

“How irrelevant is the field of Work and Organizational Psychology *really*?”

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Following a panel debate on the last EAWOP conference in Dublin and a series of reflections by different scholars published on Researchgate, a further exploration is needed concerning the state of affairs in the field of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP), and a first assessment of what needs to be done in the field in order to strengthen the study of individuals in the workplace. My claim is that the field of WOP is currently in a state of crisis. While it seems that the reverse is actually the case, we should look closely into the phenomenon of crisis – and especially the notion that an often underestimated aspect of a deep crisis is the sheer neglect among the general public, or the mainstream, and in the case of WOP, mainstream researchers, of the actual state of affairs. An analogy with the well-known scene of the orchestra continuing to play when the Titanic is sinking is appropriate here, as it seems as if the music is still playing while very few are able to express and experience the true feeling of a discipline that is rapidly losing its potential to answer questions that are highly relevant in contemporary society and workplace. All is dependent upon the indicators that is being looked at. On the one hand, output, number of scholars active in a field (e.g., OB, Organizational Behavior, is currently by far the largest division in the Academy of Management), journal citation scores, use of WOP related terms and research in popular media, student numbers at universities and other factors would suggest that WOP is currently flourishing (in this piece, WOP is used interchangeably with OB, as it is practically impossible to differentiate between the two).

On the other hand, there is a growing feeling of discontent among academics I have spoken to over the last years. Many of them went into academia with ideals and sometimes even fantasies of how they would conduct research that would have shape a better world, like an aspiring medical student who fantasizes about developing a cure against cancer. An academic career in WOP, be it in a psychology department or a business school, often starts with the hope of creating a fairer workplace, where people can truly enjoy their work, where they can experience their work as meaningful, and where important topics are addressed, such as inequality, climate change, sustainability, and justice. Yet, I observe that over the years, WOP has become much more *irrelevant*, in terms of the research that is being conducted and the implications of WOP research for both theory advancement and practice. This was eloquently expressed at the EAWOP conference in Dublin, where various scholars talked about academics having become career-focused (e.g., the desire to publish in top-tier journals rather than focus on ‘good’ research, whatever that may be), about the perpetual difficulties of understanding and bridging

the gap between research and practice, about the ideological nature of our research, and about the funneling of available research methods into the all-dominating moderated-mediation-model, which has come to define our core starting point of any study.

Underlying these concerns, I observe a much deeper and more fundamental problem with WOP, which pertains to its current lack of relevance in contemporary society, and the impossibility to understand what the real drivers are in the workplace, rather than the observed ones in the field of WOP, such as the need for individual survival and work enjoyment, as being the primary obsessions of many WOP-scholars. To understand what is happening, it is important to distinguish between what has been called processes of normalization vs. processes of *hypernormalization*. In every workplace or context, processes of normalization occur, where practices, norms and understanding are being normalized to an extent that they are accepted by virtually everyone to be able to communicate, work, and collaborate. As our cognitive resources are limited, we have to agree implicitly or explicitly to certain norms in academia, such as the norm that on academic conferences, we give people 15 minutes to present their work, after which there is the possibility to engage in discussion. The implicit norm is that one does not interrupt a presentation, in order to give the presenter the opportunity to fully explain the story underlying the work presented. Normalization is necessary in society and workplaces, and as such is also present in WOP. However, while the norm not to interrupt can be easily explained in terms of courtesy in interpersonal communication, we always have to be aware of what can become a process of hypernormalization. Hypernormalization is a term introduced by scholar Alexei Yurchak, who wrote a book on the later stages of the Soviet State towards the end of it. At that time, it was widely known to everyone that the Soviet Union was not working anymore, but yet was still accepted by both the public and the officials, due to a lack of alternative and a mere acquiescence in the domination of the current system. Hence, while everyone individually knew and was aware that the system was not working, and that it merely was confirmed in its absurdity, people still disavowed their individual responsibility to acknowledge the end of the system, and to realize that it just could not work anymore. Everything was absurd, but yet nobody dared to say this. The emperor was without clothes, but it needed a small boy to make this public knowledge. Many can still remember the officials applauding in Soviet parliaments, and no one daring to be the first to stop applauding as if a sign of disloyalty, through which this could go on forever... (see also the highly entertaining novels of Vladimir Vojnovitsj about ordinary life in Soviet Union). In short, hypernormalization refers to a state of affairs where we all individually know for ourselves

how absurd the system has become, yet we do not share this openly to others, for instance not to be perceived as disloyal to the hegemonic order. We all openly believe that a publication in *Journal of Applied Psychology* or in *Academy of Management Journal* is an indication of high-quality research, and we congratulate one another for achieving this, but we fail to openly ask the question whether all the research that we do has any real, significant meaning, to ourselves, to others, or to society. Meanwhile we merely accept a hypernormalized state where our research is merely compliant to the needs of capitalism and organizational life, as 95% of the constructs we study should ultimately lead to higher organizational performance, whatever that may be, and whatever importance that may have for us, society, and the future.

Hypernormalization describes the state of affairs in our society. It can be seen in how US media try to normalize the presidency of Trump, as if its absurdity can be explained in our traditional logic of obtaining a democratic majority through which one becomes a president. Yet we fully accept the order underlying it, are not yet ready to accept the underlying truth, which is about institutionalized racism, about powerful elites dominating societies, and about the neoliberal order forcing us to comply with it. At the time of writing this, a G20 meeting is taking place in Hamburg, and it is quite striking how the media jump on the protests as if observing a complete mystery, something that is an anomaly, without any notion of the (violent) protests being a reaction to what is the real meaning of the G20. A meaning pertaining to dominating elites who alternate G-whatever meetings with Economic Forums in Davos, ultimately dictating the very hypernormalized workplace, that what defines the object of WOP. How many articles in our field have started with the statement that the workplace is becoming more dynamic and that workers have to adapt, and become more flexible themselves? We just take the dynamic workplace as a given, as something that is externally imposed upon what we study, and as if this dynamic workplace does not result from political decisions of how societies and workplaces should function. Instead, we actively take a position where we say: “Let’s just take that for granted now, and move on” – leading to project our own fantasies of a workplace where people are happy, engaged, productive, satisfied, self-managing, proactive, crafting their jobs, working cohesively in teams, transformed by their servant leaders, trusting everyone, aging successfully, and so on and so on. But what do we have to address?

The first issue pertaining to WOP is that we urgently need to address our assumptions. WOP-researchers have generally no idea of why they are conducting their research, and are generally unaware of the assumptions of their own research. A simple question about what good research

is, produces many different answers among academics. While there is certainly no single framework of defining what good research is (and there should not be a single perspective), we also know that good research cannot be equated to impact factor of a journal, of citations, of esteem or reputation of the researcher, of a sample size, of the measures or the methods used. There is a lot of irrelevant research being published in top-tier journals, and many top journals have become utterly boring to read, being dominated by conditions of rigor as implemented top-down by editors, which does not produce good or better research. However, we have to start defining what good research is, and to do that, we need to understand what our assumptions are. Too often, if not almost always, we adhere to the instrumental logic, where all that is part of WOP is instrumental to organizational outcomes. We have to ask ourselves the question for whom we are conducting our research: for ourselves, for workers, for organizations, for society? As objective research does not exist, we have to be much more explicit about the assumptions that we have, and the aims that we want to achieve with our research.

This is also reflected in our obsession with practice. While this is not purely something that exists in the minds of WOP-researchers, as it is shared widely among academics across disciplines, we as an applied field, are particularly obsessed with it. Our research should be ultimately leading to practical implications, where on the basis of our research we tell practice/practitioners/governments how the workplace looks like and how it should be fixed. Meanwhile, we pretend as if we are non-ideological, and objectively looking at reality, and on the basis of that postulate our vision of the happy-productive-proactive and so on worker. On the one hand, we are arrogant in knowing how the individual worker should behave (manage thyself!), while on the other hand, we have no idea of what is really happening beyond our own microscope. Across the fields of WOP and OB, there has (virtually) no single paper been published mentioning neoliberalism (or any related term such as managerialism) in relation to the contemporary workplace. We have no idea of what practice is really like, yet do not shy away from selling our highly prejudiced fantasies to the world of practice, where consultants readily adopt our terminology to sell and commodify. As our terminology has such a wide appeal (who is against engagement or job crafting or the proactive worker), it seems as if we have a major impact on practice, while in reality we merely adhere to existing practices of hypernormalization in the contemporary workplace. And so we can fully accept that in the contemporary workplace people are stripped of any employment rights and benefits, and become an entrepreneur of the self, such as is the case with Uber drivers, who are told to believe

that they are indeed not just taxi drivers, but entrepreneurs, and should be happy with it. Our own role as academics influencing popular debate is not discussed at all. At the same time, we claim that Western economies are now all service-economies, where everybody has white-collar jobs, and we completely forget where manufacturing takes place – in the periphery of the world where exploitation is rife, and we cannot even see it anymore as we walk on the high street, where shops are filled with the output of the periphery for ridiculous low prices to purchase. Meanwhile, we just do another study of engagement among tax-avoiding big accountancy firm employees and how they struggle with work-life balance (me included!)...

To strengthen our link with practice, we readily jump into societal fads and turn it into a scientific concept. A prime example is research in WOP on mindfulness. This became popular as one of the elements of a rise of Western Buddhism, with yoga, zen-meditation, and mindfulness as ways through which the contemporary worker could relax from a stressful work environment. There are two problems with this. On the one hand, we have no problem with commodifying everything into products. The process is relatively straightforward: a practice which has been part of a religion or faith over many centuries in a particular Non-Western context, is taken out of its context, brought to the West, where it can be mass-produced and sold to the public. Hence meditation is no longer a key aspect within a religious life, but can be used by teachers in the West to offer to people on a weekly basis: one hour of meditation to escape the absurdity of modern life. Hence, it is commodified into a product that becomes part of the market and economy, and thus in all absurdity contributing to GDP of a nation. WOP contributes significantly to this, through conducting research on the effects of meditation on well-being and so on. By showing these very effects, WOP legitimizes the concept as being part of the economy. The second problem arises when this is investigated without any critical reflection whatsoever. Hence, we do not talk about what Western meditation *really* is, but only how this can be used to add economic value, and to sustain a hypernormalized world. In other words, *because* people meditate, they obtain the energy to be fully productive in contemporary society and to fully participate in the capitalist society. Meditation, therefore, is necessary as we use it to be productive, and without it, we have to realize the sheer hypernormalized state of the workplace, the absurdity of our internalized exploitation, and our sheer internal resistance to be part of the capitalist dystopia that we actually live in. Hence, we do not understand the violent protesters in Hamburg against the G20, but of course, we do *fully* understand them, as their protest arises from a feeling of complete helplessness and frustration with contemporary society. The violence of these protests are merely indicative of the lack of

perceived constructive alternatives, and even though there is no single justification for violence, it is not difficult to understand in relation to its causes.

So do WOP-researchers really care for employees? This is far from a straightforward question, but generalizing, the answer should be negative. WOP does care for the imagined version of 'the employee', but not a real existing individual, who has to survive in the current world, and is subject to all that is imposed upon her. WOP researchers do generally care much more for organizations (obviously implicitly as it cannot be openly acknowledged), as much as they comply with the need to sustain existing practices in the workplace, and the hegemony of capital and wealth. All that we do is to ensure the survival of organizations, and to use employees to enhance organizational performance, profitability, and shareholder value. We have become servants of power, or we have always been, and it is about time this is more generally acknowledged. Can we re-postulate WOP science as truly caring for workers and individuals?

So far, I have primarily discussed how we approach the workplace and reality. However, the future of WOP depends largely on how we work, that is, how academic research and careers unfold. As discussed above, we struggle to define what good research is, and yet have to find new ways of expressing ourselves. Scientific research has found its way to potential audiences predominantly through journal articles (especially in WOP, where books are only published to summarize existing knowledge rather than introducing new ideas). It is widely established that contemporary science has a publication-fetish, where our work and lives are increasingly defined by what we have published. Our careers are dependent upon our publications, and in extension our very identities are dependent upon it. As someone who has a relatively long publication list, I am fully aware of this, and perceive how identities have become more intertwined with how much has been published, or how many citations have been achieved. It is not about what you have to say, but how much you have said in the past, no matter how relevant it has been, how much repetition was needed to obtain the publication list, and how well-crafted a paper needs to be to get into a top-tier journal, through which the meaning of the paper has disappeared. The system has followed swiftly, and all academic institutions fetishize publications, make careers dependent upon them, pressure people to publish, obtain grants etc. All is well-known and repeatedly stated before. Yet we continue to persist in the hypernormalized academia, and we are nothing more than an applauding machine in a late Soviet government, where we all might have our individual, private thoughts, but publicly

continue to contribute fully to the system. We might even do ourselves some yoga to survive in the contemporary university system, yet forget to understand our own responsibility for sustaining the system. We also forget the meaning of fetish as an object or ritual to overcome a trauma, and to be able to 'act' normal. Perhaps the trauma is our lost sense of meaning in what we do, and something we have to rediscover? I therefore welcome any input, contribution, thought and comment which may contribute to the debate of how we want to design and develop WOP in the future. An academic discipline can only exist through people being active in the field, hence, change can only be made by these very people.