

Beyond bureaucracy and entrepreneurialism: examining the multiple discursive codes informing the work, careers and subjectivities of management graduates

Abstract

This paper examines how discursive codes and demands associated with ‘bureaucratic and entrepreneurial regimes’ of work and career organization shape the work, careers and subjectivities of management graduates. The study is based on the narratives of 30 management professionals who graduated from an Austrian business school in the early 1970s or 2000s. Its insights suggest that variegated discursive codes manifest in the graduates’ articulated professional practices and subjectivities, thereby challenging established assumptions regarding the organization of work and careers. While the practices and subjectivities of the 1970s graduates are often informed by codes and demands ascribed to ‘entrepreneurialism’, those of the 2000s graduates are infused with several codes commonly portrayed as ‘bureaucratic’.

Keywords: Bureaucracy, discursive codes, entrepreneurialism, management graduates, polyvalence, subjectivity, work and career organization

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, western societies have been witnessing changes in the ways in which work and careers are organized. These changes are generally related to a societal paradigm shift, which has been evaluated in different ways in career and management studies (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Johnson et al. 2009; Kanter 1997), sociology (Bauman 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; du Gay 2007), and work and organization studies (Courpasson and Reed 2004; McCabe 2009; Sturdy et al. 2016; Weiskopf and Loacker 2006). Within both critical and mainstream management and organization studies (MOS), there are those who consider traditional forms of work and careers as stable and linear and new ones as flexibilized, mobilized and non-linear (e.g., Heckscher and Donnellon 1994; Kanter 1997). Other MOS scholars, however, are more skeptical about the extent to which the organization of work and careers has shifted and they question the contention that crucial change has taken place (e.g., Johnson et al. 2009; Kärreman and Alvesson 2004). Moreover, within critical management studies (CMS), a body of literature has emerged in which the shift from ‘bureaucratic-fordist’ to ‘post-bureaucratic’, ‘entrepreneurial’ forms of regulating work is understood as gradually occurring. It is thus argued that contemporary work and career ‘regimes’¹ (Foucault 1994) are composed of variegated rationalities, practices and ideals (e.g., Fournier and Grey 1999; Jossierand et al. 2006; McCabe 2009; Sturdy et al. 2016).

Our paper contributes to this line of inquiry. Drawing inspiration from the work of Foucault (1982, 1990, 2008), we ask the following questions: What are the discursive codes, demands and ideals that are associated with bureaucratic and entrepreneurial work and career regimes, and how do they shape and inform the practices and subjectivities of professionals? We explore these questions on the basis of an analysis of

30 narratives of management professionals who graduated from an Austrian business school either in the early 1970s or 2000s. By showing how shifting professional and organizational discursive codes, which aim to define ‘what is to be known (and) what is to be done’ (Foucault 1991, 75), manifest in the accounts of two cohorts of management graduates in relation to their work, careers and selves, we illustrate the complexities as well as the contestations that accompany (post-)bureaucratic modes of work and subjectivity regulation. Our analysis highlights how the narratives of some of the 2000s graduates are informed by discursive codes, ideals and demands commonly aligned with the bureaucratic ‘regime’ and ‘discourse matrix’ (Thomas and Davies 2005), while discursive codes typically ascribed to the entrepreneurial regime are present in the articulated work and career practices and subjectivities of the 1970s graduates. Indeed, to some extent, both the 1970s and 2000s graduates draw on the same discursive codes in their narratives. Illustrating both similarities and differences in the professional practices and subjectivities of two groups of management graduates allows us to problematize dualistic understandings of bureaucratic and entrepreneurial work regimes and discourses (e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; Heckscher and Donnellon 1994). Our study questions and undermines the all-pervasiveness of both bureaucracy’s ‘organizational man’ idea(l), discursively defining the working subject as docile and disciplined (Sewell 2005), and post-bureaucracy’s ‘entrepreneurial self’ ideal, positioning the subject as empowered and self-responsible (du Gay 2007). In doing this, the paper theoretically and empirically contributes to and extends conceptual Foucault-informed work and organizational studies (e.g., Weiskopf and Munro 2012; Raffnsøe et al. 2016) and, more specifically, critical studies of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic forms of work(er) organization that consider discourse and subjectivity not as given,

constraining and constrained, but as mutually productive, dynamic and multi-directional (e.g., Holmer-Nadesan 1996; Thomas and Davies 2005; Thomas and Linstead 2002).

The paper is structured as follows: section two introduces the conceptual understanding of the subject as being mainly constituted within specific power/knowledge relations, discourses and discursive practices (Foucault 1982). Building on this, section three outlines the discursive codes, demands and subject ideals that tend to be prevalent within the bureaucratic 'career' and the post-bureaucratic 'enterprise regime' (McCabe 2009). Section four presents the methodology underpinning our study and provides background to the specific socio-political context in which the 1970s and 2000s graduates' work and careers are or were formed. Section five introduces the empirical research. It is followed by the discussion which highlights the variety and ambiguity of discursive codes infusing (post-)bureaucratic work contexts as well as the scopes for contingency that are concomitant with them. The concluding section summarizes the key contributions of the paper.

Discourse and the process of subjectivity constitution

Following Foucault (1970), discourses are power-invested ordering schemes that inform rather than represent extant reality, knowledge and truth. They are characterized by a certain rationality and systematics in the production of (written and spoken) texts (Foucault 1972). Despite their inherent rationality they do not, however, constitute definite entities. On the contrary, discourses are composed of multiple codes and practices that are irreducibly connected to and 'articulated in real, material contexts' (Holmer-Nadesan 1996, 54). Subsequently, they are also concomitant with 'real, material

effects' for individuals, organizations, work, careers, etc. (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte 2011; Raffnsøe et al. 2016). Discourses are hence both shaped by the power-informed social-material conditions in which they emerge and actively involved in the constitution of prevalent social relations, practices and subjectivities (Deetz 2003).

That discourses, as instruments and effects of power, systematically 'form the objects about which they speak' (Foucault 1972, 49) means, with regard to subjectivity, that identity and the subject are not given or a core element of personality which is to be discovered or uncovered (Thomas and Linstead 2002). Rather, the subject is seen as a contingent structure being produced and positioned within a dynamic field of heterogeneous power/knowledge relations, discursive codes and practices (Foucault 1982, 1994). The 'crafting' and locating of individuals in relation to discourse, and its respective hierarchy and order(s) (Holmer-Nadesan 1996, 57), also finds expression in Foucault's (1972) notion of the *subject position*. Being discursively promoted and sustained, subject positions make certain forms of seeing, speaking and, in general, knowing more legitimate and likely than others (Kuhn 2009, 682). They thus shape the practices, conduct and subjectivity of individuals in a particular manner; yet they do not determine them. Like discourse, subject positions are diverse and polyvalent 'in nature'. As a consequence, individuals also dispose of certain chances to draw upon them, namely as 'sources' for the understanding and active enactment of their selves and subjectivity/ies (Thomas and Davies 2005, 686).

More generally, however, subjectivity arises in the process of subjectification where the subject is, following Foucault, produced in two senses: first, in the sense of being 'subjected to someone else by control and dependence' (Foucault 1982, 212); and second, in the sense of being 'tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge'

(ibid.). Such conceptualization acknowledges that subjectification offers possibilities for both subjection and self-creation. On the one hand the subject is produced by certain relations and practices of power that, as a particular ‘mode of action upon actions’ (ibid., 220), shape and constrain ‘the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends’ (Foucault 1988, 18). On the other hand, the subject is invented and (trans)formed through so-called relations or practices of the self. These practices relate to the attempt to consciously respond to, contest and/or resist pluri-directional power practices, discourses and discursive codes (Foucault 1988, 18). Even if seen as complex and precarious, the subject hence can never be fully calculated and defined (Thomas and Linstead 2002). Rather than being passive ‘bodies’ or just effects of power, individuals participate in the ‘modes of actions upon actions’ and, generally, the social and discursive conditions they are embedded in. In this way, they can co- or re-create themselves, as well as the power/knowledge relations, discursive codes and subject positions that are in force at a particular time and space (Holmer-Nadesan 1996, 77).

Against this background, we illustrate through an empirical study how management professionals do not simply reproduce prevalent codes and subject positions but also challenge and modify their meanings through specific practices and (counter-)conduct. First, however, we look at the diverse forms of power and governing that are commonly associated with (post-)bureaucratic work and career regimes. We place particular emphasis on questioning how the ‘appropriate’ working subject is discursively positioned and aligned within extant regimes.

Regulating work and working subjects within bureaucratic and entrepreneurial regimes

Reviewing the broad shifts from ‘bureaucracy’ to ‘post-bureaucracy’ on the basis of CMS literature, first of all, suggests that the *bureaucratic-fordist regime* was dominated by a technical alignment of the work and labor process (Grey and Garsten 2001, 234). As an ideal-typical system of organization, bureaucracy was founded on and ordered by standardized ‘rules, that is, by laws or administrative regulations’ (Weber 1978, 956) which formally documented and centrally controlled the production process (Fleming and Sturdy 2011). According to its proponents, the idea of *Amtstreue* (faithful execution of duties) was at the core of the ‘ethos of bureaucracy’ (Weber 1978). Rules thus existed for every single activity: they defined competencies and responsibilities (du Gay 2007, 105) and were intended to guarantee rationality, efficiency and regularity in organizational practice and performance (Courpasson and Reed 2004, 6).

According to Josserand et al. (2006), the de-personalized, instrumental ‘nature’ of the bureaucratic model of work organization also targeted the human workforce. The *working subject* was basically considered as one production resource among others – s/he was deployed where her/his capacity promised the highest efficiency. In order to achieve this objective, employees were allocated to the production line or the office where they had to fulfill the tasks that blueprints assigned to them (Weiskopf and Loacker 2006). As objects of hierarchical surveillance they were, furthermore, continuously exposed to the ‘gaze’ of those in rational-legal authority (Weber 1978), i.e., those being, due to their organizational position, endowed with the formal-legal power to assess, direct and control subjects, their conduct and performance (also Foucault 1994, 202; Sewell 2005).

This suggests that the constitution and positioning of the individual as a disciplined, obedient and anti-nomadic subject has been the overall target of bureaucratic

prescriptive forms of power and concomitant discursive practices and codes (Weiskopf and Munro 2012). However, the interest in producing a passive and ‘docile body’ (Foucault 1994, 138) does not imply that the bureaucratic ‘occupational employee’ was fully exploited. Rather than destroying the human workforce, bureaucratic power practices intended to make it ‘useful’ and productive (Fleming and Sturdy 2011, 181; Raffnsøe et al. 2016). As Hamann (2009) argues, as for the ‘body at work’, the subject was discursively defined and positioned as an organizational ‘*man of exchange*’. As such s/he had to offer her/his standardized qualifications and promise obedience, conformity and an obligation to self-regulation according to organizationally defined standards and codes (McKinlay 2002). In return, though, s/he could count on stable working hours, a graded salary scale and a long-term employment contract. So if the bureaucratic working subject succeeded in passing the specific ‘examination’ procedure (Foucault 1994, 185), in many instances, s/he had the possibility to become an ‘integrated organizational member’, implying a well-defined, progressive career track based on the principle of seniority (McKinlay and Wilson 2006, 676). Moreover, enclosed organizational spheres were allied with rather clear boundaries between work and leisure (Bauman 2000). Through this tendency, social relations thus appeared to be ‘non-inclusive’, which is to say that outside the factory or the office the employee was broadly considered a ‘free subject’ (du Gay 2007, 103).

From a *governmental* point of view, focusing on how the conduct of individuals is socially and discursively directed within a particular historical era (Foucault 1982, 220), it seems that, within bureaucracy, the organizational ‘career’ model or discourse has been central for the regulation of the subject’s practices, performance and, additionally, biography (Grey 1994, 494). In effect, there was an attempt to make the subject

governable (i.e., disciplined) through the composition of reward – articulated through the promise of career – and contingent sanction (McKinlay and Wilson 2006, 676), referring to the threat of being excluded from one’s organization and function and, therefore, one’s scheduled ‘project of the self’ (Grey 1994, 481). Within the bureaucratic regime, power was exercised through a rather complex and tight ‘architecture of discipline’, directed at the main target of normalizing individuals’ activities (Foucault 1994). We now turn attention to the post-bureaucratic work and career regime and explore its (ideal-typical) rationalities and most common regulatory modes.

In the field of MOS, and CMS more specifically, it is often argued that since the late 1980s a *post-bureaucratic turn* has taken place in western economies. Ostensibly, this turn is infused by the notion of *enterprise* that is evaluated ‘as the preferred model for any form of institutional organization’ (Barratt 2008, 520). According to its proponents, associated with entrepreneurial rationalities is, in the first instance, the dissolution of clear boundaries and orders between different social fields (du Gay 2007). Post-industrial societies seem to fall into place as a network of transient, albeit often ‘sticky’ connections, in which it is the ‘market’ that develops as the central regulatory principle, conditioning the actions of organizations, individuals and the population as a whole (Foucault 2008, 340).

Since the market’s alignment is seen as dynamic, it is also associated with the rise of complex modes of production and control (Sewell 2005). The contemporary organizational form is, as suggested, defined as a ‘lean decentralized business enterprise’ where hierarchical chains of command and the use of direct, authoritarian

power are seemingly dispersed (Fleming and Sturdy 2011, 188). Work and work processes are in consequence often portrayed as team- and project-oriented, differentiated and ‘knowledge-intensive’ (Johnson et al. 2009, 40; Sennett 1998). While organizational strategies still aim for efficiency, they simultaneously put growing focus on ‘flexible specialization’ and autonomous ‘personnel development’ (Sturdy et al. 2016). Alongside this, new forms of work organization tend to be mainly regulated along cultural norms, values and images (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004), whereas employment relations are increasingly ‘contractualized’ and careers are, as Grey suggests (1994), transformed into uncertain projects of self-management (see also Pedersen 2008).

Following critical analyses, it therefore seems that, within the current work regime, power and discourse operate mainly on the autonomies that the market constitutes (Weiskopf and Munro 2012). Through fostering enterprising qualities in the working subject, the post-bureaucratic regime fashions the individual as an active, economic and self-interested subject that is affiliated with various organization- and profession-related networks (McCabe 2009), all contributing to and assessing the subject’s employability and value in terms of ‘human capital’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006, 161). The widely referenced category of human capital points to the inscription of the notion of capital into the ‘human factor’ and, thus, exemplifies the increasing economization of the workforce (Rose 1991). The current market-driven modes of governing tend to transform and ‘make up’ subjects as ‘entrepreneurs of their selves’ who are ‘defined precisely in terms of the capacity to cultivate their own human capital’ (Weiskopf and Munro 2012, 690), i.e., their talents, skills, *potentials* and abilities (du Gay et al. 1996, 266). To fulfill the discursive demand of treating one’s workforce as ever extendable

and developable human capital and employable, marketable ‘asset’, entrepreneurs have to be(come) and position themselves as disposable, innovative, hyper-productive, self-responsible and self-organized, as well as team- and customer-oriented (Salaman and Storey 2008).

From a broad *governmental* perspective, the post-bureaucratic subject is hence no longer just a ‘partner of exchange’: the market positions her/him as a flexible and strategic ‘partner of competition’ (Hamann 2009, 37; Sturdy et al. 2016), ‘being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of (his) earnings’ (Foucault 2008, 226). This implies that the subject of her/his own human capital is encouraged to actively approach her/his (working) life and self as a specific type of self-managed ‘enterprise unit’ (Weiskopf and Munro 2012, 293). Whereas normalization was the central target of power in the bureaucratic work and career regime, in this light, the central target of the post-bureaucratic regime tends to be the mobilization and ‘enterprising up’ of the subject (Weiskopf and Loacker 2006). Even if the post-bureaucratic regime does not completely replace previous discourses and forms of power, from a governmental view, this regime is hence mainly interested in ‘liberating’ and ‘empowering’ individuals (Grey and Garsten 2001) and, thus, in conditioning and positioning them as subjects of active self-government, rather than objects of discipline (Rose 1991, 213).

In the empirical section we examine how the discursive codes, demands and ideals that comprise the bureaucratic and entrepreneurial work and career regimes shape the professional practices and subjectivities of two cohorts of management graduates. We show how these regimes are less uniform and stable than critical analyses often assume

(Weiskopf and Munro 2012). First, we present the methodology underpinning our study.

Methodology

Research design

The empirical study was guided by an explorative approach, following a flexible, context-related and methodically multi-layered research strategy (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000). For the purposes of empirical material collection, semi-structured interviews, understood as ‘narrative production sites’, were the main method adopted (Kuhn 2009, 686). The paper is based on 30 interviews, conducted between 2006 and 2009, with management professionals who graduated with business management degrees in Austria in the 1970s or 2000s. To enable a discussion of both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic work contexts, the sample includes representatives of both the traditional ‘career regime’ (i.e., graduates from the 1970s) and the more recent ‘entrepreneurial regime’ (i.e., graduates from the 2000s). The interviews lasted between one and three hours. They focused on issues including (1) course of professional life, (2) significant work- and career-related episodes, (3) previous and recent organization- and/or profession-related demands, (4) work and career practices, (5) negotiation of organizational and professional challenges, and (6) understanding of work, career and (non-)professional success. To contextualize the graduates’ accounts presented in the empirical section, below we provide some background to how work and the workforce have been politically regulated in Austria from the 1970s onwards.

Contextual embeddedness

With regard to the broader social and discursive context the graduates' work and careers are or were embedded in, it is worth noting that in the 1970s most of Austria's governmental representatives claimed to be committed to sustaining the national welfare state. During these years, Austria's economic and social situation was considered promising and many spoke of the 'economic miracle', originally set in motion by the European Recovery Program (Schmitter and Lehmbuch 1979). In the 1970s and 1980s the political landscape was dominated by the Socialist Party and most governmental interventions were informed by social-democratic ideals. It was also during that time that the so-called 'Austrian Social Partnership' was fully established. It was composed of different interest groups, including representatives of employers, employees, farmers and trade unions, all collaborating on the basis of a 'consensus-oriented model'.

Following its proponents, the major purpose of the partnership model was the preservation of socio-economic stability for subsequent generations (Biegelbauer and Mayer 2007). Most notably, the model contributed to high regulation of the professional labor market. Until the mid-1990s, Austria's labor market policies were formally oriented on the principle of 'full employment' and employee benefit expansion – reflected, for example, in the introduction of gender equality programs, a pay system based on working hours and a 40-hour workweek – generally pursued at the expense of deficit spending (Weishaupt 2011). Moreover, until the 1990s an excess of labor demand existed in most industries. Long-term employment and secure careers were hence presented as par for the course. This applied especially to university graduates

who were typically facing promising career prospects, mainly due to a very low nationwide percentage of degree holders (Mayrhofer et al. 2005).

From the mid-1990s onwards, however, social and discursive shifts could be observed in terms of Austria's geopolitical positioning. National and sectoral boundaries were increasingly contested by pan-European political developments and economic forces. Internationalization of previously nationally-oriented industries was a corollary, as was privatization of former state-owned holdings and institutions. In conjunction with the growing promotion of 'free movements' of objects, goods and services, such developments led to an increase in foreign investment in Austria (Talós 2004). In 2000, the established political power relations were subject to further change. Austria's Conservative People's Party claimed the position of chancellor and built a coalition with the Freedom Party, led by the right-wing populist Jörg Haider. The coalition was nationally and internationally criticized. The change of government brought about a notable reduction in welfare support and the advent of neoliberal social and employment policies. Reforms in fields such as higher education, culture and the arts, or to the health and pension systems, exemplify these new policies, oriented towards regulatory principles such as self-responsibilization, promotion of efficiency and flexibility (e.g., Appelt 2000; Talós 2004).

The labor policy that the new government pursued was no longer based on the principle of 'full employment' but substituted by the all-pervading economic principle of 'Null-Defizit' (*Zero deficit*) (Appelt 2000). Simultaneously, though, Austria was still presented as a 'cooperative economy' (Johnson et al. 2009, 42), and its labor market participation stayed relatively high. Since 1995, however, when Austria joined the European Union, large parts of the labor market became liberalized (Statistik Austria

2010). Since then many special interest groups lost their power, and legal employee protection, job security and pay started to decline in various employment fields – including those in which university graduates were active. As a consequence of such deregulation and flexibilization, ‘intermediate level jobs’ and non-standard employment increased significantly. By 2010, a third of Austria’s employees had a non-standard work arrangement (ibid.). Among university graduates, it is primarily fixed-term, ‘all-in’ contracts that are politically sustained (Schopf and Ringler 2007, 4). Before illustrating how such labor market conditions – and the discursive demands and codes they trigger and contain – inform the narratives of the management graduates interviewed, below we provide more detail about the study’s participants.

Participants

Both the interviewees from the 1970s and the 2000s cohort are graduates of the same Austrian business school; a school which previously was a small, regional institution but is now the largest in Europe. In order to capture the potential variety and qualitative differences in (post-)bureaucratic professional practices and subjectivities, the study was based on a diverse sample (Thomas and Davies 2005). The participants (19 male, 11 female) came from varied socio-demographic backgrounds and had worked in different organizational settings and professional environments. Interviewees from both groups had experience of working in the private business sector and, to a large extent, of carrying out managerial tasks.

Table I illustrates the empirical sample in more detail. It is composed of nine long-term employees, three – by the time of the interviews – self-employed persons, and three

retired but still part-time working professionals, all of whom completed their studies in the 1970s. These graduates worked either exclusively or for the most part of their careers in medium-sized or large national companies. The majority of them were employed in manufacturing industries such as the automobile industry, aviation and electrical engineering, and specialized in areas such as accounting, trade and logistics. The sample, in addition, includes seven fixed-term employed and eight self-employed management professionals who graduated in the early 2000s. They commonly hold specializations in the area of marketing, entrepreneurship or finance, and work, often on a project-by-project basis, for both large (inter)national companies as well as smaller enterprises. The majority of these graduates are active in the service sector, often in new employment fields such as ICT or consultancy, and change their jobs, employment position and status noticeably more often than the graduates from the 1970s (Mayrhofer at al. 2005).

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed and were thereafter thematically and theoretically structured. A coding scheme was developed around the categories of (a) discursive regulation of work and careers, (b) articulated work and career practices, and (c) professional self-positioning and subjectivity. This scheme included both

theoretically predefined tree nodes (e.g., (in)subordination to organizational or professional codes) as well as free nodes emerging from the material itself (e.g., discursive codes referred to by both groups, such as discipline or flexibility) (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte 2011). Along these lines it was possible to sort and link common themes and organize the presentation of the empirical material (Fleming and Sturdy 2011). Table II provides an overview of those bureaucratic and entrepreneurial discursive codes that most notably inform the accounts of the 1970s and 2000s graduates.

INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

Throughout the analysis, we followed a ‘reflexive methodology’ (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2006). This involved a critical awareness that theoretical and methodological concepts, assumptions and pre-understandings underpin and shape the process of knowledge (re)production. As such, social inquiry, and the particular discourses it draws on and sustains, are involved in ‘ontological politics’ (Law and Urry 2004). In other words, the present inquiry also ‘in-forms’ the complex social and discursive realities that are explored and explained (Thomas and Linstead 2002, 74; Foucault 1972). Critical-reflective questioning and refining of the modes through which we developed knowledge and insights was thus central to the process of analyzing and interpreting our material, i.e., the narratives provided (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte 2011, 1257).

Empirical insights

In this section, we analyze the central discursive codes, demands and subject ideals that infuse the work contexts of the 1970s and 2000s management graduates and discuss how they shape the articulated work and career practices as well as the graduates' subjectivities 'at work'. The analysis is divided into four sub-sections. In the first two we discuss the accounts given by the 1970s graduates; we then elaborate on the accounts of the 2000s graduates.

Discursive codes shaping the work and career practices of the 1970s graduates

Extant social, political and economic conditions inform the narratives of the 1970s graduates. Societal as well as organizational discourses and discursive codes, broadly promoting socioeconomic *stability*, employment *security* and *predictability* of work and careers, are prevalent in the graduates' reflections on the work contexts they entered after graduation. The following two accounts are illustrative here:

'We were very much in demand in those days. Wherever I applied for a job they would have taken me.' [IB, female, journalist, retired/part-time employed, print media]

'My company was like a state-owned enterprise, in terms of job security and continuity. Nobody ever thought about the possibility of being outsourced. To be fired, you would have to... steal something or commit a crime.' [HH, male, IT-consultant, self-employed, electronics industry]

While some of the 1970s graduates also refer to the professional fields in which they are or were employed, it is, in the first instance, organizational discursive codes that frame and manifest in the work- and career-related accounts. As to organizational careers, the fulfillment of formal *responsibilities* and predefined performance expectations were, in common with organizational *compliance* and *loyalty*, defined as central codes and rationalities:

'I started with a staff position. First, I just prepared the paperwork, documented the process and abided by the rules. They were satisfied with my performance, and after a while, I was given more important tasks.' [IM, female, accountant, employed, aviation industry]

While not all participants suggest that moving position involved notable changes in one's work practice, quite a few claim that, for long periods, a 'clear and straight line' of steady organizational advancement was a 'taken for granted trajectory' [DM, male, manager, employed, trade].

At the same time, a few of the 1970s graduates invoke the idea that, in the end, careers are dependent on superiors' preferences, the existence of vacant positions and 'coincidence' [EB]. The following quotation illustrates this:

'It often happens that you're blocked because your boss or colleague doesn't want to clear the position. (...) It's always a question of luck! You may get the opportunity to progress earlier, or you wait, sometimes for years.' [RS, female, manager, self-employed, public relations]

Among other things, this account questions the taken-for-grantedness of steady, predictable careers and, therefore, one of the central 'discursive promises' made within

bureaucratic work contexts (McKinlay and Wilson 2006). However, it is not only due to organizational reasons that individual predictability of work and career prospects is partly contested by the 1970s graduates.

Many of the narratives indicate that, from the 1990s onwards, societal changes and, in particular, processes of internationalization and globalization began to affect and modulate the organizational ‘career regime’ (McCabe 2009) and concomitant discursive codes. Demands for *flexibility*, *mobility* and *self-initiative*, evoked in the graduates’ accounts, indeed suggest that their work and career practices are not only shaped by traditional bureaucratic codes but also by more recent, entrepreneurial ones. Some of the graduates refer to the aforementioned social and institutional processes of change as a sign of the ‘growth of industries’ and/or the beginning of a ‘golden age’ [SP]:

‘I liked my company so much, the multiple career prospects, the opportunities for travel.... I was fascinated by this growing industry... you were praised, you got a good salary and a bonus. (...) You could take initiative and influence things, if you were ready to leave predefined paths. It was great.’ [GH, male, manager, retired/part-time employed, electronics industry]

While not all 1970s graduates appear to be as enthusiastic and ‘mobilized’ by changes in the traditional alignment of work and work organization – some also bemoan interruptions to the ‘familiar organizational atmosphere’ [DK] – those raising these concerns agree that technological developments played a significant role in this context. Due to the latter, demands for *acceleration*, *economization* and ‘*professionalization*’ [SP] of work practices became increasingly influential:

'The speed of work became ten times faster. In the past you wrote a letter, which arrived after three days. Then [the recipient] read it for three days and answered it after another three days, then you got his answer, and then you started to do something again. Today he'll send you an email and say: "tomorrow". (...) The shift brought about by the computer and internet was enormous. (...) We started to do many things at the same time, and we became much more organized and efficient in our doing. We had to.' [PS, male, retailer, retired/part-time employed, iron industry]

This account illustrates that the discursive codes and demands that direct the work practices of the 1970s graduates cannot be assessed as uniform and given, but instead shift with the specific social, professional and organizational conditions in which they are embedded (Thomas and Linstead 2002). A similar assessment applies to extant careers and career practices. Even if organizations still presented a significant 'tribunal' for their regulation, from the 1990s onwards, careers started to become more dynamic, multidirectional and lateral. That linear organizational careers were not exclusive in the bureaucratic-fordist era is most obviously, though not solely, illustrated by those 1970s graduates who decided to start their own businesses after having worked for many years for the same organization. One graduate narrates this change in work and employment form as follows:

'Being self-employed means that some projects are more successful, some less; sometimes you earn a bit more, then less. (...) The contact with customers and clients becomes more important. You have to work more, but you can do more interesting things. (...) This thinking in terms of hierarchy and career ends.' [AK, male, accountant, self-employed, consultancy]

Criteria that discursively define and organize work and career (success) thus altered for these graduates, and entrepreneurial rationalities became increasingly part of emerging professional practices. Those 1970s graduates who became self-employed took up a conscious ‘challenge’ of becoming ‘much more autonomous’ [HH]. They often had vast expertise and the necessary business contacts and were active in industries that lacked pronounced competition. In addition, they, like the other graduates, continued to widely ‘believe in’ discursive promises such as socioeconomic stability and/or upwards mobility, that were made during the 1970s, 80s and 90s. At the same time, however, the interest and desire to increase individual scope and autonomies led some of the graduates to renounce privileges concomitant with linear organizational careers and, instead, to pursue more dynamic forms of work and careers, demanding *self-organization*, self-initiative and flexibility, among other things (Grey 1994). The narratives illustrate that ‘bureaucratic’ work and career practices are not determined by discursive codes such as organizational compliance and obedience alone but are also infused by certain entrepreneurial codes and demands. The following sub-section demonstrates in more depth how the 1970s graduates reflect upon, respond to and thereby co-constitute the discursive codes, subject ideals and subject positions that bureaucratic work and career settings enhance.

Discursive codes shaping the subjectivities of the 1970s graduates

The graduates’ professional self-understanding and self-positioning is in several instances shaped by the secure and steady work and employment prospects that were discursively promoted within traditional organizational work contexts. The organizational career discourse (McCabe 2009) – and the subject position of the

‘organizational man’ it sustains – effectively shape(d) the conduct and accounts of some of the management professionals. While a few of the employed graduates state that they simply ‘waited for promotion’ [DK], others argue that even if they saw their internal career development as ‘limited’, they ‘hardly saw any reason to change jobs’, especially if they ‘had a good relationship with [the] boss and work colleagues’ [KJ, male, accountant, employed, automobile industry].

Discursively enhanced merits of long-term organizational membership (e.g., collegial relations, stable positions and predictable careers) also provided some of the graduates with salient self-confidence. This could, among other things, result in the refusal of emerging entrepreneurial demands, for example, for individual *self-marketing*:

‘Once I went to a headhunter; I was curious to see what I was worth. Then he asked me, “Why are you interested in this position?” I said, “I’ve already written [in my application] why I’m interested, but if you think I’m not well-qualified, then...” – and I packed my things and left. The headhunter was astonished. Well, it’s easy to act from a secure place. We weren’t used to selling ourselves.’ [HH]

However, the narratives do not simply support and affirm organizational careers and ‘worlds’, more generally. On the contrary, quite a few of them suggest that the 1970s graduates often hesitate to ‘live up’ to bureaucratic organizational codes and associated subject ideals and positions, asking for passivity, compliance and conformity (see also Fleming and Sturdy 2011). Even strong loyalty to one’s employer does not necessarily translate into a permanent, unquestioned following of organizational codes. This is exemplified by the quote below:

'People who work in similar positions usually entertain their customers in the evening. (...) When I was a young manager, one of the older board members said: "Sylvia, if you don't learn to go out with customers, and if you insist on not drinking, I can prophesy... you'd be better off forgetting all about this business. You won't get anywhere." Well, I did get somewhere. And I still don't drink and don't go out at night.' [SH, female, manager, employed, banking]

The account highlights that organizational and/or professional codes cannot 'fix' the conduct and position/ing of those at which they are directed (Foucault 1982). Discursive codes and subject ideals are also rejected by the graduates, for example, when they are or were not considered to be especially powerful, useful or, as in the above example, when they differ too much from the graduates' voiced principles.

The account above also draws attention to another important issue: the *organization of work and life*. The narratives of the 1970s graduates suggest that this is a contested matter, mainly because of work flexibilization tendencies that increasingly form(ed) part of the graduates' work and career contexts. These tendencies are concomitant with rising demands for *availability* as well as work-related travel and mobility, manifesting in the narratives of the professionals. However, through references to extant societal codes and subject positions that undermine the scope of organizational discourses such demands are also challenged. For example, this is the case with one participant who was employed as a financial service provider at a bank. For him the irreconcilability of the increasing expectation of availability for work 'in the evenings and at weekends' [RJ] with his self-positioning as a 'family person' [RJ] was the reason for leaving the company he had worked for over a number of years.

Yet not all 1970s graduates respond(ed) to emerging flexibilization tendencies in the same skeptical manner. There are also professionals who present themselves with a much more affirmative stance towards these tendencies and, as a consequence, demand to a far lesser extent a strict delineation between work and non-work life. The two accounts below illustrate this:

'I was always keen to actively keep up a wide network of contacts, with colleagues, people from the industry and customers. (...) Over the years many of my professional contacts also turned into personal relations. But work is my life, really. I invest a lot in it.' [GB, male, CEO, employed, trade]

'The only goal that I've ever consciously pursued was having a good reputation with the [PR] agency, being respected. (...) I did many hours of unpaid work for the industry and its professionalization. I was always fully committed, towards the industry, my work, my customers. I've worked 70 hours a week. I can count the weekends I had off on one hand. (...) The agency is something like a child for me. We haven't got any children, and work... I love it very much.' [RS]

Discursive codes such as full *commitment*, *customer-* and *network-orientation* evoked in the accounts of several 1970s graduates emphasize once more that their professional self-understanding and self-positioning are shaped by certain entrepreneurial codes and subject ideals. Most of the 1970s graduates draw on different organizational and professional codes and demands while accounting for and positioning themselves. Several of them present themselves in a rather active and reflexive manner and, thus, not as docile and disciplined working subjects who solely act according to the prescriptive codes and orders associated with bureaucratic work contexts (Sewell 2005).

The picture that emerges from our study therefore questions and undermines the all-pervasive idea(1) of bureaucracy's 'organizational man'.

Discursive codes shaping the work and career practices of the 2000s graduates

The above analysis of the 1970s graduates' narratives has shown how this cohort's work and careers practices as well as their subjectivities 'at work' are shaped by a variety of discursive codes, demands and subject ideals, not exclusively those typically ascribed to bureaucratic contexts. We now move on to discuss which codes, demands and ideals manifest in the 2000s graduates' accounts and whether and how these are aligned with the post-bureaucratic 'enterprise regime' (McCabe 2009).

In many instances, management graduates from the 2000s use different language codes when compared to graduates from the 1970s. The narratives are commonly focused on the *professional fields* the graduates are employed in. These fields are typically presented as *dynamic* and even 'unsettled', characterized by constant 'changes and unexpected challenges' and requiring from individuals flexibility as they 'deal with different partners, organizations and clients' [CG, male, e-learning consultant, self-employed, consultancy].

That professional fields are often perceived as unstable also influences the type of *competences* and skills assessed as 'crucial' by the 2000s graduates. Many of them argue that pure function-related skills and practices would be nowhere near sufficient to persist within their fields:

'These days it's soft skills that are of high relevance, because customer contact and communication are so significant, as is project work. It's important to understand people. (...) You have to grow into new teams quickly. Then you start to work on the [functional] skills you need. (...) That's what this career path looks like.' [PO, male, business analyst, temporarily employed, consultancy]

The condition whereby functional expertise is changeable and often defined across organizations and projects is explained by the graduates mainly with reference to demands for *team- and customer-orientation* and 'distinct career dynamics' [CG], more generally. This dynamics requires a 'continuous adaptation' and work on individual skills and competencies, in particular 'cultural and entrepreneurial ones' [DP, female, HR consultant, temporarily employed, consumer industry]. In this light, it seems that several of the 2000s graduates consider the self-responsible adjustment and extension of their skills, practices – and 'human capital' – a given (Foucault 2008). This points to, among other things, the regulatory power of discursive codes and demands such as *self-development, self-management, flexibility* and, by extension, *employability*, that are all strongly promoted within recent entrepreneurial work and career 'regimes' (Grey and Garsten 2001).

At the same time, it is apparent in many narratives that different complexities are ascribed to contemporary forms of work and organizing. Often *project- and team-based* in orientation, these forms are presented as both constraining and liberating. The following account is illustrative here:

'We work in different companies and projects, scheduled for a couple of months up to one year. (...) The work is very diverse and flexible, and so are the teams.'

(...)[Performance] is constantly assessed. So it's a lot of responsibility. On the other hand, you're given autonomy... and in principle each project provides you with learning opportunities.' [BL, female, organizational developer, self-employed, software industry]

Next to demands for flexibility, *autonomy* and *(self-)responsibility*, many 2000s graduates highlight lateral *relationship management*, involving networking and cultivation of professional contacts, as 'critical to success' [CG]. In this context, some explicitly refer to 'being single' as work- and 'career-enhancing', since this allows 'more time for networking' [MS, male, business developer, self-employed, fashion industry]. Others, while not directly commenting on the effects that the time and effort 'invested' in managing professional relationships exert on their personal life, contend that 'effectively maintaining alliances' [KP] requires high levels of physical and mental flexibility. This, again, is framed by some as an opportunity for the 'development of an open, flexible mindset' [KP], yet by others it is depicted as an 'occasionally burdensome challenge' [JS, female, trainee, temporarily employed, electrical engineering].

Affirmative accounts of dynamic, entrepreneurial-invested work and careers thus tend to be interwoven with accounts that simultaneously contest them. It is, for instance, not uncommon for graduates, acknowledging demands for team-orientation, adaptability, autonomy and self-management (Pedersen 2008), to critically narrate pronounced individualized *competition* demands, infusing their professional fields and practices. Some, for example, concede that the 'uncertain competitive market world out there can be tough' [MR] and make it difficult and sometimes impossible for the individual employee to 'find a niche where you can position yourself' [RR], especially since it is

acknowledged that ‘in the end you have to fight on your own’ [AP]. The narratives suggest that contemporary work contexts and concomitant discursive codes are – with regard to their meanings and implications – multi-faceted and ambiguous rather than distinct.

There are, moreover, some voices among the 2000s graduates that challenge entrepreneurial work and career contexts for yet another reason. Concerns are expressed regarding the presentation of current project-based forms of organizing as being completely ‘released’ from bureaucratic codes and regulatory principles. An account by a management controller, for example, sustains the idea that principles such as formal documentation and monitoring of performance or (self)discipline, commonly ascribed to the traditional organizational ‘career regime’, do not run ‘against’ ‘projectified’ forms of work but are actually embedded in them:

*‘They [organizational management] create a project out of every piece of s**t. Every meeting where minutes have to be taken is called a project. (...) You waste more time carrying out the entire administrative work than on the actual issue itself. They make a project out of every trip to the toilet... and you have to comply. (...) Although on paper there is differentiation and diversity, in practice the whole system is often very rigid. And it affects your advancement too. (...) A career often has less to do with how good you are, but more with how willing you are to follow the path laid down on some forms.’ [WF, male, controller, temporarily employed, electronics industry]*

Many of the professionals, acknowledging that (neo-)bureaucratic codes and demands persist and shape their work and work practices, refer to contemporary organizations as

often ‘over-regulated, standardized, ponderous and elephantine’ [JS]. Several accounts of the 2000s graduates, in fact, suggest that their variegated work and career practices are directed and regulated by a combination of bureaucratic, i.e., prescriptive, and post-bureaucratic, self-regulatory principles and codes. However, the majority of the graduates argue that, from the individual’s position, work and career prospects are often difficult to foresee. As previously suggested, one response to dynamic and uncertain work and career conditions is to ‘invest’ and look after one’s competences, skills and, generally, ‘human capital’. This can provide an opportunity to counter-act uncertainty and thus, potentially, social and/or professional downwards mobility.

Against this background, in the following subsection we elaborate on how the 2000s graduates negotiate and reflect upon the challenges, complexities and ambiguities concomitant with the multiple (post-)bureaucratic professional and organizational codes, subject ideals and positions that inform contemporary worlds of work.

Discursive codes shaping the subjectivities of the 2000 graduates

Several entrepreneurial codes, demands and subject ideals – such as be active and committed, team-oriented and adaptable, and self-responsible and self-organized – are drawn upon in the narratives in relation to the graduates’ ‘subjectivities at work’. The following account from a young CEO-assistant, calling himself a ‘reform and change promoter’, illustrates how these codes are partly absorbed by the 2000s graduates:

‘I’m the one who’s pushing and saying, “it’s got to be done this way”. (...) I see a problem and solve it... I always try to be one step ahead. I restructure the company. (...) I’m the one who takes the role of innovator. I connect people and

lead the group.’ [AF, male, CEO-assistant, temporarily employed, timber industry]

While a few of these professionals try to actively ‘live up’ to entrepreneurial codes and ideals and, thereby, position themselves as ‘leaders’, ‘creative entrepreneurs’ and/or ‘team players’ [AP, PO] – depending on the context-specific demands they face, others, however, do not equally share this endeavor. They show entrepreneurial conduct ‘when necessary’ [RR] but, simultaneously, claim not to disapprove of more regulated, i.e., less entrepreneurial-invested, alignments of work and career. The narratives of this group of graduates thus show a similarity with those of the 1970s graduates in that they demonstrate how prevalent professional and organizational codes and subject ideals are both accepted and sustained, and critically reflected upon and/or rejected. Contestation of discursive codes mainly occurs when the graduates evaluate them as inconsistent, ambiguous or as standing in conflict with individual views. This is exemplified by the following statement from a former consultant, who had left the company in response to unilateral corporate demands for high performance and ‘value adding’:

‘There were hardly any possibilities to climb the ladder, even if your performance was excellent. (...) The company demanded total loyalty and commitment, but if your performance dropped a little for a month, you were straight for the chop. (...) Then they cut salaries. My boss was the perfect salesperson; he tried to use customer tricks on us. That rubbed us up the wrong way. I felt very insulted.’ [CM, male, researcher, temporarily employed, academia]

While this account suggests a considered refusal of being defined and positioned as a ‘partner of competition’ (Hamann 2009), other accounts provide expressions of far-reaching resignation, which often results in acceptance of extant professional and organizational codes and ideals. Statements such as ‘I was just a number to them’ [JS] further underline how some of the young professionals experience objectification and reification, rather than ‘empowerment’, at work. In combination with accounts like, ‘I would not mind being an ordinary administrator [and] work to rule’ [MR], such examples signify that bureaucratic codes, subject ideals and positions are also present within contemporary work and career contexts, even if they are interrelated with – ambiguous – entrepreneurial codes and ideals (Josserand et al. 2006). The latter is exemplified by the following account, referring to both the scopes as well as personal challenges and constraints that go along with current demands for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-management:

‘In addition to the lack of free time and income you have to carry the responsibility – which is principally great but it becomes a bit much... and, often, the responsibilities are also not very clear. (...) When you start dreaming about work, that’s not good. The performance pressure and stress were tremendous in the last weeks. Sometimes it was 50 hours just for the travelling. And the hours where I’m sitting in the office – I can’t count them anyway. (...) I have an all-in contract. It’s up to me how I manage this situation.’ [TK, male, project manager, temporarily employed, consumer industry]

In revealing how contemporary working subjects are discursively made self-responsible for their work, career, life and its organization, this statement points to yet another issue evoked in the narratives of the 2000s graduates: the dissolving of clear distinctions

between work and non-work. Since concomitant matters of *work/life (im)balance* and *compatibility* of family and career tend to have a strong influence on the graduates' subjectivities 'at work', below we discuss them in more detail.

First, many graduates from the 2000s neither welcome nor reject shifts towards delimitation of work. Several of them narrate these shifts in rather varying and inconsistent ways, as in the following account:

'As entrepreneur you always work. But it's important to create some distance, boundaries now and again. (...) It's important to switch off for two or three days at – whatever – a wellness center... or you go snowboarding, or have a serious night out. You need that to become sharp, to feel motivated again. (...) Compatibility is not a problem. Work and private life blend together. And you can decide when you need a break. (...) Sometimes you must be disciplined and work a few night shifts, when you have to meet a project deadline... because you love what you're doing.' [AP, male, self-employed, sports industry]

This excerpt once more shows that some graduates strive to position themselves in line with the discursive subject model of the highly *committed, empowered* entrepreneur – and yet struggle while doing so. As mentioned above, there are, however, also examples indicating a more reflexive and disobedient attitude towards predominant codes, demands and (subject) ideals. In the context of work/life balance-related matters, demands for constant *availability*, movement and *mobility* are particularly questioned.

For example:

'I probably could progress in the Group, but to do that I would have to go abroad. But I'm not interested in that. (...) You can decide whether or not you're

willing to wander around every three years. At some stage you're no longer at home anywhere. I wouldn't be willing to sacrifice myself for my job. It wouldn't benefit me at all. Neither in terms of success – if I couldn't share the pleasure with anybody – nor in terms of money – because I wouldn't have the time to spend it anyway. (...) Although I like the company in many ways, I will probably join another company where I'm not asked to constantly move, progress and compete with others.' [WF]

Some of the graduates thus reveal reluctance towards discursive demands for ongoing movement and, generally, demands to subordinate personal life to the sphere of work and career. Yet several of those adopting such a skeptical view still scramble to meet both their professional *and* non-professional aspirations and purposes:

'I enjoy my work; I really like the challenge and you get recognition in a way. But you can gauge where my priorities lie. I have a child, I'm a family man. (...) I would be unhappy as a civil servant. I'm just too cantankerous to put up with that... But I'm also quite sure that I won't be a top manager one day, because I know the level at which those tough people have to perform. (...) That's no longer compatible with family life. Regarding my career that's a pity, but, it's not worth it. (...) I've never worked on Saturday or Sunday.' [TK]

Along with the desire for 'succeeding' in different areas of life, this last account of a young manager yet again exemplifies that the 2000s graduates invoke not only entrepreneurial codes and subject ideals in their narratives, but also those commonly ascribed to bureaucratic work, careers and selves. They express appreciation for 'entrepreneurial challenges' and the autonomies and responsibilities of the 'new world

of work' and argue, 'they pay off' [DP]. At the same time, they often present and position themselves as critical and/or 'conservative' towards post-bureaucratic ideals and highlight that they desire more clarity, continuity and stability in their professional tasks, (self-)relations and careers (see also Sturdy et al. 2016). Against this backdrop, the following discussion further reflects on the power that shifting work-related codes and demands exercise on the professional practices and subjectivities of both groups of management graduates.

Discussion

Co-existing discursive codes and their effects on work, career and subjectivity

This paper has explored two work and career regimes that are, within MOS and CMS, commonly referred to as bureaucracy and entrepreneurialism (e.g., du Gay 2007; Jossierand et al. 2006; McCabe 2009). Extant studies often suggest that these regimes are encompassed by distinct and mutually exclusive codes, demands and subject ideals (e.g., Weiskopf and Munro 2012). We have analyzed empirically whether and how these codes, demands and ideals shape and inform the practices and subjectivities of working subjects, namely management professionals who graduated in the early 1970s or 2000s. Our analysis suggests that shifts from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic regimes and discourses occur gradually (Holmer-Nadesan 1996), and that management professionals face a variety of complex, often competing discursive codes and demands that cannot be exclusively ascribed to one ideal-typical work and career regime. There

are discursive codes – such as performance monitoring, (self-)discipline, flexibility and customer-orientation – that co-exist and are hence invoked in the narratives of both the 1970s and 2000s graduates.

Whereas organizational codes tend to be more powerful within bureaucratic work contexts than entrepreneurial ones, our analysis shows that the former are neither uniform nor coherent, and that the work and careers of ‘bureaucratic’ management professionals are less standardized and linear than often postulated (e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; Kanter 1997). The findings, likewise, suggest that within entrepreneurial, ‘projectified’ work settings a certain neo-bureaucratization of work and career practices takes place (McCabe 2009). Contemporary forms of governing work and careers are, however, often protean, value-oriented and symbolic rather than directly commanding (Grey and Garsten 2001, 244), i.e., they mainly regulate and channel, rather than prescribe individuals’ actions and conduct (Foucault 2008, 20). Further to this, our analysis questions whether the regime of post-bureaucracy, and the ambiguous discursive codes, demands and rationalities it encompasses, increase individual autonomy and ‘freedom’ while reducing control (du Gay 2007). From a critical perspective, it rather seems that (orchestrated) freedom constitutes a central form of post-bureaucratic power and control (Fleming and Sturdy 2011, 195). Yet, how the latter shapes subjectivities ‘at work’ is far from given.

Among the narratives of the 1970s graduates, there are those that point to strong attachments to specific organizations on the part of the professionals. This suggests that, in some instances, bureaucracy’s discursive promise of ‘organizational career’ (McKinlay and Wilson 2006) and long-term promotion has informed and regulated the graduates’ self-positioning and self-understanding. Simultaneously, though, the study

shows that not all 70s graduates lived up to that promise. There are also those who, over the course of their careers, started to approach work as a rather self-regulatory, entrepreneurial-invested ‘project of the self’ (Grey 1994). Concomitantly, the graduates also invoke professional discursive codes ‘beyond bureaucracy’ (such as self-organization, flexibility or network-orientation) that equally affect their subjectivities. Notwithstanding the above, many of the narratives suggest that the 1970s graduates share(d) a wide confidence in advancement as to their work and careers.

In comparison, most narratives of the 2000s graduates point towards these hardly counting in terms of ‘ontological security’. Even if some of them state a desire for more ‘bureaucratic opportunities’ to structure their work, careers and selves, many of them tend to consider unpredictability, multi-directionality and/or non-linearity as inherent parts of their project-driven work and careers (Sturdy et al. 2006). In most instances, the 2000s graduates seem to be directed by shifting profession- and ‘market’-related demands, with employability leading the way. In general, we have seen that several of these professionals show entrepreneurial conduct, but neither in a stringent manner, nor ‘at all costs’.

While post-bureaucratic work contexts tend to involve more dynamics, complexity and uncertainty than traditional ones, however, we also note similarities between them and the professional subjectivities they forge. Our findings demonstrate that, within both settings, there are management professionals who often absorb, subject to and reproduce prevalent discursive codes, demands and subject positions (Foucault 1990); likewise there are those who present themselves as unwilling to acknowledge and comply with dominant prescriptive codes and positions. We therefore cannot argue that one work regime is considerably more effective than the other in producing the ‘appropriate

individual', i.e., the loyal and disciplined corporate employee and/or the self-interested, entrepreneurial 'subject of human capital' (Weiskopf and Munro 2012). Indeed, our analysis shows that professional conduct and subjectivity cannot be 'read off' from organizational and professional codes and forms of power but are instead 'mediated by numerous factors and discourses' (Salaman and Storey 2008, 318). By referring to Foucault's (1990) concept of 'discursive polyvalence', below we discuss how these numerous factors and discourses affect the subjectivities and subject positions that the more recent management graduates in particular adopt.

Challenges and opportunities for active subjectivity formation: the polyvalence of discourse

The analysis of the narratives of the 2000s graduates raises the idea that heterogeneity and ambiguity of discursive codes and rationalities – to what Foucault (1990, 100) refers as the 'polyvalence of discourse' – go hand in hand with dynamics and diversity in terms of subjectivities and subject positions 'at work'. The notion of discursive polyvalence reminds us that discourses and the knowledge they promote are not given or uniform (Foucault 1972), but are constituted as a dynamic 'multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies' (Foucault 1990, 100). In this light, discourse becomes accessible as a complex and contingent assemblage of interrelated, more or less complementary rationalities, codes and practices (Foucault 1990, 98; see also Deetz 2003).

Within contemporary entrepreneurial work contexts, 'discursive polyvalence', either built on singular discursive codes (e.g., self-responsibility or autonomy) or their

interweaving (e.g., team-orientation *and* self-management), seems to be particularly well-pronounced and concomitant with complex effects for the graduates' emerging subjectivities. The persistence of ambiguous discursive codes and subject ideals can, fundamentally, constitute a source of subjection and a source of subversion and counter-conduct (Holmer-Nadesan 1996, 60). Therefore, ambiguous codes can produce diffusion and uncertainty (Sennett, 1998) and, in so doing, constrain conscious self-positioning and self-formation. Likewise, however, they can offer the graduates certain opportunities, namely, for actively asserting and working on different versions of the self (Thomas and Davies 2005).

In the narratives, discursive polyvalence is reflected in, for example, the subject positions the 2000s graduates refer to. They draw upon, negotiate and thus co-construct positions such as the 'creative entrepreneur', the 'cooperative team player', the 'born leader', the 'change promoter', the 'ordinary administrator', the 'family man' or the 'independent bachelor'; subject positions that all co-exist within the work contexts of these professionals. Here, the distinction between conformity with and resistance towards entrepreneurial codes, ideals and positions is often provisional and blurred (McCabe 2009). It is not uncommon that the young professionals comply with, oppose and question discursive codes, such as network-orientation and relationship management, self-responsibility or autonomy. As a consequence, it can remain unclear whether, for example, self-managed, 'projectified' and 'delimited' forms of work and career are indeed affirmed and prioritized over more linear, predictable and steady forms.

That being said, among the graduates – in particular the 2000s, but partly also the 1970s – it does not seem to be unusual to explain and legitimize one's conduct by attaching

weight to different professional and/or organizational codes, subject ideals and positions (Sturdy et al. 2006). Among other things, this insight emphasizes that the co-existence and heterogeneity of discursive codes puts management graduates in the position to subvert narrow fixation and definition of professional conduct, practice and subjectivity (Foucault 1982, 222). The polyvalence of discourse, in fact, offers scope for autonomy and allows the graduates to bring different interpretations and meanings of discursive codes to life (Holmer-Nadesan 1996). In other words, discursive polyvalence enables management professionals to ‘call into being’ and, thereby, re-write prevalent discursive codes, subject ideals and positions – without being directly defined as ‘irresponsible’, ‘abnormal’ or ‘inappropriate’ (Thomas and Davies 2005). By providing possibilities for considered involvement in the knowledge and truths that discourses promote, discursive polyvalence thus works not only ‘against’ but also potentially in the interest(s) of contemporary working subjects.

Following Foucault (1990), power, control and discourse operate on multiple levels and in multiple directions and are continuously accompanied by refusal, insubordination and critique. In our study this was reflected in practices of management professionals simultaneously sustaining and challenging the conditions they are surrounded by.

Conclusion

Let us close by highlighting the key contributions of this paper. First, the paper adds to the emerging body of literature within CMS that explores the shift between bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic work and career regimes as gradual and blurred rather than epochal, clear-cut and radical (e.g., Josserand et al. 2006; Sturdy et al. 2016). In

addition, the paper contributes conceptually to Foucault-inspired, discourse-analytic studies on subjectivities at work, especially those that emphasize the polyvalent ‘nature’ of discourse and, thereby, express that subjectivity is neither purely precarious nor self-determined (e.g., Thomas and Davies 2005; Whittle 2008). At last, the paper responds to calls for greater empirical granularity in Foucault-informed studies on shifting rationalities in the organization of work(ers) (Raffnsøe et al. 2016), which often remain conceptual in orientation (e.g., Weiskopf and Loacker 2006; Weiskopf and Munro 2012). The exploration of the narratives of two cohorts of management graduates allowed us to empirically ground and illustrate how bureaucratic and entrepreneurial discursive codes and demands mutually inform each other. Studying – with reference to a particular national context – how prevalent codes of work and career regulation are negotiated, reflected and enacted at a micro-level, enabled us, in fact, to go beyond generalizing and ideal-typical diagnoses (Kuhn 2009). Diversity and dynamics in the reflections offered by the graduates have thereby reinforced the idea that the ‘materialization’ of discursive rationalities, demands and subject ideals, promoted by specific work regimes, remains a contested and to some extent open ‘power game’ (McCabe 2009).

On the whole, our study of changes in work- and career-related discursive codes, practices and subjectivities illustrates that ambiguity and co-existence of discourses and discursive codes seem to be the norm rather than the exception. While the multiplicity of (post-)bureaucratic discursive codes can imply a dense ‘web’ of power and control that defines and positions subjectivity, the study has invoked more complex and contingent effects. Even if one can never guarantee the – or ‘a good’ – outcome, our analysis suggests that the ‘polyvalence of discourse’ (Foucault 1990) does not only raise

for working subjects more challenges, precarities and constraints, it also provides them with varying possibilities to become consciously involved in the evaluation and co-constitution of the meanings that extant discursive codes, subject ideals and positions are associated with (Holmer-Nadesan 1996). Like subjectivity, these meanings – and the struggle thereover – continue to be persistently ‘at work’.

Note

ⁱ Following Foucault (1994), the term 'regime' is used to delineate a more or less distinct rationality ensemble that encompasses different interrelated forms of power, discourses, and (non-)discursive codes and practices (see also Weiskopf and Locker 2006).

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