in contrast, refers to the individuals' experiences of the symbols and the process of their signification: reality is therefore inherently linked with discourse, but may either be perceived as aligned with discourse (i.e., when people experience social practices to be signified by public, official discourse), or as fundamentally misaligned, which gives rise to a social practice to be perceived as absurd in the inability of discourse to describe people's actual, everyday lived experiences. Therefore, in the remainder of this paper, when we refer to absurd social practices, this absurdity is signified through perceptions of individual(-s) of such practices as being absurd.

The discrepancy between discourse and perceived reality does not have to be perceived as irrational and illogical, and thereby opens the space for deliberate management of absurdity by those in power (Žižek, 1989, 2001). In contemporary workplaces, people may perceive a variety of forms of absurdity. For instance, the inaction of organizations and some nations towards climate change may be perceived as absurd, as it manifests through an ever-growing gap between public, authoritative, discourse (i.e., the need to tackle climate change), and perceived practices (the continued overinvestment in fossil fuels; Ambrose and Jolly, 2020). Consequently, public discourse becomes more and more impotent even as radical calls for opposing the inaction increase.

There is a wide literature on paradoxes and contradictions (e.g., Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017), which is informative for our understanding of absurdity. For instance, Lewis (2000) referred to the absurd nature of paradoxes. Paradox, contradiction, and absurdity share similarities, yet are different from each other. While paradox and contradiction denote an inconsistency or tension between elements of social practices, not all paradoxes or contradictions are absurd. For instance, Lewis (2011) talks about the 'learning paradox' as a struggle between the comfort of the past and the uncertainty of the future whilst Smith and Lewis (2011) highlight contradictory tensions between organizing, learning, performing and belonging in contemporary, competitive organizations. While such paradoxes may indicate tensions and contradictions, they do not have to be 'out of tune' or inappropriate. Absurdity transcends such forms of inappropriateness and indicates a deeper, and fundamental discrepancy of how social practice becomes enacted and is normalized. While paradox and contradiction remain in the space of competing logics, absurdity denotes the dissolution of logic altogether into a profound form of inappropriateness (Bal et al., 2023). For instance, the global inability to effectively address climate change is no longer a case of competing logics (i.e., retaining business as usual vs. reducing carbon emissions), but an example of the dissolution of the logic of climate inertia in light of the destruction of the planet and the subsistence livelihoods of the most deprived in certain parts of the world. Absurdity, therefore, always includes a tragic and depriving potential in the impotence of really existing practices to reflect enunciation or public, official discourse. Paradoxes, however, neither have to be tragic, nor have to be about the gap between pretense and reality.

When the absurd arises out of this gap (cf. Loacker and Peters, 2015; Nagel, 1971), it is authoritative discourse itself that creates the emergence of absurdity. As authoritative discourse aims for absolutism and all-encompassing visions on perceived reality, by definition, it will fail to capture everything within the workplace. Hence, a gap between discourse and reality is inherent to authoritative discourse, and thus the emergence of absurdity. Over time, this gap may only grow wider (see Fisher, 2009; Marin and Jameson, 1976; Žižek, 1994), and absurdity arises because of this perpetual distinction. It is therefore apt to ask why such gaps are perceived as *absurd*. One explanation may be focused on the inherent nature of the absurd as illogical. While modern neoliberal-capitalist society is built on principles of Enlightenment, reason, and the *homo economicus* (Bal and Dóci, 2018; McCabe, 2016), the existing gaps between reason and experienced reality violate this very principle. In the absence of rationality, absurdity exposes the fundamental contradictions in the current system.

While we will later explain absurdity normalization building based on the analysis of the late Soviet Union era (Yurchak, 2005), we first emphasize the contemporary nature of absurdities in Western, neoliberal society (e.g., the rise of populist leaders and the planetary destruction due to the neoliberal capitalist economic system; Cederström and Fleming, 2012). However, in line with Albert Camus, we contend that absurdity is inherent to human life, and therefore can be observed across time and space. There are also other literatures that have touched upon absurdities, such as the literature on paradox (Lewis, 2000; Vince et al., 2018), Graeber's work on 'bullshit' jobs (2018), Cederström and Fleming's work around 'strange capitalism' (2012), all of which elucidate the absurd nature of contemporary work and workplaces. Yet, while informative they do not directly engage with the meaning and manifestation of absurdity, and how absurdity is normalized in contemporary work and workplaces.

Manifestation of absurdity

While absurdity has been mainly discussed in philosophy and literature, it is unclear how absurdity manifests, both individually and collectively. On the one hand, absurdity can express itself individually, such as Nagel's (1971) example of an individual who is knighted and whose pants fall. Graeber's (2018) analysis of 'bullshit' jobs also reveals the absurdities that individuals experience because of the inherent meaninglessness and absurdity of their work. Absurdity manifests itself here within an individual, but it can be also experienced collectively. For instance, officialdom/bureaucracy is not absurd because of individual experience, but because of a collective expression, where the functioning of entire organizations or sectors is stifled. Therefore, absurdity can be experienced both individually and collectively. An individual may experience a social practice as absurd, but this does not necessarily have to be shared and can be contested by others. When absurdity remains limited to individual experience, it does not need to be normalized as it is *only* a collective experience of absurdity that spurs a process of hypernormalization. In other words, when absurdity becomes systemic, a pressure towards normalization and banalization may unfold.

Theoretical background of hypernormalization

Starkey and colleagues (2019) have argued that absurdity calls for a process of finding meaning in meaninglessness. Finding such meaning in absurdity also involves a rupture from the notion of the rational human being and rational structures and institutions. In contrast, due to the tragic potential of absurdity, it always risks disrupting individual's ontological security, or the human necessity of perceiving oneself as a whole and undivided member of society (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological security offers stability, identity, and self-esteem, and absurdity has the potential to precisely undermine those feelings. It is therefore that absurdity provokes a process of normalization to retain ontological security, whereby absurdity is taken for granted, disavowed, and perceived as a norm that is neutral. This process is described by Yurchak (2005) as hypernormalization.

Yurchak (2003; 2005) investigated the paradoxes in Soviet society that contributed to the sudden collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980s (ibid), and in particular, the paradox of eternity and stagnation which was central to maintaining the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the Soviet Union seemed to exhibit eternal existence, while on the other hand, quality of life and the system itself were stagnating. The death of Stalin in 1953 had created a discursive vacuum, ceasing the existence of the supreme Master who could authorize public discourse. In response, the ruling elite decided to stick to the discourse allowed during the Stalin era as a way of not only managing the continuity of the state but also the perpetuation of people's purported ontological security. Consequently, ideological representations (such as media expressions, rituals and formal structures) were perfectly replicated over time (Yurchack, 2003). The effect of this ideological reproduction of texts and cultural symbols was that their literal meaning became increasingly dissociated from their 'real' constative meaning. This reproduction of form became the way Soviet society and practices were maintained, and as such ideological enunciation represented 'objective truths' (Yurchack, 2005: 10). However, these ideological texts and symbols became an end in themselves and increasingly 'frozen' (ibid: 26).

The rising discrepancy between authoritative discourse and really existing practices led to a hypernormalization of language: texts and symbols became absurd in their inability to describe perceived reality but were yet treated as entirely 'normal' in society (see Žižek, 1994). Moreover, as ideological enunciation was incapable of describing experienced social reality, it became increasingly separated from ideological rule (Yurchak, 2005). In other words, the post-Stalin Soviet regime was constantly dealing with the crisis of legitimacy, as ideological representations (e.g., liberation of the individual, critical thinking) were dissociated from everyday experience. Yet, this hypernormalization of language and cultural symbols provided uniformity, predictability and banality, hence engendering ontological security for state and citizens (Croft, 2012; Mitzen, 2006). This notion of ontological security explains a fundamental human need 'to experience oneself as a whole [...] to realize a sense of agency' (Mitzen, 2006: 342), and thereby provides stability, identity and a sense of oneself, which was imperative in the uncertain times of the Soviet system. Yet, this clinging on to ontological security also created a new vacuum of meaning, in which language could never be understood properly, and always entailed a multitude of possible constative meanings, exploited by the Soviet Communist Party for the perpetuation of its power and hegemony.

As any deviation from the existing permitted discourse could potentially form a threat to the system, it became frozen and fixed to what Stalin had approved of during his reign. However, while reality develops, this frozen discourse became less and less able to capture, regulate and dominate the reality of what was happening in society. This spurred absurd effects, whereby official discourse became more and more detached from perceived reality, and whereby individuals had to find pragmatic ways to deal with this gap (i.e., understand that official discourse was not to be taken literally, and that underneath it, unwritten rules dictated how social practice was regulated). Yet, this frozen discourse provided the ruling elites almost 40 years (of a perception) of control over their gigantic Soviet empire ('until it was no more'; Yurchak, 2005). To survive in post-Stalin Soviet Union, an individual needed a level of pragmatism to be able to understand the performative nature of ideological messages and the space which was open for a variation of constative and contestable meanings of ideology. Yurchak's research (2003, 2005) shows that a binary split between public ideological display and private beliefs was too simplistic. In reality, they were continuously intertwined, and people were both engaged in the performative and constative dimension of ideology. This meant that people did not privately disengage from Communist ideals, while being involved in the performative dimension of the reproduction of form. In contrast, because ideological enunciation became increasingly empty (Žižek, 1989), it also opened space for new meanings. Hence, individuals were actively looking for creative reinterpretation of Communist ideals (such as liberation, social welfare and collectivity of belonging) into new meanings that were ‘not limited to the constative meanings of authoritative discourse’ (Yurchak, 2005: 115). This often involved an explicit un-anchoring of the constative dimension of authoritative and hegemonic discourse, whilst filling this with new bottom-up generated meanings (see Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020). Thereby, people often maintained their beliefs, and they found pragmatic ways of translating and applying ideology to their everyday contexts (Yurchak, 2003).

Hypernormalization of absurdity in contemporary workplaces

It has been argued that hypernormalization was not just a feature of the Soviet Union but is also manifest in contemporary society (Bal, 2017; Nicholls, 2017). Our analysis aims not to generalize or compare across different geo-political ideologies, but to use Yurchak’s key insights into hypernormalization in the Soviet Union to understand contemporary social practices and how their manifestations in work and workplaces that can be perceived as absurd. Hypernormalization concerns the normalization of the absurd, and thus the process by which the absurd is taken for granted, perpetuated, and projected upon people as the norm (May and Finch, 2009). It is a process that may be orchestrated and deliberately managed, but also unfolds spontaneously. The absurd becomes hypernormal when illogical, inappropriate, and irrational societal or organizational practices are treated as entirely normal to the extent that they become banal. Absurdity is therefore continuously concealed, as its normalization renders a practice as something that is merely part of the fabric of society. This hypernormal is not only staged by powerful actors striving for dominance and control but is also internalized by individuals. Therefore, hypernormalization is functional when social practice is internalized to such an extent that people no longer recognize a practice as being absurd, but as something that is inherently part of society or workplaces. Practices are therefore not perceived to be absurd, and once recognition of a practice as absurd has been generated, it constitutes a first step out of hypernormalization. Through such recognition, debate can take place around the practice itself, its effects, and potential alternatives.

Hypernormalization fulfils multiple functions, such as predictability and stability, even when its detrimental effects become increasingly clear to those exposed to it (Žižek, 2018). While absurdity reveals the complexity of human existence, hypernormalization offers stability in the face of the chaos of absurdity. Hypernormalization also maintains the myth of the rational organization and of the individual who can be managed effectively for organizational benefit (Bal and Dóci, 2018; McCabe, 2016). However, despite a process of hypernormalization, it may not be the case that people are collectively unaware of absurdities surrounding them. For instance, a growing group of people now problematize work-related racism and white supremacy, exposing their inherent absurdity (Arciniega, 2021; Shor, 2020). The question, therefore, is why hypernormalization is effective, even when the inherent absurdity is exposed. The work of Slavoj Žižek (1989, 1994, 2001) provides insights into the effectiveness of hypernormalization through ideology.

The complexities and dynamics underpinning normalization of the absurd do not only play an essential part in the translation of ideology into practice, but also have detrimental effects for individuals and society at large. Normalization of absurdity obscures the harm that actually results from absurd practice or discourse and discourages individuals and organizations to change their practices to ensure greater dignity of people and the planet (Bal, 2017). For instance, it has been well-documented how in the face of the absurdity of planetary destruction, necessary climate action is not being taken and fossil-fuel companies continue to generate enormous profits (Blühdorn, 2017). In other words, while absurdity produces systemic suffering and marginalization of vulnerable people and the planet, hypernormalization of fossil fuel burning delegitimizes claims of the systemic causes of suffering. It is therefore needed to understand how hypernormalization functions, and how it can be contested.

Dynamics of hypernormalization

Hypernormalization, or the process of how absurdity becomes normalized, emerges either spontaneously in response to societal pressures, or is orchestrated by powerful groups in search of societal dominance (Yurchak, 2003, 2005). Mostly, however, it is the combination of factors that explains the emergence of hypernormalization, whereby absurdity results from illogical practices or dissolvement of logic altogether. Such absurdity may turn out to be functional and inherent to society. The motivation behind initiating hypernormalization may be a need for predictability and ontological security, even though it may unfold spontaneously (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002; Mitzen, 2006).

In contemporary workplaces, 'official discourse' is much less directly regulated as was the case in the Soviet Union, yet, at the same time performs an important function. Discourse has an important symbolic and performative role, and may function as a fantasy for people to disavow perceived existing practices (Žižek, 1989, 1994, 2001). Hence, people may cling on to such official discourse, or imaginary fantasies, to retain their beliefs in the current system, and to move away from a realization that reality on the ground may be more and more opposed to ideological discourse (see Fisher, 2009; Vince et al., 2018). If the latter would prevail, it would be associated with a dissonance, or a perception that action is needed to close this gap between the impotence of discourse to describe reality, through either changing discourse, or to engage in collective action towards societal ideals (e.g., in Western society), to actually provide people with the chance to experience freedom and personal growth (Bal and Dóci, 2018).

In contrast, Žižek (2018: 205) argues that this dissonance between official discourse and practice has positive aspects. Žižek argues that the gap makes ideology 'livable', and therefore constitutes an actual conditioning for its functioning. Without this gap, and thus in the hypothetical existence of the perfect overlap between discourse and reality, people would not be able to attribute personal failing to the system itself, but only to themselves. The cure then would be moral improvement of the individual (Žižek, 2018). Hence, the functional aspect of absurdity in the sense of a widening gap between enunciation and practice includes a way out of the necessity to exclusively blame the individual for failure, and instead opens the way for systemic critique and a reinterpretation of hypernormalization. However, at the same time, when this gap between pretense and practice is widening, it may lead to increasing absurdity when enunciation becomes more and more impotent in the face of an increase in hypernormalized absurdity for general societal ontological security, and consequently, may have detrimental effects for people and the planet. For instance, the ever-widening gap between proclaimed climate commitment and climate inertia in organizations, leads to an ever-escalating process of environmental destruction, which is not effectively contested due to the increasing emphasis of hegemonic actors in society (e.g., MNC's, politicians) on official discourse for the need for 'cheaper', 'subsidized' and 'affordable' energy, and the pretense that there is 'genuine' climate action being taken. The question is then, how individuals cope with hypernormalization. We discuss three interrelated processes: ideological fantasmatic investment, internalization and disavowal.

These explain how individuals are gripped by absurdities and deny absurdity to exist whilst faced with counterevidence of its harmful nature. For instance, while ever-rising income inequalities become absurd over time, where a smaller number of people (e.g., CEOs) earn and control global wealth while a rising number of people live in poverty (World Economic Forum, 2019), it is insufficient to merely raise awareness about such income inequalities. As absurdity does not concern itself with truth claims per se, rational arguments about the (un-)truthfulness of absurdity do not effectively address the issue (Bal, 2017). This is because of ideological fantasy about hypernormalization and the possibility for ontological security within absurdity (Mitzen, 2006). While absurdity poses a threat to stability, it is actually the explicit acknowledgement and conscious separation from absurdity that causes ontological *in*security (Croft, 2012), as it entails a conscious (and risky) breach from the established and enunciated order. Hence, while absurdity perceptions arise from the gap between reason and the illogical, between proclamation and reality, it is this gap which provides the ontological foundation for ideological fantasy and maintenance of hypernormalization (Žižek, 2018).

In this perspective, hypernormalization is maintained ideologically, and particularly the development of a fantasy of normality in absurdity. We use ideology in the conceptualization of philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a 'fantasy construction which serves as a support for reality itself' (Žižek, 1989: 45). Hence, fantasy which underpins ideology is not disconnected from reality, but offers reality itself. Therefore, ideological enunciation, such as Communist ideals within Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2005), or meritocratic ideals in liberal capitalism (Su, 2015), have an important fantasmatic logic (Glynos, 2008) in constituting and maintaining beliefs among individuals that what is proclaimed can not only be achieved, but also structures reality itself. For instance, a fantasy of meritocracy may not bear a strong relationship with existing practices in organizations (Littler, 2013; Van Dijk et al., 2020), but may form an ideological reference that structures organizations as if it does exist.

Absurdity also functions as ideological fantasy, as its underlying social practice is not judged based on rationality or the possibility of actual manifestation, but on the fantasmatic appeal it provides. For instance, the absurdity of income inequalities is not effectively contested as meritocracy still functions as an ideological reference and as a fantasy that structures reality (within neoliberal states). It thereby allows people to experience absurdity as normal and attribute success of the rich to hard work, while blaming the poor for their failure to be enterprising and 'successful'. Individuals deny the existence of and maintain their beliefs in absurdity through fantasizing how social reality is formed through the fantasy itself. Thereby, the fantasy becomes performative, and people act as if the absurdity is entirely normal *and* banal, complying with hypernormalization. Such fantasies may also include a desire for a *retrotopia* (Bauman, 2017), a nostalgic longing for an imagined past that was never there, which provides even stronger fantasmatic investment into absurdity. This idealized past is presented as the 'natural order' that needs to be resurrected (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2018), but which nonetheless merely presents another escape *into* absurdity and offers no real solution. For instance, in the case of persisting gender inequality, those fighting for greater gender equality are facing a conservative backlash, including a fantasmatic investment into the natural order of gender hierarchies and the primacy of men over women. The absurdity of gender inequality in the workplace is thereby effectively hypernormalized and banalized.

As a result, absurdity itself is denied, and rationalized through the adaptation of perceptions of what valid norms are (Haack and Siewecke, 2018). Yet, the fantasmatic logic does not fully explain the dynamics underpinning individual responses to hypernormalization. Therefore, internalization and disavowal (Žižek, 1989, 2001) explain how individuals in modern society are gripped by hypernormalization, and why individuals continue to fantasize about and invest in hypernormalization. If a critical mass would recognize the absurdity of their predicament, why do they not resist, such that this gap between proclaimed ideals (e.g., authoritative discourse) and reality is decreased? While Žižek (1989, 2018) points to the very problematic nature of the official ideology itself and the impossibility of transforming empty, ideological signifiers into practices (e.g., brotherhood, equality and meritocracy), people also maintain their individual psychological belief and investment in absurdity. In other words, akin to the Soviet Union, there is no binary split between ideology and existing practices, as individuals are engaged both in the performative and constative dimension of modern ideology, thereby continuing to internalize and normalize absurdity.

In line with Žižek (1989: 12), this attitude can be explained on the basis of cynical disavowal: 'I know very well that social practices are absurd, but I will still treat them as entirely normal'. This plays out largely unconsciously as a fantasy, and influences behavior. Yet, people may be unaware or perhaps acknowledge absurdity only when they are explicitly confronted, and even then, may deny a practice to be absurd. In other words, absurdity is currently upfront, and no longer merely hidden from the public eye and thereby fully integrated into public discourse (e.g., rising inequality is now acknowledged by the very institutions responsible for its creation - see World Economic Forum, 2019). While it may become harder to deny that absurdity exists, people have also become cynical about it, and disavow absurdity to be part of the fabric of institutions.

In hypernormalization, perceptions of lack of alternative are central, and this further sustains feelings of powerlessness or even hopelessness. When people feel powerless and may not be hopeful to make any real changes, they are more likely to legitimize the system and be cynical and inert (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Van der Toorn et al., 2015). When people feel unable to influence their own situation, they will be more likely to bridge the gap between enunciation and reality through cynicism. At the same time, disavowal is generated through the internalization of ideology into people's core fantasies about themselves and their work (Bal and Dóci, 2018). Hence, ideological enunciation becomes internalized as fantasies that actually support reality (Fisher, 2009). Such beliefs are not about universal truths, but about personal truths. In other words, people actively search for support for their fantasies in themselves and others in their vicinity (either in real life or online), so that their fantasies can remain intact, and the absurdity is denied as either non-existent or irrelevant. Internalization of ideological fantasies (Glynos, 2008) renders ideological enunciation as truth-statements (e.g., that everyone has a fair chance to success and social mobility), which closes the gap with reality, thereby blaming individuals for their failure to be on the receiving end of the unequal distribution of resources and success in society (Bal and Dóci, 2018).

Through the internalization of absurdity into one's core beliefs about the structure of society, people fantasize that there is *no* gap between enunciation and reality, and therefore they feel as if they do not have to engage in performative rituals but are merely engaged in the constative dimension of authoritative discourse. For instance, the absurdity of proclaimed commitment of large fossil-fuel companies to sustainability and climate action vis-à-vis the real environmental destruction by these companies and their role in climate disaster is disavowed (Brown, 2016). Such a situation perpetuates and sustains the fantasy of genuine commitment to the climate. In this fantasy, absurdity is still denied, and people fantasize about how they engage in the constative dimensions of climate action when they recycle their waste, even though recycling does not significantly address any of the issues around climate change (Blühdorn, 2017; Brown, 2016). This also indicates that individuals are pragmatic translators of authoritative discourse; while practice may not be meaningfully related to discourse, people continue to act as if it does, and may thereby maintain their beliefs in the system in the pretense of obtaining ontological security.

In sum, hypernormalization unfolds in similar ways as described in Yurchak's (2003, 2005) analysis of the late Soviet Union. While contemporary authoritative discourse is controlled to a lesser extent by governments in Western society than in Soviet Union, it has become increasingly frozen in describing neoliberal-capitalist fantasies about society and workplaces (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Glynos, 2008). The absurdities arising from the discrepancies between discourse and really existing practices have been normalized and maintained at collective and individual level through ideological fantasy and internalization. While hypernormalization offers stability and predictability, the continuing need for individuals to pragmatically deal with the effects of the gap between the performative and constative dimension of authoritative discourse, has also spurred a crisis of legitimacy (**cf.** Yurchak, 2005). For instance, more and more people perceive climate inertia, societal inequalities, and racism as contemporary absurdities, and, in response, a rising number of protests have emerged.

A way out of hypernormalization?

Owing to its inherent ideological dimension (Yurchak, 2005; Žižek, 2018), there is no mere stepping out of hypernormalization (Freeden, 2003). It is likely that awareness of absurdity creates ontological insecurity or a loss of sense of self (Kinvall, 2004). Ideology provides a structure and maintenance of fantasy, and thereby the comfort of stability and predictability (Jost et al., 2017). Awareness of hypernormalization is uncomfortable, as it involves a dramatic rupture with one's existing convictions and beliefs about the world (i.e., the recognition of a practice as absurd). Therefore, there is no straightforward way out of hypernormalization, not merely because it concerns a social phenomenon that has grave personal-psychological dimensions, but because it always involves a radical breach from one's ontological security. We present three interrelated ways through which hypernormalization can be challenged in society: problematization, resistance, and imagination.

Problematization

A first necessary but insufficient step towards effectively challenging hypernormalization is problematization. A key to understanding the potential ways out of hypernormalization involves estrangement, or the recognition of the strangeness of a certain practice (Pfaller, 2012). Through such recognition, previously held assertions about the self-evident nature of certain practices in society and workplace are transformed from evidence into a question. This can be done through exposing absurdity, in its illogical and inappropriate nature, and in its separation of reality from ideological inscription causing humans to suffer. Problematization of absurdity therefore helps people to recognize its strangeness. The very act of doing this constitutes the first step towards liberation from hypernormalization. One crucial difference between the Soviet Union and contemporary Western society concerns freedom of speech, as problematization of the absurd can be conducted more openly, and thereby exposed more widely to people.

Estrangement of absurdity can also be achieved through acceptance of absurdity itself. While absurdity does not concern itself with truth-statements (Foroughi et al., 2019), it is therefore insufficient to expose the untruthful nature of absurdity. However, absurdity can be exposed through taking it one step further, by, for instance a 'naïve', literal reading of authoritative discourse (Fleming and Sewell, 2002). This classical approach was used often in the Soviet Union by authors like Voinovich (through his protagonist Ivan Chonkin). Through a literal reading of authoritative discourse and the staging of naïve protagonists who internalize this discourse, the system is exposed in its absurd manifestation. Such literatures have also been published outside of the Soviet era, such as by Hašek about WWI (through the protagonist Soldier Švejk), indicating a more pervasive nature of absurdity and hypernormalization preceding the Soviet Union. Another form of such problematization is offered by Agamben (2007), through his notion of *profanation*. Profanation, or the de-sacralization of the sacred through ridiculing or play, can expose inherent absurdities, and unmask and problematize absurd features of social practices (see also Śliwa et al. 2012's analysis of the profanation of leadership). Profanation can therefore play an important role in problematizing, as through de-sacralizing, absurdities may be revealed and contested, while power is neutralized (ibid). In finding new uses through profanation, one could even imagine new ways to live with absurdity, and thus finding even more extensive impacts of profanation. Therefore, profanation's impact may extend beyond problematizing, towards an understanding of how absurd practices may be resisted.

Yet, problematization is insufficient to change hypernormalized practices in organizations and society. For instance, it is even the privileged elites from the World Economic Forum (2019), who are now problematizing income inequalities. This is partly because absurdity risks being hijacked by those who have invested in retaining hypernormalization as it benefits those in power. While awareness of absurdity can be remediated through cynical disavowal and ideological internalization, it is therefore needed that problematization is linked to resistance.

Resistance

A second necessary, yet insufficient, strategy, concerns the role of resistance against absurdity. While hypernormalization should be problematized through recognition of its strangeness (e.g., through exposing its detrimental effects on people and the planet), people's active resistance against such practices is also needed. Recent academic literature has revalued the role of resistance in bringing about social change (Contu, 2018; Derber, 2017; Weinberg and Banks, 2019). Resistance is necessary as problematization, in itself, is unlikely to change social and organizational reality; it is needed to actively resist against hegemonic ideology which facilitates absurdity to manifest and perpetuate. Contu (2018) speaks in this context of 'parrhesiastic' activism, or the notion of speaking truth to power. Resistance can manifest both individually and collectively, and hidden and public (Mumby et al., 2017), and aims to address the use of power to subordination. Within Soviet hypernormalization, resistance appeared through creative interpretation of the constative dimension of authoritative discourse (such as a revaluing of collectivity in one's community), whilst engaging in the performative rituals of the Communist system. Similarly, performativity is often enforced in Western society, whereby individuals must comply, such as in the case with bureaucracy in organizations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Hence, it is either within such constraints that resistance can be generated, or through more collective forms, where groups in society protest the destructive nature of hypernormalization.

Another form of resistance against absurdity is through entire withdrawal, as Sloterdijk's *kynic* (1987) shows. The kynic resists absurdity through disengaging with discourse entirely and defecates on authoritative discourse. It is a withdrawal *from* discourse, and by disengaging entirely, the kynic shows the impotence of discourse, and perhaps the inability to expose absurdity through rationality itself - because absurdity does not follow logic or rationality itself. Therefore, unmasking absurdity can best be achieved outside the domain of rationality itself. The kynic is therefore a prime example of absurdity resistance through taking it to the extreme, not just achieving estrangement (Pfaller, 2012), but withdrawal from absurdity altogether (see also Śliwa et al., 2012).

Yet again, resistance is insufficient to address and change hypernormalized practices. For instance, the Gilet Jaunes (Yellow Vest) Movement in France originated in 2018 as a protest against rising fuel prices (which caused many liberal environmentalists not to sympathize with the movement), and led to resistance across Europe (Masquelier, 2021). However, while this resistance movement initially was directed at rising fuel prices, a lack of problematization underpinned the movement. These protests concerned a resistance against the hegemonic order, but without a clear problematization of the hypernormalization that caused the unrest and frustration. Absurdity exposed itself here, as the French neoliberal government imposed so-called environment taxes which would affect the most vulnerable people. This led people to protest (a rather incremental form of) climate action. Absurdity emerged here in the impossible choice for people between climate action and economic survival, thereby pretending that the two were unrelated to each other. At the same time, the French government responded with military intervention, delegitimizing a debate on the link between environmentalism and emancipatory economics (for the marginalized poor). Nonetheless, the lack of success of the movement can be partly attributed to the lack of problem identification, as well as a lack of alternatives that are necessary to successfully counter hypernormalization.

Imagination

Lack of an alternative is a strong driver behind hypernormalization dynamics. It also explains the persistent nature of hypernormalization; whereas people in the former Soviet Union dreamed of Western life (Yurchak, 2005), contemporary society lacks such a comparative perspective, contributing to inertia and compliance (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). In addition to problematization and resistance, imagination is therefore needed to bring about change. Kilroy (2019) advocated a parallax view, which entails the formulation of *radical* alternatives. This means to fundamentally break away from absurdity, and not by merely trying to expose the falsehood of absurdity. Exposing absurdity as 'post-truth' (Foroughi et al., 2019) would implicitly assume that there is a 'rational' opposite of absurdity which is intrinsically appealing (e.g., a fantasy of a return to purposeful, efficient bureaucracy in organizations). It is therefore needed to formulate alternative visions of reality that may provide a way out, or a way for people to construct a more 'livable' position (Žižek, 2018) that protects the dignity of people and the planet (Bal, 2017). This includes the formulation and provision of new forms of ontological security (Kinvall, 2004; Mitzen, 2006). As problematization and resistance without imagination of alternatives only create or enhance ontological *in*security, it is imperative that a more fruitful way out of hypernormalization is to create new visions for identity-formulation and collective solidarity, and thus new forms of ontological security for people in workplaces.

In this context, Žižek (1989, 2001), argues for a traversing of the fantasy (underpinning hypernormalization). Žižek argues that traversing the fantasy is not about a politics that aims to realize an impossible dream, but one that confronts social antagonisms, that becomes aware of one's fantasy structuring the ego, through which an individual can gain a healthy sense of oneself. It is about recognizing the horror, gaps and incompleteness in all things and between oneself and the social world. However, this could only be the starting point of living with absurdity as an individual coping strategy, while more collective forms of resistance, imagination and social action are to be theorized following the traversing of fantasy. In other words, our identified need for imagination should build on this notion of traversing the fantasy, while articulating new ways of organizing and engaging in social and organizational practice.

Hence, imagination involves the creation of 'new fantasies', as absurdity is ultimately about a fantasy about social order. For instance, bureaucracy entails a fantasy of the smoothly functioning and efficient organization, which may become absurd when its destructive potential is normalized, whereby individuals suffer because of bureaucratic procedures. In response, imagination involves the dreaming of responsible alternatives, and counter-narratives of how authoritative discourse in society could obtain new constative meanings, providing new forms of ontological security to individuals and collectives.

One more mundane way through which ontological security may be protected is through engagement into the performative dimension of an ideology of absurdity (e.g., through participation in bureaucracy), while at the same time, finding creative ways of reinterpreting hegemonic discourse into more meaningful action. Such dual engagement is alike practices of individuals in the Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2003, 2005), and may have greater importance than initially recognized. Key to such endeavors is the combination of problematization, resistance and imagination, as they may jointly form the antidote to reproduction of form and a way to which creative reinterpretations of constative dimensions become materialized. Through these strategies, individuals may experience disalienation (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020), or a regained sense of connectedness with oneself, others and the world.

Experimentation may play a central role, whereby engagement in the performative dimension is conducted at the minimum level of necessity and in a way that authoritative discourse becomes meaningless. For instance, in an organizational bureaucracy where employees continuously must fill in forms, these forms can be provided with the same reproduced, meaningless content that act as empty signifiers that nonetheless fulfill the bureaucratic desire for content. At the same time, individuals may experiment with new ways of organizing and collaborating *beyond* bureaucracy, through informal organizations within the formal structures (see e.g., Parker et al., 2014). Such experimentation may provide meaning locally but may also give rise to more collective forms of solidarity, meaning-making and collective action to spur change in society and workplaces.

Discussion

This paper conceptualized absurdity and hypernormalization in the context of work and society. Based on an understanding of contemporary workplaces as 'absurd', this paper analyzed how such absurdities are normalized and maintained. The analysis commenced with a clarification of the concept of absurdity. There is a lack of understanding of absurdity in the workplace, and this paper builds on previous work (e.g., Loacker and Peters, 2015; Starkey et al., 2019) to provide better understandings of how absurdity emerges and how it is maintained through hypernormalization. Hypernormalization was also used to refer to the split between authoritative discourse and really existing practices in the last decades of the Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2003, 2005). Particularly, the concept of reproduction of form after Stalin's death ensured that discourse was reproduced repeatedly, such that it gradually lost its meaning and relationship to reality, contributing to this absurd relationship between ideology and practice.

This paper explained how the normalization of absurdity is present throughout socio-organizational and geo-political contexts, as the ideological functioning is similar, even though it applies to capitalist countries (Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Fisher, 2009). Two elements are central to the translation of hypernormalization in the contemporary context. Firstly, the split between official discourse and really existing practices is not just the result of ideology, but also an important element of the functioning of ideology over time (Žižek, 2018). This can be observed in how practices become more absurd, as the split between what is maintained in public discourse (e.g., commitment to combat climate change) and actual manifestation (e.g., the continued overinvestment in the economy in contrast with the protection of the environment; Blühdorn, 2017) is only growing. However, this split enables the status quo, and the normalization of the gap ensures that ideology lacks effective contestation (Žižek, 1994). Secondly, the role of reproduction of form in contemporary society underpins hypernormalization, whereby discourse is reproduced to such an extent that such phrases have become dissociated from reality and the possibility of describing the predicament of individuals. It thereby becomes meaningless, and acting as empty signifiers; it produces an ambiguous meaning that may actually be counterproductive in terms of its proclaimed goal (Kilroy, 2019).

However, such a split does not sufficiently describe hypernormalization, as it misses the inappropriate and illogical elements of absurdity. Absurdity leads to suffering when it is 'inappropriate', or when hypernormalization allows for a resurfacing of racism, misogyny, and dignity violations (Bal, 2017). The study of absurdity and hypernormalization is therefore needed - as these present themselves as essential elements of contemporary ideology and societal and organizational functioning - in order to expose their potential destructive nature for people, animals and the planet.

Theoretical implications

We have conceptually identified absurdity and hypernormalization in this paper. Yet, there has been no research focusing on the absurdities in contemporary workplaces, despite some scholarly investigations on a variety of concepts and juxtapositions which can be understood as absurd (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; McCabe, 2016). It is relevant that the roles of ideology and internalization are explored in more detail, as they underpin the maintenance of hypernormalization over time. In ideological terms, there are both spontaneous elements of emergence and ideological investment into hypernormalization, as well as of deliberate management of hypernormalization processes. For instance, the absurdity of increasing bureaucratization in organizational life, unfolds to a large extent through spontaneous development, largely contributed to by deliberate management (in-)action although its rise is not entirely explainable (Clegg et al., 2016). It is therefore needed to untangle both processes of ideological investment into the strengthening of hypernormalization. One such process may involve the internalization of absurdity into one's core beliefs about the state of the world and its functioning, through which the absurdity is either disavowed, or not recognized as such.

It can therefore be stated, that hypernormalization has a strong psychological component, as it touches upon individuals' core beliefs and attitudes about the world (Mitzen, 2006). Unconscious and conscious efforts to deny or rationalize the emergence and maintenance of absurdity pertain to psychological dynamics and thereby provide ontological security. This makes the 'stepping out' of hypernormalization not merely a conscious process of detachment from absurdity, but a deeply emotional and painful process through which individuals must disengage from the very core functioning of contemporary (Western, neoliberal) ideology. It is not surprising that Žižek (1989, 2001) has drawn attention to the role of disavowal, as this provides the way through which some of the key values of the Western world (e.g., democracy, freedom of speech and press) are actively negated (see also Huber et al., 1997). This also shows that problematization only serves as a conditional securitization activity, but insufficient for (radical) social change.

Future research directions

With the novelty of scientific interest in absurdity and hypernormalization, a range of research questions can guide future endeavors to enrich understanding. A first possible question pertains to how absurdity can be assessed. On the one hand, individual and collective perceptions of absurdity and hypernormalization may be relevant and interesting to ascertain and investigate to assess the extent to which they manifest and are maintained.

On the other hand, such an approach assumes that absurdity and hypernormalization can be assessed at the conscious level of the individual and/or groups in society, which may only be partially true. Therefore, discourse analysis or conceptual work may shed more light upon the nature and manifestation of hypernormalization (e.g., Bal and Dóci, 2018; De Cleen et al., 2021).

A relevant question for future research is to what extent the three strategies to escape the circularity of hypernormalization are valid empirically. While we identified problematization, resistance and imagination as three interrelated and necessary steps out of hypernormalization, they are yet insufficient on their own. As we only briefly discussed the three strategies, further research may investigate in more depth the potential of the three as jointly explaining the ways through which more sustainable futures from a state of hypernormalized absurdity can be imagined. While there is literature on each of the separate strategies (e.g., Contu, 2018; Mumby et al., 2017), it would be informative to investigate attempts where each of the three strategies are conducted to ascertain what they could each contribute to sustaining individual and collective well-being in society and organizations.

In sum, our paper on hypernormalization of absurdity offers a new lens to study contemporary workplaces, thereby elucidating the dynamics and processes that underpin the emergence of absurdity, its maintenance, and why individuals and collectives are hesitant to address hypernormalization openly. The lens of absurdity helps to understand wider phenomena, including inequality and marginalization, and climate inertia. Once it has been established that such phenomena can be perceived as absurd, it allows for an understanding of fantasmatic investment into the status quo or into an imagined past or a retrotopia (Bauman, 2017), but also the deliberate management of hypernormalization. We can observe the absurdity of the dissociation between the literatures on corporate social responsibility and the proclaimed commitment of companies towards combatting climate change, and the realities of climate change (Blühdorn, 2017). A hypernormalization lens may offer insights into the deliberate management of this gap, as it protects organizational interests in short-term profitability and the status quo. However, absurdity exposes itself in the destructive effects of climate change worldwide, and the continued destruction of nature, such as in the

Brazilian Amazon (Casado and Londoño, 2019). Understanding and addressing the ideological investment and internalization into hypernormalization will be the first step towards positive change.

Conclusion

It has been argued for a long time that life is absurd in its futility and inevitability of death (Nagel, 1971). Yurchak (2003; 2005) showed that such a gap between meaninglessness and real life is filled with various constative meanings. Hence, absurdity may have positive effects as well, as it constitutes the fabric of society, or how ideology is actually translated into practice or how people create some semblance of meaningfulness out of a hypernormalized absurd situation or how people can imagine new visions of self, collective identities as alternatives to ontological *in*securities. Nonetheless, the split between ideological meaninglessness and real practices may ultimately be harmful and may have detrimental effects for individuals and societies. It is therefore apparent that an understanding of hypernormalization may contribute to positive social change, through problematization, resistance, and imagination.

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