Beyond happy families and authenticity: Back to work organisation and mundaneness in the critique of 'authenticating' management programs

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abstract

Over the past 10 years, a concern for the 'authentic' individual at work has taken up the agenda within HRM, as well as that of critics of HRM. Within Critical Management Studies (CMS) in particular, spirituality, fun programs and health discourses are treated as forms of neo-normative control – a sophisticated way for modern capitalism to tap into the very existence of the employee. Arguing that this kind of critique mimics rather than challenges the state of affairs, a de-dramatization and re-contextualization of the critique is suggested, based on (re)introducing a classical concern for the organization of work. Shifting the focus from control and identity to mundane matters of work tasks and work coordination produces less sophisticated analysis, but may help CMS critique out of its current state of paralysis and move it closer to the everyday challenges faced by organizational actors.

Introduction

In current HRM practice, 'fun' initiatives are becoming widespread (Ford et al., 2003; Schoeneman, 2006) and maintaining a focus on individual health and spirituality has increasingly been embraced as a legitimate way to develop and manage human resources (Lips-Wiersma and Mills, 2014; Grawitch et al., 2006; Nash, 2003). Regardless of the specific program offered, the general idea is to encourage employees to become 'whole human beings', while simultaneously enhancing organizational productivity. Alongside this development, a body of critical literature has emerged on the subject of 'authenticating' management

techniques (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Cederstöm and Fleming, 2012; Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Spicer, 2011; Pedersen, 2008, 2011). Critics argue that the alleged 'win-win' situation is, in fact, exploitative in nature. When employees are offered the chance to 'become themselves' in a workplace setting, whether this entails becoming healthier, freer, happier, more spiritually enlightened, a painstaking quest to tease out the inner potentialities of the single individual in the name of productivity is set in course. These various management technologies have been characterized as forms of 'neo-normative control', and is seen as being representative of a historic change in management control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). The power of capital and management is no longer an external force, as was the case in the traditional bureaucracy (Weber, 2007; Walton, 1989). It does not even seek the conformity of the single individual employee to a common culture (Kunda, 1992; Casey, 1999; Willmott, 1993), but instead has developed into an existential mechanism rooted in the ability of employees to realize their own full potential by 'just being themselves' (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). However, implicit in all of this is a constant demand for the employee to become 'someone else': to realize their own full potential in accordance with an external norm (Cederström, 2011). As a consequence, the critical literature depicts employees as serving as mere cogs in the wheel of modern-day capitalism, left feeling perpetually guilty and facing the ever-present danger of suffering from self-exploitation or stress-related breakdowns (Spicer, 2011; Pedersen, 2008). The possibility of resistance is considered to be a frantic gesture, a decaf resistance or an act of cynicism, which serves yet another source of productivity, holding no currency or implying no power to make a change (Contu, 2008; Johnsen et al., 2009; Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2008; Maravelias, 2007).

The ambition of this article is to challenge and reorient this HRM critique, thus joining forces with those engaged in the ongoing, self-reflexive debates on the status of critique within critical management studies (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Adler, 2008; Spicer et al., 2009; Hartman, 2014; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). Doubts and regrets have been aired widely as to whether or not CMS critique may in fact live up to its inherent ambition of reversing and making an impact on current management rhetoric and practice. As argued by Spicer et al. (2009), there is a need for critical scholars to engage more closely with the management practices under study and thus refrain from adopting the common stance and shying away from a means-ends logic in knowledge production, refusing to deliver alternatives to HR managers and remaining 'anti-performative' (Spicer et al., 2009). A 'cynical distance' is upheld (*Ibid.*: 542). Adler speaks of a certain 'complacency' within CMS (Adler, 2008) and Hartman adds to this by pointing out that the habitual preference of critical scholars to adopt inaccessible philosophical theories and styles of writing is the main problem (Hartman, 2014). 'CMS satisfies itself with attempts to shock the mainstream out of its ideological

slumber' (Spicer et al., 2009: 542). As such, the divide between practice and critique widens.

While the distance between critics and practice is often framed as being the main problem, the mimetic tendencies shared by HRM discourses and CMS critique have remained largely unaddressed. As this article will argue, in the context of the neo-normative analyses of employee authenticity at work, it is proximity, as much as distance, that forms an obstacle to critique being politically and practically relevant. Accordingly, neo-normative critique may not serve to counter capitalism, but in fact support its very machinery. The divide becomes an indiscernible crack.

A possible response to the double-edged challenge of distance and proximity within CMS critique could be a renewed, yet classical, focus on the organization of work. When the analysis and critique of authenticating management programs are situated within specific organizational settings, it serves to de-dramatize and re-contextualize the widely-held preoccupation with control; to specify often-abstracted individual identities and to question the explanatory power attributed to ideology within CMS. Acknowledging the organization of work in the critical analysis of management may produce less-entertaining analyses, but it offers specification, which may very well be the antidote to both sophisticated critique and high-flying HRM rhetoric.

In order to present this argument, the article proceeds in two subsequent steps. First, following the work of Gabriel (1999, 2001), the ongoing preoccupation with control within CMS is addressed, and it is argued that this preoccupation still seems to 'blind us'. Using Gabriel as a catalyst in this critical reading, the focus will be on the theoretical repertoire and assumptions at play within the debate on neo-normative control and employee authenticity (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Cederström, 2011; Spicer 2011; Pedersen, 2011; Cederstöm and Fleming, 2012; Cederström and Spicer, 2015). While this debate really only includes a few scholars, their voices have succeeded in establishing quite a solid and continuous discourse, crosscutting a range of journals, as well as finding its way into the public debate. Furthermore, these scholars have continued to address the long-standing controversy related to the essential triad of CMS: control, resistance and identity, thus also extending beyond the specific neo-normative debates.

Second, an alternative approach to HRM analysis and critique is proposed. This alternative finds its inspiration in a recent effort to bring the organization of work back to organization and management theory (Barley and Kunda, 2001; du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2012, 2014; Vikkelsø, 2015; Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015). Following from this particular 'stance', classical yet mundane concerns such as the work task, work

roles and work coordination become decisive contextual components in the analysis of HRM programs. The potential of this approach is then shown in the analysis of a spiritual program made available to social workers in the Danish Probation Service. The analysis first shows how authenticating management techniques are organizationally embedded and are highly fragile activities, a far cry from the well-oiled machinery of neo-normative control and self-capitalization. Second, it suggests that attending to the mundane challenges of everyday work organization is as important to the critical and political project of CMS as is attending to the latest management discourses.

'Mordantly entertaining'

Capitalist and management critique is no longer the exclusive concern of academics; it has become fashionable among a wider public (Piketty, 2014; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Cederström and Spicer, 2015). Indeed, it seems that the more entrapped and cynical the take on our current circumstances the better. Reading the endorsements of 'Dead Man Working' by Cederström and Fleming (2012), it is difficult not to sense the almost masochistic pleasure invoked:

> Cederström and Fleming's brilliant dark and witty book tells us the truth. Working in our sleep? Dressing up as infants? Deprivation tank addiction? Fitness centers? Suicide? Email? If you didn't already know what work has made you become then this book might have a devastating effect on your life. Read it! (Simon Critchley, Hans Jonas Professor, New School for Social Research) [...] The book is mordantly entertaining. (Stephen Poole, The Guardian)

Building on the academic research and publications of the two authors, the book describes vigorously, and entertainingly, how the widespread focus on individual wellness, authenticity and fun at work can be seen not just as a matter of individual choice or a passing management fad, but, indeed, as emblematic of our current capitalist society. Similarly, reading 'The Wellness Syndrome' (Cederström and Spicer, 2015), the engagement of employees, students and mothers in various health and wellness practices is described, not simply as a matter of grooming individual well-being and health, but equally as practices in service of the persuasive yet invisible dynamic of modern capitalism. As individuals strive to become increasingly healthy, unique and authentic, they unwittingly become the indispensable 'Other' to capitalism. It is devastating news – but still a good read, as the reviewers suggest. While the critique presented is dark and paralytic, this is precisely why reading it is a thrilling experience overall. It really is 'mordantly entertaining'.

The tendency to dramatize our shared misery is not just found in the popular versions of CMS. It shows up in many journal articles on the subject of authenticating management as well. According to Spicer (2011), drawing on psycho-analyst Basterra (2004), we live in 'authenticity traps' that keep us struggling against outside symbolic orders in order to become authentic, while at the same time failing to recognize that these very structures are the ones that give us a sense of authenticity. The situation is tragic and there is no way out. Similarly, Pedersen (2008) describes stress management programs as being based on the ability of the employee to constantly balance, or rather capitalize on, the inner tension between full engagement and a potential stress-related breakdown. As Pedersen argues, stress management feeds on the individual's ability to engage productively in a constant 'tune-in, break-down and re-boot' – process, serving not to prevent stress in the first place, but to create a machinery of perpetual productivity, with the very stress breakdown as an integral component. Again, the point is dramatic, serving to show that to modern capitalism, there is no outside, no escape. Following Contu, when we seek to escape as individuals, even our various attempts at resistance are already part and parcel of the capitalist logic itself and thus amount to no more than what Contu has coined 'decaf resistance' (Contu, 2008). A resistance without any real effect.

This is not to say that scholars are not supposed to write passionately and in an engaged fashion about the dangers of our current circumstances. There is every reason to be suspicious when HR programs uncritically present the employment relationship as a matter of employee self-fulfillment. Yet, if critique is intended to highlight opportunities for change and to set out alternative routes, overly dramatized writings do not seem conducive to us escaping the 'authenticity trap'.

'Blinded by control'

In an article published in 1999, Gabriel already addresses the gloomy tendency within critical management studies to focus primarily on the control aspects of organizations. Taking as his point of departure the still widely cited article by Casey (1999), in which the company and the form of control it relies on are likened to the normative and psychological pressures a of family context, Gabriel outlines the critical academic debate at the time - a debate, he argues, that revolves around a recurring 'problematic' with organizational control, identity and resistance as its cornerstones. According to Gabriel, the corporate control addressed by CMS scholars can be seen as 'totalizing', referring specifically to the attitude and focus of the critical scholars themselves. Calling the preoccupation with control an expression of a 'metaphysical pathos' (Gabriel, 1999: 194), Gabriel argues that control has become 'totalizing' in so far as academics themselves have been

'blinded by the discourses of control and surveillance' (*Ibid.*: 192), as if control were the only concern worth mentioning in the analysis of organizations. Gabriel reflects:

> That our lives are controlled by diverse forces operating both on us and through us cannot be doubted. That our lives can be reduced to these forces in a totalitarian gloom runs against what history has to tell us. (*Ibid.*: 192)

Sixteen years later, the debate on control has only been amplified (Mumby, 2005; Fleming and Spicer, 2008). Control comes in various forms: those running the gamut from bureaucratic to normative, as well the recent addition of the notion of neo-normative control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011). Equally, critical researchers have found that control appears in a variety of combinations, as bureaucratic forms of control are not simply superseded by normative and neo-normative variations. Forms of control are analyzed in order to unravel their specific co-existences. Forms of control are seen as 'hybrids' (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001), as 'cages in tandem' (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman et al., 2006). Basically, the overall message is that organizational control is becoming more and more pervasive and, as a result, more difficult to resist. According to a more recent article by Gabriel, the control discourse has grown into 'a safe haven' for researchers, as well as a commodity that circulates in the market (Gabriel, 2001). Much the same as with 'The Wellness Syndrome' and 'Dead Man Working', here critique has become an aesthetic product, applauded for its ability to be 'mordantly entertaining'.

De-contextualized critique

When control becomes the primary focus, it diminishes the capacity of critical analyses to take into account other important aspects of organizational life. Indeed, the organization itself disappears from view. As pointed out by Gabriel, within CMS, the organization tends to be conceptualized as a 'symbolic universe', in which the control of individual desires and drives has become a key issue, whereas economic and political features have lost traction (Gabriel, 1999: 188). This diagnosis quite closely mirrors the recent critical studies of authenticating management programs: they too, are set within a contextual vacuum, as the organization is often overlooked or treated as an empty and unspecified container. In a recent special issue of Work, Employment and Society entitled 'Managerial control and workplace regimes' (2010), the editors, specifically referring to the debate on neo-normative control, note that:

> [t]here is a recurrent danger of focusing on control practices and mechanisms themselves (or surveillance in the context of call centres), in relative isolation from

the contextual conditions and characteristics that give them meaning. (Thompson and Van den Broek, 2010: 9)

Gabriel discusses the de-contextualization of critique using broad-stroke labels such as 'post-modernism', 'plural perspectives' and 'anti-essentialism'. With no clear directions and fixed normativities, critique finds itself multiplying endlessly, in an 'unfettered unfolding of fantasy' (Gabriel, 2001: 27). While these post-modern characteristics certainly form part of the picture, fixed normativities are, however, not entirely absent within neo-normative critique. On the contrary, there is a quite consistent preoccupation with ideology as a structural explanatory force.

Ideology trumps

Neo-normative analysis often starts, and ends, with the same overall agenda: unraveling the workings and pitfalls of the ideologies underpinning modern day capitalism. As stressed by Cederström and Spicer, '[o]ur concern in this book is not with wellness per se. Our concern is how wellness has become an ideology' (Cederström and Spicer, 2015: 3). Equally, as Fleming (2009) sets out to critically address the latest tendency among managers to 'corporatize' employees' personal authenticity, he states his objective as follows:

> My objective in writing this book is to develop a kind of ideology critique whereby the appearance of this discursive practice is unpacked to reveal half-hidden structures, contradictions, and even unintended opportunities for real progressive change. (Fleming, 2009: viii)

Just a page later Fleming continues:

> I will argue that difference, diversity and the *sui generis* of individual actualization become expressive instruments that reinforce the conservative politics of accumulation. (*Ibid.*: ix)

Irrespective of the specific empirical focus (health, fun-programs, spirituality, etc.) the aim is to discover the more or less hidden ideological structures at work beneath the surface, feeding the accumulative and exploitative logic of capitalism. Under the label of neo-normative control, what has been added to this otherwise classical structural reading and critique of capitalism is that the previous distinction between labor and life is no longer sustainable. Rather, life itself has become a component of the production apparatus. As Fleming states: '[...] it is this imaginary outsideness that capital relies upon to sustain its own rhythms' (*Ibid.*: 117). Treating the ideologies of modern capitalism as the overall framework, or rather the underlying mechanism and explanatory force, is, however, what generates the insensitivity towards the specificities of different programs and their organizational contexts. Following Ekman (2012), CMS is often cast as a story of

'the usual suspects', implying highly predefined roles, with 'capitalism, managers, instrumental goals and control' as the bad guys, and the employees as the subjugated party, with the normative promise of liberation and autonomy on the horizon (*Ibid*.: 22). In CMS analysis, managers as well as employees participate in what is an already tightly choreographed game of ideological control, with no apparent alternatives (see also Mogensen, 2012). However, even ideological forces appear in context.

Generic identities

In the article by Fleming and Sturdy (2009), in which the notion of 'neo-normative control' is framed for the first time, the authors do recognize that types of control are, and should be, studied as tightly linked to the specific work context under study. Referring to the dominant focus on identity prevalent within the critical literature, they self-critically reflect:

> The focus on identity appears to be impoverished if it does not also correspond with task, job and role autonomy/creativity. Indeed, we may expect different employee responses in different contexts. (*Ibid*.: 580).

In the quote, the authors thus appreciate that studying control systems in a high school and those in a high-tech company is not the same. Since the contexts, as well as the 'occupational status' of the individuals under study, are so disparate, the interplay between identity and control cannot be considered to be generic. In principle, they invite to nuance the otherwise set choreography of ideology critique. While the importance of the organizational context is honored as a general stance, however, it remains largely absent from the analysis. Despite the differentiation according to classical sociological parameters, individuals are analyzed primarily in relation to the management program itself. In effect, the exclusive focus on managerial discourses and control renders the analysis unable to situate the notion of neo-normative control within a particular context, and consequently makes it impossible to differentiate between contexts, as well as between identities, including both employees and managers.

Returning to the quote by Fleming in which he argues how individual actualization is something that is *sui generis*, existing beyond any kind of questioning and politics, his statement becomes paradoxically emblematic; not only to modern capitalism, but equally to its critics. While the critics blame capitalist ideology for having turned individual self-actualization into a mere instrument of accumulation, they should also be pointing the finger toward themselves. The individuals in their critical analyses are never treated as having any other possibility available to them than staying self-actualizing individuals, *sui generis*. In

other words, they remain abstracted and unspecified individuals, defined by ideological forces and characterized by the universal ability to self-actualize. This approach, in effect, mimics the very management discourses the critics aim to subvert. This is where high flying ideology critique collapses into mimesis.

Now the question is what might the alternative outset be for critique? In the work of Gabriel, psychoanalysis and the 'struggling, interacting, feeling, thinking and suffering subject' (Gabriel, 1999: 179) is suggested as an alternative analytical starting point. In light of the above, however, this does not seem a viable solution. Despite the current hype around the (re-)introduction of Lacan to organization theory (Cederström and Hoedemaeker, 2010; Contu et al., 2010; Fotaki et al., 2012), when psychoanalysis is applied to authenticating management techniques, we still seem blinded. As we are invited to unearth the fantasies of modern work life, the focus on the symbolic imaginaries of abstracted employee subjects tends to produce the very same problems identified above (see Cederström, 2011). Furthermore, moving critique even further into Lacanian controversies and the psychodynamics of the individual simply serves to nurture the unfortunate mimetic tendency within neo-normative critique to turn the individual subject into the abstracted, yet prime nexus and battleground for both management discourse and management critique. The antidote and possible road ahead suggested here takes the work organization as its analytical starting point, thus targeting both the drama, the de-contextualized critique and the abstracted individual identities caught up in self-actualization.

A way forward: Bringing work organization back in

Within organization theorizing, there is a nascent interest in the reintroduction of the organization. This may seem odd, but it relates to the historical fact that increasingly, the organization as a formalized and purposeful entity has disappeared from organization theory (Barley and Kunda, 2001; Vikkelsø, 2015; Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015; du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2012, 2014, 2016). According to Barley and Kunda, regrettably, the acknowledgement of the intimate link between the organization and work, characteristic of the historical lineage of organization theory, no longer holds traction in the field (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 76). Theorizing and analyzing the organization as an entity with an identifiable purpose in terms of a primary task (whether this task is the production of toilet paper or providing counselling) requiring specific organizational measures in terms of division of labor, specification of work and work roles, choice of management, etc. has fallen out of favor. While concern with the proper organization of work was dominant among early organizational theorists (Taylor, 1967; Weber, 2007; Barnard, 1938; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Trist and

Bamforth, 1951), today, the organization as an object of study has changed. Using verbs instead of nouns (Weick, 1979), organizations are conceptualized as processes of 'organiz*ing*'; as the product of social constructions and ongoing sense-making; as a defocused entity with no clear boundaries, defined in terms of a plurality of concepts like 'discourse', 'power' and 'subjectivity' (Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015: 450). Indeed, as an object of study, the organization has increasingly become 'symbolic' (Gabriel, 1999). As Vikkelsø argues, the research agenda that goes along with this is increasingly characterized by a 'critical disposition', at the expense of the classical and mundane aspects of work organization: '[...] "task" and "purpose" are rejected as self-evident matters and displaced by analyses of power plays that can and should be critiqued' (Vikkelsø, 2015: 423). Without going further into the historical reasons for this development, a political unease in response to the instrumental rationality and 'life-crushing facets' of organizations, as well as a skepticism of the positivist and functional approach in classic organization theory have been critical in producing this development (Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015: 447, 451; du Gay, 2000, Hartman, 2014). Lopdrup-Hjorth (2015) goes so far as to refer to a veritable 'organization phobia'. According to Lopdrup-Hjorth, the current dismay within critical organization theory, including CMS, is, in fact, related to the turn away from organizations as functional systems. The political ambition in organization theorizing to adopt 'a critical dispostion', implying a rejection of instrumental rationality and 'putting the human centre stage' (Vikkelsø, 2015: 423), has left this very same human in a vacuum. As argued by Barley and Kunda, neglecting the study of organizations without relating this to specific work activities has serious consequences when it comes to our current understanding of modern forms of organizing: '[...] until our images of work are updated, efforts at specifying postbureaucratic forms will continue to be seriously hampered' (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 77). As is the argument here, this also has important implications when it comes to critique. When management critique no longer involves a notion of the organization of work, the ability to represent the reality and identities of key actors – employees and managers – is diminished. As argued by du Gay and Vikkelsø (2012), being able to pose critique and intervene in organizations requires specificity. It requires a closer look at the 'practical realities' of organizations (Vikkelsø, 2015), analytically implying that once again concepts such as 'work task', 'work coordination' and 'work roles' become important conceptual outsets for organizational theorists, critical or otherwise.

Following this classical and also quite pragmatic stance, the analysis presented below has been conducted with the aim of firmly situating the discursive and ideological underpinnings of a spiritual program within the specific work organization in which it appears. The analysis specifies the effects of a meditation program by relating it to the purpose, work tasks and work coordination characteristic of the Probation Services, as well as to the particular people working

there in terms of their roles, relationships, responsibilities and, not least, the concerns they have in relation to their work situation. By asking how the program, 'Project Peace', was taken up by employees and management and how it was related to the specific organization of work, we are able to specify and thus qualify the kinds of effects – negative or otherwise – that we may claim emerge from the introduction of an authenticating management program.

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first lays out the overall intentions and discourse of the program, as well as the reactions of the employees vis-à-vis the program. In many respects, this follows the dimensions normally accounted for within a critical neo-normative analysis, having as its primary focus the relationship between the program and the individual. As a consequence, the employees in this section are not differentiated, but are aggregated under the common category 'employees'. The second part then sets out to show what happens when we analyze the meditation program, as well as the employees, beyond the scope of neo-normative critique, situating both within the work setting of the Probation Services. It proceeds by discerning three displacements as a consequence of the proposed alternative analytical perspective: 1) from generic identities to specific tasks and work roles 2) From work as life to work *or* life, and finally 3) from powerful to powerless management.

Method and the search for black swans

This analysis is based on qualitative data (interviews and documents) on a meditation program initiated by the Danish Probation Services (DPS). The primary focus of the data collection was to evaluate 'Project Peace', seeking to uncover the managerial intentions behind its implementation, the methods employed and how employees experienced the program. Due to the author's general interest in work environment, questions pertaining to the conditions of work were included in the interview design. All in all, eight interviews were conducted. First, an initial interview with an employee and a manager was held in order to become acquainted with the context of the Probation Services and the particular challenges employees faced that were associated with stress, which the mediation program was aiming to address. The intentions behind the implementation of the meditation program and the methods used were then investigated by interviewing the external consultant (a peace-to-mind therapist) involved in the project, as well as the responsible HR professional in the directorate. Documents including the peace-to-mind website, as well as documents and power points used for communication by the HR department and the consultants working with the local probation offices were also included in the dataset. To understand the 'effects' of the program at the local level, group

interviews of employees were conducted across three different probation offices. The groups consisted of between three and eight people and included both social workers and administrative staff. Local managers at each site were interviewed and, finally, two non-participants were interviewed over the phone in an effort to get an impression of why they chose not to participate. With the exception of the interview with the HR professional, all interviews were subsequently transcribed. Finally, the author herself conducted a participant observation in the context of a peace-to mind treatment offered by an external consultant/therapist. The empirical material would no doubt have been strengthened had it also included close observations of everyday work and management; unfortunately, however, this was not possible. For the purposes of this article, the data presented here is still valid, as the interviews give us valuable insights into the mundane, yet decisive aspects of the work and its organization within the Probation Services.

As the data collection preceded the ambition to write this article, one cannot speak of a strategic choice of case (Flyvbjerg, 2004). As a state-run bureaucracy, however, it does provide us with a case that is more likely to contrast to the post-bureaucratic discourse of the meditation program; the role and status of the employee and work being the most poignant examples. As shown in the analysis, the Danish Prison and Probation Services works according to a rather classical, Weberian divide between personality/life and office. As such, the powerlessness of the meditation program could be explained by a clash between a strong bureaucratic mode of organization and a post-bureaucratic discourse less potent. As indirect support for this argument, the CMS critique around normative and neo-normative control has often taken knowledge work, consultancies and other classical, post-bureaucratic organizations as their empirical points of departure (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Costas and Fleming, 2009).

Yet, in terms of this article's main argument and its concern with re-contextualizing critique in HRM using close studies of work and its organization, the main justification for the choice of case study is methodological and analytical in character. It is based on the question of whether or not it succeeds at providing sufficient insight into not only management discourses, but also the specific work being done and its related organizational efforts. As argued in the critical reading above, in many cases empirical studies of neo-normative control are hardly situated at all, given their primary focus on management discourses and ideology. Following from this, even the studies situated within classical bureaucratic organizations, whether call centers or public schools (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Kärreman et al., 2006), fail to produce conclusions that depart from the analysis of their post-bureaucratic counterparts. As argued elsewhere (Mogensen, 2012), judging the quality of the critical analysis requires us to ask whether or not the data and the theoretical framework actually allow the analysis to extend beyond

the powers already assumed by ideology and managerial discourse. Does it move beyond the 'usual supsects' (Ekman, 2012)? If not, the choice of case organization – bureaucratic or otherwise – seems less important. Despret (2006) suggests that we let the field 'resist', and uses the study of sheep as an illustrative example, while Popper (1992/1959) chose the image of the black swan. No matter which animal analogy you prefer, the principle of falsification is the same. In other words, the quality and validity of a case study, including this one, depends on whether or not its empirical and analytical focus actually allow the field of study (authenticating management programs) to appear different – black instead of white – in order to create the possibility of extending beyond the accepted wisdom of CMS critique.

The Probation Services and 'Project Peace'

The main purpose of the Probation Services is to supervise and support parolees, as well as clients that have been sentenced to community service, electronic tagging or treatment. While prison officers are the professional group within the Prison and Probation Services at large who have the most challenging work environment (Prison and Probation Services, 2015), general budget cuts and an increased workload, including an increase in potentially risky house calls brought about by an increase in the use of electronic tagging, has strained social workers within the Probation Offices considerably, as well. Furthermore, clients are generally considered to have become more complex and demanding, an issue that has increased the need for more elaborate and often difficult collaboration with the psychiatric system and other public authorities. As a consequence, sick-leave statistics show increase in short term illness in particular. 'Project Peace' was a seven-week program initiated by the central HR department of the Danish Prison and Probation Services and was run by the external consultancy firm 'Peace-to-Mind'. The program's aim was to decrease stress among employees of the Probation Services and addressed counsellors in particular. Using individual healing and so-called peace-to-mind-treatments in combination with group meditation, employees were offered the chance to (re)connect to their 'inner peace'. As it is put in the official presentation:

> The Peace to Mind Treatment helps employees recreate contact with their inner peace; a contact that will lead to greater happiness as well as performance both in their private life and their work life.

During a peace-to-mind session, the employee would spend the 30-minute treatment lying on a fold-out treatment table, covered with a blanket, while the therapist would sit at the top end of the table holding her hands on either side of the employee's head without making contact, yet transferring her peace to the body of the client. If necessary, the client was invited to start the session by voicing a

particular concern or, afterward to briefly discuss the experiences and thoughts that may have come up during the session. Outside of this, not many words were spoken. The treatment was offered during work hours. The group meditation, on the other hand, was held after work and lasted one-and-a-half hours, commencing at 4:00 pm. The locale, a large meeting room with chairs set up in a circle set the scene. First, the group of employees would be introduced to a specific meditation technique: body scanning, visualization, mental travel or specific breathing exercises. Next, they were offered the opportunity to try it out and share their experiences within the group afterward. They were then prompted to go home and practice the different techniques between sessions. A variety of techniques were offered in an effort to increase the likelihood that the employees found a method that matched their specific preferences in order to strengthen the 'self-help' aspect of Project Peace:

> The goal is for both employees and the offices to become self-reliant – that they are able to restore the peace and focus that characterizes the optimal employee, even after the collaboration with Peace to Mind has ended.

Authenticating techniques and individualized responsibility

The employees interviewed were generally very positive about the program. This was confirmed in the official final evaluation carried out among the 130 participants and it came through in the group interviews, as well. One of the initial challenges the program faced, especially in relation to the peace-to-mind treatment, was that it was considered to be somewhat mystical in nature. When the employees described their initial reactions, terms like 'mumbo-jumbo', 'hippie' and 'flaky' were used and associations to popular TV programs on exorcism were made. However, with only a few exceptions, the participants said that they managed to let go of their initial skepticism. The 'mystical' nature of the program notwithstanding, the simple act of lying on the bench made them feel extraordinarily relaxed and calm. It was 'super nice', as one employee put it, while another had the feeling of being 'in seventh heaven'. Still another referred to a sense of 'coming home'.

When asked about specific effects of the program as they pertained to their work situation, the employees had a harder time articulating their views. Taking the results of the group interviews as a whole, however, it is clear that the program was generally considered to offer a kind of 'protective shield' against stress. As one employee explains:

> I was going to do a presentation and all... and when I was sitting on the highway, I thought [breathes in loudly]: Breathe! I can't get there any faster anyway. And that was really helpful, since stress was just about to creep up on me.

Knowing how to breathe in this way helped the employee to avoid becoming overwhelmed by stress. She was able to defend herself against it using the breathing exercises she learned. As a result, it also makes her feel safer. She continues:

> Well, I think it makes you calmer – that you know you have these tools to grab, if you end up in situations like that. This is certainly what makes me feel safer; that you are not in unknown territory if all of a sudden you find yourself in some kind of trouble.

The simple breathing technique is seen as a handy tool, something the employees carry with them 'in their back pocket'. As another employee puts it, '[it is] ready to use when needed'. In line with this, a therapist is cited as saying that meditation is like saving money; it is a way to 'put energy in the bank'. Meditating on a regular basis makes employees better equipped to resist external pressure, so the argument goes. Taking an aggregate look at the attitudes of the employees vis-à-vis the program, the employees seemed generally positive about it, as they gradually accepted the core of the program: the idea of the responsible employee who is able to self-help in response to stress and to self-reflexively evaluate the effects according to the authority of their own experience.

Speaking with the therapist, she readily confirmed this program discourse. While I was curious to know whether some employees might have felt overwhelmed by this level of intimacy in a work setting, the therapist assured me that this was not the case with Project Peace. As it was 100 % tailor made to each individual employee, it rarely led to situations that brought people out of their comfort zones. 'What happens is exactly what you need today', she emphasized. Referring to herself as a 'medium', the therapist explained that the 'truth' about what happens is sanctioned by the client him or herself. Contrasting her work to that of a psychologist, the therapist did not define her 'professionalism' in terms of a specific body of knowledge, but rather in her ability to sense the client´s needs. She added, '[...] it is your responsibility. It is your life. I am simply helping you'. As such, the program provided individuals with a mirror, leaving both the nature of the stress, as well as possible solutions to specific problems to be determined by the ability and will of the single employee him or herself to self-monitor and self-heal.

From this, one could, indeed, conduct a critical analysis along the lines of neo-normative control: 'Project Peace' is about controlling the productive resources of the employee by letting the employee 'become themselves'. Indeed, Pedersen's (2008) description of the perpetual machinery of stress-management, tuning in, breaking down and rebooting, comes fairly close to the description above. However, adhering to this analysis would mean ignoring other relevant aspects of

the empirical data. It would be but one side of the story. In discussing the intentions and effects of the meditation program with the employees, mundane aspects of work and work organization popped up continuously, reminding us that work stress and its possible solutions cannot be reduced to a relationship between management programs and generic authentic employees. Though both do play a role, they do so in a way that is inevitably situated, shaped and also displaced by the specific work task and work organization at hand, which calls for analysis and critique that takes this into account.

From generic identities to specific tasks and work roles

The main target of the meditation program was the counsellors within the Danish Probation Services (DPS), but interviewees in the group interviews, appointed by local managers, also consisted of administrative staff who had participated in the program. Rather than being a problem, the mixed groups helped clarify the importance of the division and coordination of work in relation to the program, as well as to work stress.

Counsellors carry out the primary task of the Probation Services, namely monitoring and supporting clients when they are on conditional probation. Typically, clients are required to visit the counsellors' office once every two weeks in order to follow up on their action plan, which specifies the parameters of what is normally a two-year probation period, as appointed by the judicial system. In spite of the increasing number of administrative procedures and political/legal demands on case processing that have been introduced, including, for example, a checklist-guideline for conducting 'motivating conversations', the counsellors' work is characterized by the reliance on professional judgement and a high degree of autonomy around work planning. While the counsellors tended to describe their work as being unpredictable as a result of the close relationship they have with complex clients, they remain flexible and define the content and flow of their work themselves, creating their own schedules and also working from home every once in a while.

The administrative staff, on the other hand, work in a supporting role vis-à-vis the counsellors. Administrative tasks are often 'produced' and defined by the counsellors, as they ask admin staff to inquire about important information with collaborators (prison institutions, lawyers, the municipality, the psychiatric system) in relation to their clients. Furthermore, admin staff work out of open offices and have a shared responsibility to be available at certain time intervals during the day when phones are open for incoming calls and clients show up at

the front desk. Their work and the execution of their work is, thus, far less flexible, as it is more dependent on others.

As becomes obvious from the information presented above, employees in the DPS are not generic individuals. When analytically attending to their work and their mutual work coordination, they become particular kinds of professionals with different types of tasks, roles and, not least, different conditions in terms of the coordination of work. These differences have a proximate effect when it comes to the meditation program, but they also produce fairly different work environments. In relation to the former, both counsellors and admin staff were prompted to meditate during work hours, but due to the nature of their work and its organization, the two professional groups faced very different situations. A dialogue between a counsellor and an admin staff went as follows:

> Counsellor: With regard to the mornings [...] you have expressed that while I go up to my office and just shut my door, you are not able to do the same.
>
> Admin staff: No I can't. It will take its toll on my colleagues... Even if I just have to go down to the bathroom, I have to announce: "I'm just going to run to the bathroom".

Given the flexibility of her work, the counsellor is able to decide for herself when she wants to take time for meditation and also has the facilities that allow her to do so: a single office and a door to close. This is, however, not an option for the admin staff. Their work tasks are beyond their control and are highly dependent on coordination with colleagues. In this setting, obviously, individual meditation practices become an *organizational* impossibility, as even taking time off to go to the restroom is seen as an obstacle in terms of the completion of daily work. Relating this to the power – or powerlessness – of the meditation program, adequate explanations will have to extend beyond the program discourse and the individual. Whether these employees take on the program identity, reliably doing their mediation, or are unable to do so, the reasons can and should be found as much in work and its organization as in the program discourse and the individual. This begs a shift in our analytical focus from identities and self-work of the individual, to organizational and collective concerns such as the character, distribution and coordination of work.

From work as life to work *or* life

An important assumption within neo-normative critique is the idea that authenticating management programs are set in place and act as productivity enhancing devices. Across the Probation Offices, employees confirmed that they have become better in prioritizing assignments, able to juggle more assignments

at a time, and to remain more 'cool-headed' when facing conflicts at work. Thus, apart from acting as a protective shield against stress, the meditation program was also experienced as supporting productivity, i.e. the ability of the employees to more effectively handle the general increase in number and complexity of cases in a normal workday. In this sense, the official win-win approach of increasing worker well-being and productivity simultaneously seemed to be readily reproduced. However, taking into consideration other statements made during employee and management interviews, the program was also seen as being in competition with demands of everyday work. This became particularly evident during discussions of the possibility of sustaining the meditation practice after the program. As a counsellor states:

> When you reach the time of day where you might need it [meditation], it's also when you realize: "my god, I only have two hours left before I go home". Then you don't manage to do it.

The work situation as it stands makes it very difficult for both counsellors and admin staff to prioritize meditation, even if busy times are exactly when meditation is most needed. As one employee succinctly puts it, 'one also wants to go home'. One of the managers supports this position by expressing her concern that the program is, in fact, not alleviating work stress of her employees, but actually making things worse:

> Many employees have a lot of overtime, which makes it [the meditation program] less appropriate. It is just adding things on. It becomes a vicious circle

Another manager reflects a similar concern by bluntly stating:

> Well, you cannot meditate your way to everything. Now, a couple of extra hands here and there? That I wouldn't mind.

In line with what was conveyed by the employees, the piles of work on desks, the workload present as a constant pressure at the DPS, are not considered to be resolved by the use of meditation. According to the managers, it is not peace to mind but man power that they are short of.

In reading the critical literature, one of the most important characteristics of modern day capitalism that is identified is the blurring of life and work. Indeed, the whole mechanism of neo-normative control and authenticating self-techniques is based on the ability of the employee to set aside the distinction between life and work and bring into play highly personalized resources that were previously not considered relevant in a work place setting at all. Revisiting the employee quote above, this is related quite closely to the demarcation of work and its opposite. 'When there are only two hours left', this employee goes home, leaving piles of

work behind. To her, work is measured in hours and when those seven-and-a-half hours have passed, work is over. No negotiations are had as to whether work could or should spill over into her private life. No blurring of the lines between work and non-work seems to take place. In fact, following both managers and employees they all agree on a very clear distinction between work and non-work. This is evidenced by the fact that in one of the departments, previous negotiations between employees and management have given employees 20 minutes every second day for optional recreational purposes. At one point, taking a walk was popular, but collectively, employees and management have decided to exchange this practice for meditation. The local manager is supportive of whatever activity the employees might chose and only stipulates that they are not allowed to use more than the allotted time. While respecting the choice of the individual employee, work is still measured and managed in terms of time. As she stresses:

> Officially one does not do things like that [meditating or walking] during work hours. You work when you are here. And that is what we do. Only now we have this old agreement, which we have expanded to involve meditation as another alternative to walking.

The roles and responsibilities of the employees in the DPS are still framed in terms of a traditional concern for (work) time. As such, introducing meditation does not decisively blur the distinction between work and life, as modern capitalist ideology and neo-normative critics would have us believe. To both employees and management at the DPS, it seems, the work place is still considered a specific arena – separate from life – with a specific, yet limited set of responsibilities for employees and managers respectively. Those responsibilities may be negotiable, by giving employees the extraordinary right to spend 20 minutes of work time meditating, for example, yet the DPS is basically a classical bureaucratic organization, far from the unbounded and existential employment relationship described by CMS scholars.

From powerful to powerless management

Consequently, it becomes difficult to define Project Peace as simply a way for management to tap into and control the existential potential of the individual. Though, this might be the result if we stay with the program discourse; if we look at the managers in the DPS, an alternative storyline is supported. As we have seen above, local managers were largely on the same side as the employees, as they found the meditation program to be at odds with daily productivity demands. Furthermore, they appeared rather disconnected and far from powerful in relation to the program. This was not least due to the fact that Program Peace was run by

external consultants and that a confidentiality agreement between the external therapists and employees had been included in the project:

> In relation to collective meditation, the issues, experiences etc. that may arise in conversations during meditation sessions are covered by a mutual contract of confidentiality between employees and Peace-to-Mind therapists.

Not being able or rather, not being allowed to know what was going on with their employees made it difficult for local managers to even become managers of the project: 'what happens in there has a certain sacredness to it', as one of the managers stated, at the same time expressing regret about his limited involvement. There was never any collective feedback, he explained. Reflecting on Project Peace was something that happened around the water cooler, as it was informally discussed and experiences were shared among employees. Thus, although local managers generally supported the project, they found themselves side-stepped by Project Peace. Compounding this, as the project was only economically able to offer the meditation program to a select few employees in the Probation Services, this made it even harder for local managers to integrate the program in their managerial portfolio. In this sense, the discourse of the authentic and self-responsible individual informing Project Peace is shown to have an impact at the managerial level. Yet, it tended to leave managers weak rather than potent.

To present this kind of analysis, however, requires a clear differentiation between the program discourse and the specific managers within the organization. In CMS analysis, as has been pointed out by Ekman (2012, 2014), the two are often mistaken as one and the same. In a recent edited collection on the Spirit of Capitalism, Ekman writes:

> In other words, my empirical data suggest that the 'exploitation' of authenticity discourses at work is practiced by employees as much as by management and organizations, and that the ensuing vulnerability is distributed across the manager-employee distinction rather than along it. (Ekman, 2014: 304)

While authenticity discourses might exploit workers, workers may also seek to exploit the potentialities of the ambiguous and undetermined work settings (see also Maravelias, 2007). Or as was the case here, authenticating management programs aimed at enhancing worker well-being and productivity concurrently may have only little to do with specific managers. The relationship between managers and managerial discourses cannot be presupposed. It requires specific empirical investigation. In the case of the Probation Services, the relationship between the spiritual program and the specific managers is revealed to be feeble, as are the managerial powers, thus situating Project Peace fairly far away from the power storyline of neo-normative control.

Conclusion

This article challenges the standpoints in the current battleground of neo-normative HRM critique by highlighting the limits imposed by its recurrent focus on control, ideology, and employee identities. While the critique might produce highly dramatic and thrilling analyses, they are often too abstracted from specific organizational contexts and the organizational actors under study.

As a consequence, the critical analyses tend to overestimate the importance and power of managerial programs, leaving readers entertained, but also paralyzed. Paradoxically, by focusing on managerial programs, ideology and employee identities without situating them within a specific organizational context, we risk mimicking and even support the machinery of authenticating management programs, as they feed from the very same abstracted ideas of organizations and self-actualizing individuals. The renewed performative role of CMS, as called for by Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman thus comes to the forefront with an unpleasant twist. When neo-normative critique draws on a theoretical and discursive repertoire, which, in fact, mimics current HRM discourses, it leaves us with only a limited capacity to produce the 'subversive mobilizations' sought for (Spicer et al., 2009: 544).

The antidote to this development within neo-normative critique, it is suggested, comes from the re-introduction of classical organization theory: the idea that the organization is a functional entity preoccupied with the division and coordination of tasks and work roles in relation to a specific purpose. Even if organizations are becoming more flexible, networked, unbounded, etc., making the work task harder to delineate as a principle of organizing (Hackman and Oldman, 2010), as pointed out by Barley and Kunda (2001), we should not allow for the historically intimate relationship between organization and work to disappear from organization theory and analysis altogether.

First of all, as this analysis shows, when we focus on mundane features of every day work organization, such as work tasks, work coordination and work roles, claims as to the actual effects of authenticating management programs become decidedly more nuanced. Project Peace never becomes a story of the powerful and all-encompassing logic of modern capitalism. It is, however, a story of how the techniques and discourses of authenticity, despite their immediate resonance with the social workers in question, lack the power to be sustained. As such, this analysis suggests that authenticating management programs are highly feeble and may play out quite differently than the discourses, ideologies and managerial intentions supporting it might specify. In the Probation Services, at least, among

both employees and local managers, getting everyday work done seems more important and more powerful than becoming authentic.

Second, what we, as critical management scholars, might gain from shifting our focus to a mundane interest in the organization of work, is the ability to get closer to the organizational reality that confronts the organizational actors of concern. In fact, what seems to be the most pressing issue to address within the Probation Services, given the current challenges of work stress, is not Project Peace. Rather, the most pressing issues from the perspective of the employees is the daily organization of work: matching workloads with work time and employee resources, finding new ways of coordinating work and addressing the current imbalances in the division of labor and coordination between counsellors and admin staff. While this certainly still involves the actions of management and managers, managerial ambition and scope – as well as the critical analysis that goes with it – will have to be radically reframed from a concern with nurturing and shaping 'the authentic employee', to more broadly supporting the organization of collaborative efforts to achieve common goals. A recourse to the basic tenets of Socio-Technical Systems theory, as it was initially developed from coal mining studies in the fifties (Trist and Bamforth, 1951) could serve as a source of inspiration. As they argued, taking care of the human relations of production, including the psycho-social well-being of the employees, calls for an integrated view of the organization: a detailed knowledge of the work task and its technical/organizational aspects, as well as the social dimensions relating to the interpersonal dynamics of work relationships. As argued by Mogensen (2012), rather than letting issues of work stress implode into the individual by reducing them to matters of authentic existence and self-identity, worker well-being may once again become linked to classical organizational, and indeed political, concerns of work tasks, workloads, work time and work responsibilities.

Whether this analytical approach to HRM and HRM critique should be called an 'empirical stance' (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2014), 'critical realism' (Thompson, 2004), or, indeed, 'subversive functionalism' (Hartman, 2014) is a matter of temperament. Of importance is the implied agenda for critical management scholars: to favor empirical sensitivity and a practical concern for the work people are actually doing and how they organize and coordinate their collective efforts. Certainly, this mundane version of work life and its managerial concerns and challenges might lack sophistication, entertainment, and drama, but it undeniably leads to a far less paralytic analysis and critique of modern day HRM, as it seeks to tap into the specific, everyday concerns of organizational actors.

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