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Shades of communitas: a study of soft skills programs

Alison Fixsen and Damien Ridge

Abstract

In societies where neoliberal individualism prevails, communal experiences nevertheless remain crucial to human life. Drawing on data from a series of soft skills programs (SSPs) for Higher Education (HE) staff, we investigated SSP social worlds, their role in navigating staff in uncertain times and points of resistance within them. We found SSPs to be distinctly performative platforms, engaging actors in various self-care and entrepreneurial activities**.** A complex network of relationships was established via SSPs, and group effects akin to communitas, in "lighter" and "darker" forms. Incongruities of SSPs included gender imbalances and emotional management issues, while a mismatch between managerial attempts to create positive communitas and the reality of mounting workloads and job-cuts facing HE staff were noted in this study. SSPs may help counter organizational siloism, but reflect the ambiguities within neoliberal culture and can deter staff from pursuing political modes of collective expression in the workplace.

Introduction

Soft skills programs (SSPs) for staff have an increasing presence in large organizations, yet lived experiences of these programs and the interests they serve have remained largely unexplored. Importantly, the part played by SSPs for staff navigating through rapidly shifting organizational landscapes, and in re-shaping their relationship to self and others in the workplace and beyond have been topics neglected to-date. For this paper, we examine findings from an ethnography of SSPs in a university setting, using dramaturgical theory to investigate their cultural forms and ethos. We begin by looking at the origins of what might be called the "soft-skills culture" within contemporary western society, its associations with neoliberal discourses and its relevance to staff in the HE sector. We go on to look at the conflicting forces and pressures on staff within organizations to be both neoliberal self-determining entrepreneurs and members of a corporate community, and the ambiguous role of SSPs in this process. We then expound our conceptualization of SSPs as neoliberal performative arenas in which self-care shares a platform not only with entrepreneurism but also with "communitas" (whereby individuals come together integrally) in varying "shades. "

Study context

Our ethnography focuses on soft skills development programs provided for academic and corporate service staff in a UK university. We use the term "soft skills" to refer to non-discipline specific personal and professional attributes believed to help individuals navigate the requirements, challenges and opportunities of society and workplace in pursuit of personal or organizational goals (Heckman and Kautz 2012). Unlike many technical skills, soft skills (as personal and interpersonal skills) cannot

be acquired alone; they require interactivity to develop and practice skills, often under the guidance of a tutor or facilitator. The authors themselves have taken part in a range of personal and professional development courses, and have developed and managed undergraduate and post-graduate programs including soft skills development. We have noted the growth in SSPs on offer to both academic and corporate service staff and were interested in the affective and cultural implications of this trend, in particular the impact on relationships workplace. We also considered that, with virtual platforms rapidly replacing corporeal learning and development arenas, exploring the cultural and social dimensions of SSPs could be of importance to learning and development professionals and academics and researchers with an interest in organizational practices.

Soft skills in the marketplace

The need to train staff in soft skills and emotional competencies can be viewed as part of a necessary response to the demand for new skills sets associated with technological progress, expansion of a global communication infrastructure (Cukier et al. 2009) and less rigid and increasingly interdisciplinary career paths (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005). Numerous studies attest to the value of these kinds of skills for enhanced decision making (Hess and Bacigalupo 2011), effective leadership and management (Ketter 2014) better interpersonal relationships and wellbeing (Lomas et al. 2014) as well as overall personal and academic success (Romanelli, Cain, and Smith 2006). Soft skills straddle two domains, self-care and entrepreneurship, and in a society preoccupied with both they are big business. In the US, the self-improvement industry, including soft skills training provided through motivational speaking and coaching, generates $10 billion per year (Market Data Enterprises 2013). Yet, a drawback of soft skills training for employees is that these

skills are less quantifiable than technical or hard skills which, in terms of their transferability to, or within, the workplace, may appear to be time, energy, and money wasted (Laker and Powell 2011).

Soft skills and emotions

Soft skills, as opposed to hard skills, emphasize the emotional, rather than the purely cognitive or practical, domain. Work-place emotions are frequently regulated yet opaque in situ (Gibson 2006), however on soft skills programmes (SSPs) they can be examined in an "emotionally intelligent" way (McGurk 2010). In the form of social and emotional skill-sets (Goleman, Boyatzis, and Rhee 2000; Marsh 2012), soft skills training is considered useful for positively influencing attitudes and behaviours, and in so doing increasing the organizational pool of emotional capital (Gendron 2005), where emotional capital refers to a set of emotion-based resources thought to increase career prospects and personal/institutional success. A further advantage of SSPs is that the positive "therapeutic" field they can create has less perceived reputational risks than seeking out psychotherapeutic support through an organization (Chew-Graham, Rogers, and Yassin 2003; Lomas et al. 2017). Working and learning in groups may also help to develop group emotional competences (GECs) (Koman, Wolff, and Howard 2012), unachievable at individual level (Fixsen and Ridge 2012).

By stressing particular ("intelligent" and "positive") emotion-based skill sets (Goleman et al. 2000; Marsh 2012), more complex emotional responses can appear unwelcome or even suggest character deficiencies (Fineman 2006). For this reason alone we consider SSPs and their rituals and mores, an under-researched area of emotion work (Fixsen and Ridge 2012) and emotional regulation (Buruck et al. 2016). Writing on emotional labor in the 1970's, Hochschild (1979) documented the negative social and emotional effects of commercializing human feeling, and while

conditions of employment have changed, not all of these have been for the better (Hochschild 2011). Despite more emphasis placed on the need for courtesy and consideration to staff, stress and burnout are still prevalent in people and customer facing professions, including teaching (Biron, Brun, and Ivers 2008; Watts and Robertson 2011) and have reached crisis point in some sectors (Cheshire et al. 2017).

Neoliberalism and Higher Education

We contend that neoliberalism, which we understand at its core to be a dogma that values market exchanges as an ethic to guide all human action (Harvey 2005), has created a culture in which individual performance, not collective purposes, is prioritized (Radice 2013). The result is not just a deepening of the social and economic divide (Harvey 2005), but a more transitional or "liminal" workplace (Tempest and Starkey 2004) in which employees feel less certain about their future within and outside the organization, and employers adopt more short term approaches to staff needs and employment. Lack of employment rights, public services, and welfare support have left employees to fall back on their own resources, whilst they are encouraged to reinvent themselves as "micro-entrepreneurs of the self " (Hall 2016).

Higher Education has not been immune to neoliberal policies and ethics. Through necessity or design its senior management teams appear to have largely embraced neoliberalism. Indeed, some argue that global competitiveness has largely overtaken intellectual rigor as the key driving force within HE (Peters 2012; Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016), resulting in fragmentation of the academic sector (Floyd and Morrison 2014). The combination of increased workloads, siloism (Biggs 2015) and employment uncertainties has taken its toll on staff health. Recent studies have indicated rising levels of anxiety, stress and identity confusion within academic

communities (Biron et al. 2008; Floyd 2015; Knights and Clarke 2013; Shin and Jung 2014). At the same time, the increasingly customer and league-table driven nature of higher education has put pressure on staff to be not just teachers, researchers or administrators, but even more diversely skilled and competent customer-care providers (Tatar and Horenczyk 2003). Human resource departments (HRM) have promoted the profound changes taking place in HE (Knight 2012), resulting in academic, corporate management and administrative staff entering an area of eternal liminality and self-governance (Tempest and Starkey 2004). Managers in HE have become important performers in the process of conversion (Berg, Huijebens, and Larsen 2015; Winter 2009), demanding that institutions prioritise training in state-of-the-art leadership and management skills (Beatty 2010; Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, and Avey 2008). In summary, with universities increasingly marketized, and employees under greater scrutiny, including via social media (Hall 2016), university management has had to consider how best to support a semi-mobile and diverse pool of staff, and SSPs have been heralded as one way of achieving this (Ariratana, Sirisookslip, and Ngang 2015; Junrat et al. 2014).

Methodology

Ethnography was selected as the means of gaining access to multiple data on SSPs and for studying their culture. One of many traditions lying within the field of qualitative inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), the ethnographic method has been used quite widely in workplace (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017; Tolich1993) and educational settings (Alexander 1999; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000). In the field of education, ethnographic studies can contribute to a better understanding of recent shifts and changes, including in HE (Iloh and Tierney 2013), and associations between emotions and power (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017). Fieldwork was

conducted over twenty-two months in a UK university. Forming trusting and mutually respectful relationships with managers in HR and organizational development was an important part of the process of gaining information and access to parts of the organization that might normally be closed. Another consideration was choosing from the wide range of soft skills programs (SSPs) and activities available at the time which, in addition to the menu of courses and workshops managed through Human Resources, included regular workshops aimed at preparing staff for a restructuring of the academic program. Table 1 gives a list of key programs attended by the first author or included in the study via participant interviews. Multiple half and one-day workshops were also enrolled on or observed by the lead researcher over the fieldwork period. As academics we needed to bear in mind our closeness to the subject matter, and were aware that this study could present us with our own set of emotional and moral challenges (Goslinga and Frank 2007). Here, care was taken during the fieldwork to reflect on the influence of our own relationships on interviewing, analysis and reporting of the findings.

(Insert Table 1 here).

Field-notes were recorded manually, and divided into observations and descriptive notes. To allow for greater involvement in the program timetable, most of the note taking took place in the periods between activities on the SSPs, or while a facilitator was taking the lead. The lead researcher also made extensive use of memos on a phone, noting any changes taking place in feelings and attitudes, and revisiting emerging ideas and concepts as required. Strategies were used to encourage facilitators and participants to feel comfortable with the researcher, such as self-disclosure and the assured confidentiality. To protect subjects, only short descriptions of activities involving other participants are included.

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Staff members who had recently attended one or more soft skills programmes were contacted via email by an HR manager or lead researcher, and were invited to participate in one to one semi-structured interviews, either during or subsequent to managing or attending an SSP. Those interviewed consisted of 25 staff (8 female and 4 male academics, 7 female and one male corporate service staff and 2 female and 3 male facilitators/ managers) from across the university. Some participants had attended several programs, and those who were both attendees and managers of SSPs were interviewed about them separately. The unequal female to male ratio reflected the gender balance on most SSPs attended in this study, however we attempted to interview academic and corporate service staff from all levels. Questions to participants covered the following areas; participant's area of work, reason for taking part in SSPs, overall experiences, personal and professional gains from participating, benefits and challenges and plans for utilising skills and experiential knowledge. Transcription was verbatim with any identifying details removed, and transcripts checked for approval by participants.

In the first stages of analysis, data from observation, interviews, stakeholder discussions and "site documents" (such as course handbooks) were considered as separate elements, and read and re-read to discover variables (including categories and concepts) within them allowing cross checking of data for consistency and accuracy. The full data set was then coded using a modified constant comparison approach (Strauss and Corbin 2015) inspecting and comparing all data and fragments arising in a given case and moving from a larger to more compact data set (Silverman 2014). A detailed code-log was used to develop both "in vivo" (participants' own words or terms) and constructed (created by researcher) codes, to compare and cross-reference themes and codes from interview, observation and reflexive data. In

addition to manual memos and coding, the full data set was coded using NVivo software.

Conceptual framework

SSPs are social events in which actors perform in various group rituals, characterized by group symbols and meanings. For our conceptual framework, we turned to theory concerning ritual and collective emotion, including those of Goffman (1959,1967) Collins (1990, 2004) and Turner (1967, 1985). Traditionally rituals were regarded as special ceremonies, usually with religious or spiritual connotations (Palutzian 2017, 25). The work of Goffman and others has greatly extended this interpretation, so that even mundane daily acts, such as greeting others can be viewed as interaction rituals with their own rules and symbols (Goffman 1959, 1967, Collins 2004, von Scheve et al. 2014). Everyday interactions are performed in various settings or "regions," which may be referred to theatrically as the front region ("front of stage"), the back region ("back of stage") and so on (Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015). Emotions are central to ritual performances and are constantly monitored (to "save face"), enacted and portrayed in different social contexts (Goffman 1959, 75).

Like Goffman we regard ritual and performance as elemental to everyday social interaction. At the same time, some rituals, either by virtue of their perceived status or the strength of feeling that they generate in players, take on a greater significance than others. Collins portrays all individuals as strategic pursuers of "emotional energy," constantly feeling their way through situations (2004, 3), to find social and moral cohesion within thes group. Ultimately, Collins argues, it is this emotional energy which people take away with them from rituals and which therefore determines the "success" or "failure" of a ritual. In successful rituals, emotions intensify into the shared excitement that Durkheim (1912) called "collective

effervescence," producing positive emotional outcomes such as confidence and moral solidarity (Collins, 2004, 104).

Collins draws on the psychophysiological model of entrainment to explain the success or failure of interaction rituals. The key to successful rituals is where human nervous systems become attuned and bodily patterns become enmeshed in a process he calls "emotional entrainment" (p64). von Scheve et al. (2014) further describe emotional entrainment as an affective attunement, which emotionally "charges" group rituals and influences group-related attitudes beyond the original encounter. Where emotional entrainment is sufficiently strong in social situations, members not only identify with the group, but also wish to repeat the process (Allen 2013), thus reinforcing what Collins terms "interaction ritual chains" (Collins 2004). Interaction ritual theory thus offers a transformative explanation of collective emotions across time and space, with emotional responses (e.g. sense of moral rightness, enthusiasm, embarrassment, alienation) incorporated into the individual's perception of self and relationships and providing a bank of emotional resources/responses for subsequent ritual encounters (Collins 2004, 50; Fixsen et al. 2015)

The concept of embodied engagement has been used to describe the participation of one's entire self in an activity, including in understanding and meaning making (Merleau-Ponty 1962). In his focus on embodied engagement in social dramas, ethnographer Victor Turner (1920-83) was influenced by Durkheim (Olaveson 2001), but also resurrected van Gennep's (Bigger 2009) concept of the "rite of passage" as three distinct but interlinked phases of engagement: separation (i.e. detachment of an individual from an earlier fixed point and social structure), liminality (limen- signifying threshold) and aggregation (when the passage is

completed) (Turner 1967, 1985). It is during the liminal phase, when the person is "betwixt and between" two cultural states (Turner 1967) and when structure and hierarchy break down (Turner 1969), that a type of social communion or solidarity known as "communitas" can arise out of ritual. In contrast to the self-conscious position we customarily inhabit, communitas is regarded as a relatively ego-less felt state, which in its purest form can manifest as a "collective joy" (Turner, 2012). This holistic experience is fleeting and we return quickly to our familiar state of separateness and self-consciousness, albeit with some recollection of the feeling.

In its mode of expression, collective emotion is culturally specific, for example in the 18th century, emotion became closely associated with social rebellion and political agitation (Hewitt 2017), whereas under modern-day neoliberalism, emotion has become a kind of commodity to be profited from by multiple industries (e.g., advertising, media, health therapies). Collective emotion (communitas) must therefore compete with individualistic emotions based around self-determination and competitiveness (Mcginnis and Gentry 2008). A "dark communitas" can exist (Stavely 2016), which, due its potentially disruptive influence would pose a threat to the authorities presiding over the established structure. This has implications for those attempting to engender enthusiasm and engagement through collective performances, such as on SSPs. We turn now to the results of our fieldwork, focusing our attention on the trajectories of staff members who attended or facilitated the SSPs in this study.

Findings

Entry into SSP worlds

Over a period of twenty months, the lead researcher took part in a series of staff SSPs, which ranged from half-day workshops to a coaching and mentoring program extending over several months. Away Days and Residential events that focused on

soft skills training were also included in this study. In addition to a menu of HR managed courses taking place during this time, various faculty-run staff development activities and an extensive program of workshops being offered to academic staff to prepare them for a major change initiative were included. The majority of the SSPs were of a relatively informal nature but a few, such as a leadership and coaching course, led on to a professional qualification. While the subject matter of the SSPs varied, they included distinctive artifacts, rituals and messages that distinguished them from everyday work or social activities. These included; a named event in a location (or setting) that was physically or symbolically removed from the normal workplace environment; the presence of invited participants and facilitators, a timetable, plan and rules; course materials and props and the use of an assortment of interactive and experiential learning activities.

The general format of programs was to open with a whole group presentation or briefing. The cohort was then divided into smaller groups (often six to eight), re-assembling the larger group at intervals for general discussion or further presentations. During small group work, participants were assigned similar topics to discuss or activities and role-plays to execute. The following extract describes the ritual proceedings on the first day of observation on a four-day woman's development program:

> "On entering the room, we are asked to sign a register, put on our sticky name badges, help ourselves to coffee, and "feel welcome" to browse the self-development books displayed on tables at the back. When everyone is seated, we are given an explanation about the program and its history. Next, we are divided into groups. We are reminded that this day is for us, but that there are

golden rules, and we should try to stay for the duration of the day. We are

asked to explore what we want to get out of the programme. Most of our

group (and other groups) have at least some goals in common. We move

around in a circle, posting our thoughts on flipcharts and it's rather like the

game of musical chairs." *Lead researcher diary extract*

Personal and professional investment

Actors in SPPs social worlds entered them for various reasons and expressed different

levels of investment in them (managers and facilitators unsurprisingly voicing the

strongest ideological commitment). Many of the HR managed (as opposed to some

Faculty run) programs were voluntary, however attendance on all HR run SSPs was

recorded on the staff member's personal and professional record and required the

approval of a line manager. Participants spoke of a variety of prompts and incentives,

which had motivated them to attend particular courses, including taking time out,

developing their career and acting on the recommendation of a mentor or manager.

Staff from corporate services in particular saw SSPs as a chance to up-skill in

preparation for the next career move, e.g., "I wanted to move forward with my career

. . . so I went in thinking 'I'll make it work for me'"; and; "although you're embedded

in the contract you're always thinking of what the next step is where you will be

going." The type of course recommended or offered to staff largely mirrored rank

within the organization (Kezar and Lester 2009; Mumford, Campion, and Morgeson

2007), so being put forward for a leadership course could feel quite an achievement;

"my line manager put me forward . . . It's quite a popular program, so it was quite

flattering."

Corporate service staff, most of who followed more "nomadic" career paths (Fixsen, Cranfield, and Ridge 2017) expressed few opinions about changes within the organization under study. Academics' views concerning the working life and job mobility were more ambiguous, while redundancies and restructuring had left many with an attitude of cynical weariness. None spoke of leaving academia completely and those seeking career progression tended to seek it internally rather than in another place of work. As one senior female academic explained, moves between academic institutions generally applied to the young. Nevertheless several academics spoke about the importance of engaging in (and being seen to be engage in) professional development e.g., "You must market and promote yourself, that's the world we are in"; and; "One does everything to be primed for any opportunities that come up." In addition, a number of the academics on SSPs were "career hybrids" (Garoupa and Ginsburg 2011), combining faculty posts with other business roles. This suggests that the type of careerism emerging within HE is increasingly complex, with academics engaging in attempts to develop their role as entrepreneurial agents while maintaining their academic identity (Clarke et al. 2012, 14).

Self-care and gender

While some had attended SSPs purely for work or career reasons, most participants regarded their time on SSPs as time out or "me time", e.g., "It was a useful opportunity I think to get out of the office, and to look at the issues in my working life and say, "what do you really want?" Residential events in particular were viewed as chances to focus on self and "to go out of university and out of that brain space." Maintaining a distinction between course activities and the workplace was emphasised by facilitators, one of whom said "don't bring any work, don't do anything." Nevertheless some (especially academics) admitted that, with pressing

deadlines to meet, they had left in the breaks and breached the SSP rules to look at emails or attend meetings.

Different self-care practices were used on SSPs, such as self-reflection, mindfulness and self-compassion, resilience and assertiveness training. Several participants interviewed (both academic and corporate service staff) felt that these practices helped with self-awareness and self-confidence, e.g., "I think I'm relatively aware of things I'm less strong at, like assertiveness, confidence; "I wouldn't say that I am pushover but I think that I usually will be more inclined to find a solution that suits the other person better than for myself."

Self-care issues potentially relate to everyone, yet the marketing of self-care has been aimed primarily at female audiences (Rottenberg 2014). Most of the SSPs offered to staff at this time were not gender specific, yet with the exception of one all-male SSP, which the ethnographer was not permitted to attend, female participants outnumbered their male counterparts at all events. When asked about his views on this gender discrepancy on a coaching course, one male academic talked about what he saw as a culture of "academic testosterone" prevailing within academia. Here, it is interesting that character traits that might traditionally be considered "masculine", such as assertiveness, self-responsibility and empowerment were promoted on the all-women SSPs in this study. To demonstrate to other women how "self-realization" could be achieved, motivational guest speakers were invited to share their stories with participants:

> "We have a guest speaker. She has a success story to tell us. She advises us about making a plan; 'think about *who* opens doors for you or better still build that door yourself. It's a continuous progress,' she says. 'You have to keep on

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developing yourself.' *Lead researcher diary extract, women's development program*

These female "role models" were discussed at some length in class and in later interviews. Several of the younger women found them inspiring, whereas the older female staff members were more disparaging about the aspirational messages being delivered, e.g., "The woman regularly works to all hours and she has no work life balance. " Academics in particular were quick to pick up on the pro-health nudges and the associations made between health and professional success, e.g. "There was a sort of subliminal message- 'If you do cycling or something, you will get on in management.' "

Learning through performing

Much has been written about the benefits of experiential learning and dramaturgical devices (e.g. creative group work, role play) in both child and adult learning and development (Baruah and Paulus 2009; Hromek and Roffey 2009; Smith 2009), and both featured widely on the SSPs in this study. One such example was a socio drama workshop, during which participants were asked to explore and reflect on alternative approaches for tackling challenging interactions with students. Each participant chose a role in this scenario and every so often the facilitator said 'freeze!' and two people would swap roles. The whole effect produced a lot of laughter at times, and at the end of the session, participants resolved to stay in touch with the facilitator and with one another. Many of these more creative sessions took place away from a university, which some participants felt allowed for more creative license; e.g. "adults can play too." Some of the role-playing exercises ostensibly appeared to serve little purpose but were nevertheless fun at the time:

It (the programme) had a very interactive dynamic. But you know, I came out

of the course and my wife asked what did you do today, and I said, "I had to

be a sheep. I was blindfolded and someone blew a whistle to direct me into a

pen." It's kind of not your standard sort of management exercises.

Male, academic

Performing in or out of role in front of one's peers can be nerve-wracking in terms of

the potential for judgement. Some performances on SSPs were informal, even

impromptu, whereas others were observed and commented on by invited guests

including students and line managers. Participants, including experienced lecturers,

vividly described their particular forms of performance nerves, excitement and so on,

when front of stage, and the sense of achievement felt from successfully challenging

personal comfort zones; e.g., "the fact that I actually did do all those things that I was

terrified to do. Like stand[ing] up in front of those people.*"*

Other group activities on SSPs had a more intimate, authentic feel. One senior

academic, who formed an action learning group with professionals of similar ranks

from other organizations, saw it as an opportunity to "let off steam" about internal

work matters; "(I said) I'd like just to have a rant, I just want to get it all out . . . and

that rambling and talking it through will help me clarify it in my head." Not all the

group exercises proceeded smoothly however. Group or team members come with

different personalities and values (Glew 2009; Klein et al. 2011), and the working out

peoples' characters within a group can take time (George 1990), e.g., "Every time

you're working with new people you are trying to test the water with them." One

male academic recalled "some friction" with a "dictatorial buddy," on a leadership

skills program, who had assumed a controlling posture during an imaginary crisis scenario. Having to work with "negative people" could also be a problem and could colour participants' feelings and opinions about the course, e.g., "we had a couple of people who were just like his big wall of negativity. I hate my job here at x . . . [it] was so hard (for this participant) to turn them round."

Social networking and communitas

In a neoliberal world in which employees are expected to market themselves, "serious networking," such as making new contacts or exploring collaborative projects, assumes great importance. One male academic recalled how some years ago he had used his time on an SSP to develop a new enterprise: "I remember the particular moment, which was when me and my colleague pitched an idea . . . and they said, 'Yes it's great! Put it forward, we'll support it.'" Another female academic described the congregating of females from different sectors on a leadership course as something akin to an "old boy" network," but amongst women.

Research into embodied engagement suggests that virtual communication and forms of artificial intelligence may not adequately replace the meaningful encounters that employees seek in the workplace (Ray 2006; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Contrasting with the "siloism" (Tett 2015) created by increasingly compartmentalized, digitized work spheres, time on an SSP was an opportunity to physically network and engage with others in workplace related activities. Many of the motivations and benefits of SSPs identified by participants (such as building relationship and performing with others) revolved around the corporeal physicality of attendance, with the establishment of connections, including trust, building of collegiate relationships and practising reflexive performances, largely taking place via face-to-face interaction rituals, e.g. "We shared very deeply about ourselves . . . cut through the superfluous

quite quickly."

For the new or temporary staff, this physicality was important in terms of establishing agency within the institution. The opportunity to chat with managers (and potentially court their favor) was, for junior staff, a particular "perk" of residential and business events e.g., "My manager's manager was on the course, and I feel that she's much more approachable now if I encounter a problem." Higher ranking staff (possibly to avoid the constant need to "put on a face") tended to seek out contacts with similarly positions inside or outside of the organization. One senior member described how they saw their meetings with an external action-learning group as an opportunity to have "a good rant" in a way that might not feel safe with colleagues within their organization. Establishing these types of collegial relationships was important to the morale of participants, thus even those with busy work schedules made time to meet up with staff from other divisions and other institutions they had met on a previous SSP: "We had breakfast together this morning . . . we do intend to continue and we're trying to make the next date now."

Incidental learning takes place outside the classroom or workplace, often in groups, for instance, as a result of a conversation with a colleague, occurring in between learning activities at a conference, on porch steps and in people's rooms (McFerrin 1999). Residential events favoured combining learning with leisure, and most of the participants in this study appreciated the conviviality of these events. For example on one residential event attended and observed by the researcher, participants sat around in the bar after class, and chatted in a less formal way about topics related to learning and development. At this particular venue there was a swimming pool, which proved a good location in which to watch participants informally networking while enjoying themselves in the pool.

At its best, the physical coming together of people with similar intentions can be a pivotal moment, alive with possibilities, akin to Durkheim's portrayal of the collective consciousness (Durkheim 1912). One male academic described feeling "inspired" during his time on a large-scale SSP event; "(there was) a great sense that people were active participants . . . you felt that you were "part of building" something rather than it being a passive meeting." Other participants used terms such as "energy" or "synergy" to describe the positive "buzz" on some SSPs, e.g., "The energy in the room, the potential synergy of working in different teams . . . the whole positivity of the experience stands out."

Discord and dissent

Collins argues that at micro-level, positive emotional processes are easier to enact than conflict processes, the latter being easier to conduct at a distance (2004, 74). Nevertheless, certain face-to-face interaction rituals succeed, while others fall flat (Collins, 2004) or lead to suspicion and conflict (Boyns and Luery 2015). Despite attempts to convince participants of the importance of these skills, some "non-believers" (Elms and Costell 1992) failed to be convinced of their importance, e.g., "it was too touchy feely for my taste." The academics in particular criticised what they saw as simplistic interpretations of psychological theories on SSPs, with aspects of programs reported to be just plain dull, e.g., "It was death by Power Point," or delivered at a pace, which frustrated some academics; "You had to sit for ages listening to a very slow movement of information."

Another concern for participants were the hidden agendas on some SSPs, with suspicions expressed concerning their internal politics. Role ambiguities and power differentials between people on some courses made some participants reluctant to speak freely, e.g., "However good your relationship is (I don't know how you can)

speak freely, knowing your manager (is present). There must be a conflict of interest somewhere." Certain topics were seen as best discussed outside or "back of stage," for example one academic spoke of how, "It's all very well to bring together 30 or 40 people in a room, then say it's confidential . . . I think you need a certain level of comfort personally."

While emotional discord between fellow SSP participants in this study seemed to be by and large managed, if only through ignoring the other party, disagreements with facilitators could produce a deeper sense of unease. Two participants (one directly involved in the incident) expressed a sense of shock over the management of one scenario in which, following the screening of a highly emotive video, a participant was asked to leave because their crying "might upset the others." As the facilitator possibly recognised, the fallout from emotion-laden scenarios can spread to others through a group emotional cascade effect (Wolff et al. 2006), but they failed to realize the rapidity of this effect. Via facial and verbal exchanges "back of stage" (Glushko and Tabas 2009; Goffman 1959) this particular emotional cascade effect had its own momentum; "The girl next to me just turned to me and she said, "Did she really just say that?" And you know we were all astounded that someone who is leading the course was so insensitive." In this case the emotional fallout was not (for some participants) satisfactorily resolved through facilitator intervention, and the narrative continued to circulate. This resulted in a counter-solidarity being created within group, as they attempted to disentangle the resulting moral and emotional jumble by themselves (Fixsen et al. 2015).

As agents of change, managers are expected to understand and work with the uncertainty and anxiety of transition, and to manage the "darker side" of emotionally charged situations (Boyns and Luery 2015). During the period in which this study

took place a wide scale strategic and undergraduate program change initiative was being rolled out, which was not proving wholly popular, especially with the academic staff. To provide information and training on the ethos and requirements of this new strategy, an extensive program of workshops and Away Days was being delivered to academic and corporate service staff, and formed part of the fieldwork for this ethnography. At the larger scale events, it was noted that organizers used various strategies to manage staff criticism and anxiety and to "win people over" to this less than popular change agenda. Tactics included bringing in "experts" from outside the organization to explain the benefits of changes; using light hearted humor to create the impression that everybody was "in the same boat"; and boosting morale by portraying the organization as forward thinking and entrepreneurial. The mingling of managers with participants "on the ground" also helped to militate against the impression of there being an "us and them" and discouraged "back of stage" gossip (Glushko and Tabas 2008; Goffman 1959; Michelson, van Iterson, and Waddington 2010) from derailing the "front of stage" message. Even so, on some SSPs critical comments and dark humour (Wright, Powell, and Ridge 2006) were expressed in areas out of the earshot of managers, on topics such as unreasonable demands made on teaching staff and the chaotic approach of senior management strategies.

Discussion

For this study we investigated SSPs, their collective elements and the part they play in informing what for many has become a more unpredictable career path in HE. Our findings were presented under the following themes: entry into SSP worlds, personal and professional investment, self-care and gender, learning through performing, social networking and communitas, and discord and dissent. We found SSPs to be decidedly performative social worlds, both in the dramatic and performance management sense

of the term use experiential learning devices promote self-care, entrepreneurism and "communitas." Various dramaturgical devices were employed on SSPs (typically ice-breakers, role play, group presentations), designed to engage actors in various self-care and entrepreneurial activities, and to convince participants of the importance of and credibility of these skill sets (Elms and Costello 1992). By separating the actor from the emotional dramas being played out, e.g. in role-play, the ritual aspects of SSPs acted as governance devices, both protecting and distancing participants from their performances. Participants also used theatrical metaphors and analogies to discuss their own performances and to assess the performances of others (e.g. "their stage," " primadonna").

Participants congregate as "actors" in social worlds, but arrive from different "sub worlds" (Strauss 1984), which in the case of SSPs included various departments, work sectors and different institutions. A complex network of social and emotional relationships was established both during and outside of the program schedule ("on set" and "back of stage" (Collins 2004; Goffman 1959)), which at times established a group effect akin to communitas, albeit in different forms. Program planners and facilitators employed different strategies to encourage emotional entrainment between participants (von Scheve *et al.*, 2014), and participants referred to scenarios in which this had been successful. Those SPPs which allowed time for group discussion, separated managers from their staff, offered privacy to encourage self exploration and creativity and in which the purpose of activities was well explained, were more likely to be deemed "successful" as interaction rituals (Collins, 2004). Conversely, activities that took place in venues deemed cramped or noisy, with overlong or slow presentations, with arbitrary or unclear rituals or with excessive intervention from facilitators were more likely, in emotional energy terms, to "fail" as interaction rituals

(Collins, 2004). Trust and mutual support were central tenets on SSPs, however tensions and divergences due to personality clashes, status differences and management issues were also widely evidenced in this study.

Self care on SSPs

With diminishing health and social-care resources (Schaufeli, Bakker, and van Rhenen 2009) and stress related health problems on the increase, including among HE staff (Biron et al. 2008; Winefield and Jarrett 2001) self-care remains an important vehicle for promoting worker well-being. As a concept self-care has multiple definitions (Ball and Olmedo 2013; Barnett et al. 2007; Denyes, Orem, and Bekel 2001). However, following Foucault (1998) we accept self-care practices to be a set of techniques that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves' (18). Self-care practices have until recently been largely separated from the workplace. Recognizing their benefit in terms of creating economic and emotional capital (Gendron 2005), agents of the neoliberal economy have devised multiple ways of promoting self-care practices including through the provision of SSPs.

Self-care practices can, according to many studies, bring many benefits. Mindfulness practices have been associated with decreased anxiety (Dekeyser et al. 2008), better quality relationships (Branch and Murray 2008; Bush 2011; Goodman and Schorling 2012; Tomac 2012) and a greater sense of wellbeing (Van Gordon et al. 2016), although these practices also have their psychological hazards (Lomas, Hefferon, and Ivtzan 2016). When employed contemplatively, self-reflection can change the "hearts and minds" of learners (Schon, 1983; Moon, 2004), while time spent in contemplation may increase mental clarity so that, on re-engagement in daily

life, one can focus on problems worthy of inquiry (Webster-Wright 2013). In contrast to the materialism and inauthenticity of modern society (Taylor 1991), self-care practices can seem wholesome and commendable. These types of skills are transferable and can potentially benefit people in many walks of life.

Yet, with neoliberal influence, self-care has gone beyond the individual choice for self-advocacy and become a "foundation science" (Denyes et al. 2001) infused or confused with corporately engineered messages. Foucault's (1998) conception of self-care was as a technology of power associated with biopower (Foucault 2008), the latter referring to the means by which organizations take over peoples' lives and heath (Larsen 2007). Self-care as a marketing opportunity can be exploitative (Furedi 2004) and a method of endlessly shaping and monitoring employees' attitudes and behaviors (Ecclestone 2012). While positivity discourses can help employees on a micro-level, they can also deter individuals and groups from engaging in anything more than superficial changes (Argyris 1998; Fineman 2006) or seeking more collective avenues of political power (Ehrenreich 2010). We noted that on the female only programs in particular, the self-positivity and self-responsibility ethic went hand in hand, with women being encouraged to overcome their confidence and assertiveness issues in order to assume greater responsibility for their own wellbeing and self-care (Rottenberg 2014). Rather than seeking help, the neoliberal woman (potentially more than her male counterpart) is expected to adopt a tougher attitude to herself and others (Rottenberg 2014), as possibly illustrated in the silencing of "over-emotional" responses on one all-female SSP described in this study. The potentially exploitative impact of these gendered messages in terms of emotional regulation is worth considering in further studies.

Career development and communitas

Sociological theory suggests that, at their best moments, something greater than the sum of the parts occurs during successful rituals (Olaveson 2001), a type of collective feeling, which can be described as high emotional energy or communitas (Turner 1985). These experiences bear resemblance to what Charmaz (1991) calls the "intense present," during which people experience "a sense of passion, authenticity, and involvement" in the lived activity. Despite the increased number of technological tools, which enable working people to exchange information without meeting in person, face-to-face work networking events have become increasingly popular (Mitchell, Schlegelmilch, and Mone 2016). Mitchell's study examining the value of these types of event to individuals found it to be a mixture of professional, reputational and educative, as well as social and emotional learning (Mitchell, Schlegelmilch, and Mone, 2016). Our fieldwork confirmed a complex network of personal and interpersonal relationships established on face-to-face SSPs encouraged through various devices, ranging from confidentiality codes, icebreakers, peer group discussion, group projects, out of hours socializing and end of year celebrations. The effects of emotional entrainment extended beyond the individual; being in close proximity with others made some participants in this study feel part of "something bigger, or a "wider community" which could feel inspiring.

Yet, as arenas for communal feeling, the SSPs in this study held an ambiguous position. On the one hand, the impression was of a relatively status-less social space, in which both participants and managers were able to share common goals and aspirations. On the other hand, in an entrepreneurial environment, work colleagues necessarily compete with each other for power and resources, and this inevitably creates hierarchies, anxieties and other emotional barriers. As neoliberal constructs, SSPs promote the ideas of self as a marketable product, which can affect the

authenticity of the experience and of relationship building (Vannini and Williams 2009). Another potential limitation of SSPs concerns the transference of soft skills from course to workplace. Proceedings such as Away Days and staff residential events can create a temporary "buzz," however the transfer of insights and conclusions reached on these events back into the organization is by no means guaranteed (Johnson 2008). Faced with a precarious situation with regard to the shape of Higher Education and their future within in it, staff may feel reluctant to invest significant or sustained emotional energy in the social interaction ritual chains (Collins 2004) in which they partake, voluntarily or otherwise.

The utopian view of communitas is only part of the picture; when based on oppositional processes, group emotional energy can have a darker side (Boyns and Luery 2015). As Turner (1969) recognized, the liminal phase is that of anti-structure and the point at which the mainstream may be collectively challenged. We therefore propose a more nuanced conceptualization of communitas, which encompasses its lighter (acquiescent) and darker (oppositional) shades. Where people physically congregate, these lighter and darker types of communitas can coexist, albeit in an uneasy state of alliance. Our findings suggest a mismatch between management attempts to create positive communitas against the reality of mounting workloads and job cuts commented on by participants in the study. We noted many examples in the organization under study, where "corporate-style" communitas promoted by managerial staff (as representatives of the status quo) shared room space with "oppositional communitas" in the form of critical or disengaged staff. In times of "corporate chaos" dark communitas may contribute to organizational stability by creating alternative communication avenues (e.g. via gossip), and by distracting attention away from macro-level issues of power and powerlessness, while appearing

to ratify the freedom of expression that neoliberalism purports to embody (Harvey 2005).

Conclusions

As human beings we are faced with these two wants, the desire to be recognised and respected as an individual and a craving to belong, to be emotionally connected to, to be subsumed, into groups and social worlds. These two human needs have informed political and social governance and its symbols and rituals throughout recorded history; under the influence of neoliberalism however individualism has prevailed at the expense of collective identification. This is the age of the "micro-entrepreneur "(Hall 2016) and with the atomization of work-practices individuals are increasingly left to face their personal stresses and anxieties alone (Berg et al. 2016; Winefield and Jarrett 2001), including in universities. With working life increasingly an individual, digitized pursuit people seek out communitas on virtual platforms i.e. social media, which in some cases may be of a less benevolent nature and design (Gehl 2016). Managers may fear the dark communitas that can surface at such events, but we suggest that expressions of dark communitas "front of stage" as well as "back of stage" additionally serve as a safety valve for expressing unhappiness and anxiety. Silencing these collective voices via workplace siloism seems a shortsighted option.

Faced with budget cuts, universities and other educational establishments are rapidly shifting towards online learning modules and a greater prioritizing of technically oriented staff training courses. Despite the problems with face-to-face staff development identified in this study, with the phasing out of face-to-face learning programs, some avenues for expression of emotional energy and communitas will, we believe, disappear from modern life. What the future of staff development will look like must be the subject of another study, but a year on from this

ethnography a further strategic change initiative had been set in motion, with the consequent shedding of many SSPs and staff from all sectors. Learning and development departments are interested in human capital potential, but as this study suggests, their stated ambition to create a more engaged and cooperative workforce are frequently thwarted by managerial edicts, job changes and budgets (Berg et al. 2016; Watts and Robertson 2011). Ethnography and traditional concepts, such as communitas, present professionals new ways with which to explore these types of dilemma, hopefully pointing learning and teaching stakeholders in a direction away from the neoliberal and toward more holistic, ethical modes of operation within HE and elsewhere (Lysø, Mjøen, and Levin 2011). However, given the insidious nature of neoliberalism, the authenticity of such "ethical" endeavors may continue be questioned. The viewpoints expressed in this paper reflect our own ontological and political positions but have nevertheless been reinforced by our ethnographic investigations.

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