

# Wabi-sabi (侘寂): Imperfection, incompleteness and impermanence in organizational life

## SCOS/ACSCOS Conference

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### **The role of power relations and the need for 'imperfection, incompleteness and impermanence', in the discourse of the management systems and sciences.**

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Management systems and sciences can be understood as a dynamic interplay among a heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, practices, and forms of self-understanding that crystallise in a variety of ways, producing what is experienced as the 'workplace'.

This ensemble contains elements that are directly related to the problematisation of work as a human experience, in addition to elements related to others, such as the problematisation of health and fitness; production and consumerism; place, time and permanence; diversity; sustainability; ethics and aesthetics, and discourses/practices that address notions of *perfection* and *completeness*.

The dynamic nature of this interplay highlights that the workplace is in a continuous process of creation, and re-creation, always in search of, and contributing to, the crystallisation of wider social arrangements that are more rational and economic; following Foucault (1982): "what is to be understood by the disciplining of societies in Europe since the eighteenth century is ... that an increasingly better invigilated process of adjustment has been sought after -more and more rational and economic- between productive activities, resources of communication and the play of power relations." (p. 219).

In this context, the role of the workplace is to contribute to the social ordering (governance) of discourses, practices, and ways of self-understanding at a particular historical moment. This governance is made possible by power relations, (understood by Foucault as a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions), rather than by the logical force of historical determinism, or by the idea of progress.

In this sense, power is considered intrinsic to social relations, being deeply rooted in the social fabric, i.e., it would be futile to consider the possibility of power-less social relations, or power 'outside' or 'above' social interaction. Furthermore, a society without power relations can only be an abstraction. (Foucault, 1982).

The presence of power in the asymmetric micro-dynamics of everyday social interaction, can be partially glimpsed by examining the development of a more stable legal-neutral-egalitarian metanarrative that has produced the codes, regulations, purpose-made buildings, and the institutions of modern society, i.e., this discourse, like the tip of an iceberg, hides the omnipresence of power in everyday life.

In this context, it is possible to argue that the role of the management systems and sciences is to provide the main metanarrative of a perfect and complete working life (based on notions such as efficiency, empowerment, team-work, work-life balance, professional work, meritocracy, neutrality, and so on). A permanent utopia that masks the asymmetric micro-dynamics of power present in every organisational encounter and interaction. Furthermore, the role of business training and business education would be to help individuals internalise the official metanarrative and either ignores or assumes as an anomaly, any social interaction that deviates from the official organisational discourse.

Curiously, organisations need to avoid fully to operate according to their own corporate *nirvana* to function properly, and to be able deliver products and services (e.g., 'work to rule' has been a powerful tool for sabotage and organisational paralysis). This is because the power relations that underpin the official organisational metanarrative need some degree of outside freedom to operate - freedom understood as the outside/un-normalised space of experience.

However, as power is imbedded in all social relations, the 'outside/un-normalised' space of experience is characterised by relationships of resistance, non-compliance and ambiguity, where the imperfect, the incomplete, and the impermanent can be found. In other words, the rational organisational metanarrative based on striving for perfection, control, completeness, and permanence, needs the possibility of its opposite to exist.

The relationship between the social relationships that have been normalised by the organisational metanarrative, and what lies beyond, is at the same time a reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation (Foucault, 1982).

This permanent provocation is needed to avoid organisational life becoming domination or slavery (i.e., when the outside disappears, and any possibility of freedom and resistance is no longer possible); it is also important because the innovation and creativity that facilitates organisational adaptation and survival, emerges from the outside/un-normalised space of experience.

This paper will elaborate on the theme of power relations from a Foucauldian perspective on the relationship between the (im)perfection, (in)completeness and (im)permanence of organisational life.

Foucault, M., 1982, The subject and power, In Dreyfus, H., and Rabinow, P., Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.