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# Welcome to the House of Fun: Work Space and Social Identity

Chris Baldry and Jerry Hallier

Institute for Socio-Management, Stirling Management School

## Abstract

*Following the diffusion of HRM as the dominant legitimating managerial ideology, some employers have started to see the built working environment as a component in managing organisational culture and employee commitment. A good example is where the work space is designed to support a range of officially encouraged 'fun' activities at work. Drawing on recent research literature and from media reports of contemporary developments, this paper explores the consequences of such developments for employees' social identity formation and maintenance, with a particular focus on the office and customer service centre. Our analysis suggests that management's attempts to determine what is deemed fun may not only be resented by workers because it intrudes on their existing private identities but also because it seeks to re-shape their values and expression.*

## Keywords:

Working environment; organisational culture; offices; commitment

## Introduction

While organisational practitioners and researchers in Scandinavia and much of Northern Europe have long seen the design of the working environment as a fundamental ingredient within the quality of working life debate (van Meel, 2000; Gallie, 2003), the Anglo-American view, until recently, has been that work buildings – factories, mills, hospitals and offices – are simply containers for work processes. This view can be traced back to Elton Mayo's popularising of the Hawthorne experiments (Gillespie, 1991) and the over-simplified conclusion that variations in the physical environment had no effect on performance. For most of the second half of the twentieth century transatlantic management orthodoxy held that the built working environment could be regarded as an organisational constant.

This is now changing, although not through a belated adoption of the values of the QWL debate, but rather following the diffusion of HRM as the dominant legitimating managerial ideology. There has been a growing trend for organisations to begin to see the design of work-space as a component part of organisational culture and identity, and as part of the strategy for raising and/or maintaining levels of employee commitment (and productivity). Thus the recent architectural and business press has been awash with examples of office walls being torn down and cubicles being scrapped and being replaced by an exotic array of interior plazas and malls, tents, yurts, lounges, palm trees and water features (HR Magazine, 2002). For example, BP's offices in Houston Texas were redesigned into clusters of work 'neighbourhoods' around a central café and contain tented semi-enclosed spaces for 'quiet time' (Ottawa Citizen, 2006). A recent rapturous review of the European research offices of office furniture manufacturer Steelcase offers a further example and gives the flavour of this kind of journalism:

'No one has an assigned workstation, yet meeting spaces of all shapes, sizes and degrees of informality abound; their 'yurts' and 'dyadic slices' look like they should be occupied by waifs modelling vintage Cardin and Courrèges ...Yet...this is no mutated survival from the 90s dotcom bubble but the prototype of how millions will work tomorrow' (The Guardian, 2008).

However, such architectural innovation would mean nothing if not mirrored in appropriate and expected behaviours. In an increasingly popular sub-variant of the new interest in office design, the introduction of unusual decor and interior spatial arrangement has paralleled the overt dissemination of a workplace 'fun' culture

(Kinnie et al., 2000; Redman and Mathews, 2002), in which the built environment is co-opted to support a range of officially encouraged ‘fun’ activities at work.

This paper explores the consequences of the development of the consciously designed ‘fun’ workplace for employees’ social identity formation and maintenance, with a particular focus on the office and customer service centre in an Anglo-American or ‘transatlantic’ societal context. This is very much an exploratory paper which brings together work in the previously unrelated areas of space and social identity. It is illustrated by examples taken from recent research literature and from media reports of contemporary developments, particularly in office interiors, predominantly in the UK and USA.

### **How buildings work**

Work buildings operate on both a functional and a symbolic level (Eco, 1980; Stimson, 1986; Baldry 1999). They house and facilitate labour processes but at the same time convey overt and subliminal messages about organisational hierarchy and power. In the traditional ‘transatlantic’ office these signals frequently emphasise hierarchy, through a differential allocation of space, décor and furnishing, status-based variations in the degree of visual and aural privacy (Konar and Sundstrom, 1986; Vischer, 2005) and hierarchically demarcated territorial space (Doxtater, 1990). In contrast, office layout can also serve to *conceal* the locus of power in order to promote a more unitarist organisational culture through, for example, either open-plan layouts which are inclusive of managers’ workspace, or modular offices with identical space allocation and fitments for all grades of staff (Berg and Kreiner, 1990).

In social market economies with a tradition of regulated labour market activity there are likely to be limitations placed on employers' autonomy of building use: for example in the mid-1970s all the Scandinavian countries passed working environment legislation insisting on environmental minima for workplaces, including access to windows, natural light, and personal space (Andersen, 1997); similar legislation exists in the Netherlands (van Meel, de Jonge and Dewulf, 1997; van Meel, 2000). Here responsibility for the optimal functioning of the built environment is likely to be jointly shared between management and employee bodies such as works councils (Swedish Institute, 1993; van Meel, 2000). In contrast, in the loosely regulated 'flexible' labour markets of the UK and the USA the work environment is often quite literally a 'contested terrain', and contains the same latent conflicts of interests as are inherent in the capitalist employment relationship (Baldry, 1999). As the QWL movement recognised, an employee's preferred work environment should be pleasant, healthy, and should offer occupants a degree of control over ambient variables such as light and temperature; it should afford an acceptable degree of privacy and should support the work performance rather than create obstacles to meeting production or service targets (through, for example, poor air quality, noise levels or cramped space (Vischer, 2005). In contrast, the Anglo-American employer's preferred work building traditionally has an exterior which will communicate something of the organisation's size and prestige and the dominant priority for interior space planning is that the running costs of accommodating the work process should ideally be minimised. The building functions of heating, lighting, ventilation and maintenance therefore become for management a cost-control issue, while for employees they are a comfort or environmental quality issue (Baldry, Bain and Taylor, 1997).

### **Hard and soft HRM and the workplace environment**

This potential conflict of interest over working space has consequences for any HRM policy which may be in existence. Although work space is seldom discussed in Anglo-American texts on HRM or organisational behaviour, employees' expectations about space are likely to form part of what Vischer (2005; p.4) refers to as the 'socio-spatial contract', an implicit deal between employees and employer and which acts to give the workplace its symbolic power.

Any ideology that stresses that people are the company's strongest asset must appear to back up this claim by provision of quality working surroundings and this has required a re-evaluation of the way internal workspace is used. While researchers of both space and organizational culture have long recognised that work buildings' appearance, layout, décor and design comprise a strong set of cultural symbols (Berg and Kreiner, 1990; Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Baldry, 1999; Parker, 2000; Burrell and Dale, 2003), only recently have transatlantic employers started to revise their view of work buildings and to view them as the means of encapsulating organisational culture and values.

For example, the unitarist underpinning of HRM has resulted in a reduction in separate offices for managers (or at least middle managers), and the fetish of the team is reflected in open plan groupings of 'pods' or islands of workstations. However, despite the ubiquity of team-based workstation clustering, developments in office space design can currently be observed to be running in two opposite directions both

of which, ironically, are based on the idea that interior space design can actively assist in the promotion of corporate values.

The first focuses on the vaunted concept of flexibility, and perhaps corresponds to Storey's 'hard' model of HRM (Storey, 1992). The mantra of flexibility, the professionalisation of knowledge work and the reality of cost reduction (Apgar, 1998) are used to justify innovations in which the concept of a personal workspace is coming close to being eradicated altogether through practices such as hot desking or hotelling. 'Clean desk' policies are now common, in which no employee is to have any paper on the desk at the end of the day - it is either filed electronically or binned. Usually, in such locations, there are ancillary instructions that there are also to be no pin-ups, postcards, or fuzzy toys near or on the PC, nothing which suggests any vestige of personalisation and locational identity.

This model of enhanced environmental control would seem to be focused on large scale routinized white collar 'back office' work with little face to face contact with customers or public. But, because such enhanced environmental control strips the workplace of some of those little concessions that might have made intensified task cycles bearable, it has the potential to strip the employment relationship right down to the cash nexus, skewing the effort bargain and undermining any rhetoric of commitment. Therefore for those sectors of employment where employee/customer rapport is part of the service delivery product and the job involves a high degree of emotion work, the consequences of the above development in space planning can prove very problematic for the HRM goal of enhanced commitment to organisational values.

It is here therefore, where the very feelings of the employee have to be captured and moulded (Taylor, 1998; Flecker and Hofbauer, 1998), that we are beginning to see the manipulation of the internal working environment take a different direction, as a direct adjunct to such expressions of ‘soft’ HRM as the promotion of a shared or team ethos. Much of this is a subset of the new managerial rhetoric that ‘work should be fun’ (Kinnie et al., 2000; Redman and Matthews, 2002) and forms the corollary that it should therefore be undertaken in a ‘fun’ workplace. As one enthusiastic evangelist for the fun workplace has put it:

Creating places where people love to work is about creating a culture where individuals can freely bring *the best of their whole selves* to work each day’ (Yerkes, 2007; p. xv) [our emphasis].

From our analysis of the business and architectural press reports of recent office design innovation we have identified two clear types of fun environment. We argue that these have been constructed with very different goals in mind and that these are directly related to differences in labour processes. We will give some brief examples of these two types here, which we can call respectively ‘knowledge work is fun’ and ‘the job may be boring but we can have a laugh’.

### **Knowledge work is fun**

‘The office of the future is going to be a lot more fun... The future is all about producing ideas – not things - so in a world of tough competition, the workplace must get the best out of people and be where they really want to go’ (Beaston, quoted in: *Evening Standard*, 2006).

This declaration by architect Richard Beaston of the British Council for Offices is a concise summation of current trends in several areas of creative knowledge-based employment such as multimedia, PR and marketing, architecture and design and legal services. While architects and design firms have always used their own offices as advertisements for their skill and creativity, current ideas are clearly focused not so much on the customer as on the motivation of the staff. The Belgian architect Will Erens, in describing his design for a London PR company, claimed his goal was to create a 'better than home feeling' where work can be as much fun as leisure (*The Independent on Sunday*, 2000).

This importing of home signifiers into the workplace, in sectors with predominantly young staff, can result in designs that seem consciously to ape a student apartment, such as the London multimedia company whose reception area boasts beaten-up sofas, a fridge full of beer, a table football and loud rock music on the stereo (*The Guardian*, 2001). Similarly a US advertising agency is designed around open community areas, a courtyard with a pool table and 50-inch plasma screen TV, and a commercial garage door leading to a 'brainstorm room'. The management's hope for this environment was that it would 'unify employees, energize them and foster creativity' (Adweek.com, 2005). This trend, implying to young graduates or newly qualified young employees that working life can continue to offer the pleasures of pre-work life, is of course a continuation of the 1980s Silicon Valley IT houses and their campus layouts with jogging tracks and skateboard pitches.



The successor to those early examples, and current benchmark for the fun workplace, is Google. The company's website ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com), 2008) proudly describes the Google Culture, in which the flat corporate hierarchy is reflected in the fact that Googlers (sic) all eat in the same café, play roller hockey every Thursday and 'share an obsessive commitment to creating research perfection and having a great time doing it' (ibid.). There then follows a description of its world HQ at Mountain View, California – the Googleplex – and 'some of the essential elements that define a Google workspace'. It is worth while quoting from this verbatim:

**'Lobby Décor** – Piano, lava lamps and live projection of current search queries from around the world.

**Hallway Décor** – Bicycles and large runner exercise balls on the floors, press clippings from around the world posted on bulletin boards everywhere. Many Googlers standing around discussing arcane IP addressing issues and how to build a better spam filter.

**Googler offices** – Googlers work in high density clusters remarkably reflective of our server setup, with three or four staffers sharing spaces with couches and dogs. This improves on information flow and saves on heating bills.

**Equipment** - Most Googlers have high powered Linux OS workstations on their desktops. In Google's earliest days desks were wooden doors mounted on two sawhorses. Some of these are still in use within the engineering group.

**Recreation facilities** – Workout room with weights and rowing machine, locker rooms, washers and dryers, massage room, assorted video games, Foosball, baby grand piano, pool table, ping pong, roller hockey twice a week' (Ibid).

It goes on to describe the Google café, the Snack Rooms and to give the address of the nearest 24-hour doughnut shop. Other accounts of the Googleplex mention the volleyball pitch, rock-climbing wall and the facility for staff to travel round the 'campus' on push-scooters (Sunday Times, 2007b).

The message sent by this kind of symbol-rich environment is one of youthfulness (and not necessarily chronological age – the ‘inner child’ crops up a lot in this kind of discourse), creativity, collaboration and autonomy. It is also of course a heavily gendered environment, reminiscent of the UK TV series ‘Men Behaving Badly’.

**The job may be boring but we can have a laugh.**

‘We’re mad here, we’re all mad - I’m mad.’

Ricky Gervais as David Brent in ‘The Office’.

By contrast, in more routinized work flows the fun environment is more a strategy for encouraging the right emotional mind set in the context of an alienated job. The deliberate promotion of a culture of ‘fun’ as a navigational route between the twin goals of maximizing employee commitment and controlling employee behaviour has been noted in several studies (Redman and Mathews, 2002; Kinnie *et al.*, 2000; Alferof and Knights, 2003; Baldry *et al.*, 2007). Organizational fun in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is certainly big business, particularly in the USA where such ‘funsultants’ as the company *Funcilitators* advise large corporations, including Anheuser-Busch, IBM, Marriott and Nextel, how to ‘lighten up’ (The Sunday Times, 2007a). While ‘fun’ is currently being used as a deliberate strategy for commitment and labour retention in a variety of organizational sectors, it could be seen to be of special relevance to the provision of particular types of personal services, such as holidays and entertainment; here the hope is that the positive emotions generated by a fun working environment will seep into the telephone conversation and be transmitted to the customer.

A good example is given by Baldry et al. (2007) in their study of the package holiday company, 'Holstravel'. The travel agent's call centre had been consciously designed to be a fun environment which would not only house the fun activities but would itself, through its décor and layout, speak of 'holiday'. The open-plan work-floor had a ceiling of dark sky-blue and walls painted in bright colours with murals of exotic red and orange and large plastic palm trees were dotted about the floor among the clustered workstations. The staff restaurant, called 'The Shoreline', was accessed from the main floor by crossing an interior stream, fed by a waterfall. A bridge over the same stream served as a symbolic transition point between the fairly conventional corporate foyer and the 'holiday space' of the work floor, with the added feature of a 'Sensorama' which played holiday sounds (such as waves on a beach, a rain forest, a jet taking off) from speakers in the wall.

The company was very clear that this environment has been *specifically* designed to promote the sense of 'fun' and of 'holiday'. As the manager of the *Holstravel* centre openly admitted:

When they come to work we want to promote a happy atmosphere, where people are friendly, so that staff are then happy with the customer. ...So the idea was, 'Get people in the holiday mood' and then they can talk to the customers..... It's designed to change peoples' minds. If people are coming in at 8 am on a dull day we want to change their mind set so that they are thinking, 'I am now ready to sell dreams''. (Baldry et al., 2007; p. 95).

Within this colourful work environment the company regularly promoted a series of fun activities such as quizzes, team competitions and prizes (for meeting sales targets), and fancy dress days with holiday themes (such as French Day, America

Day, or James Bond Day). Unusually for a call centre, pop music was played fairly constantly over the PA system (ibid.).

An equally unusual example of using the built working environment to promote a sense of ‘wackiness’ is provided by a US call centre located in an old manufacturing tool-assembly building in Vermillion, South Dakota. Many of the staff are temps recruited from the local university and to make the environment, in the company’s own words, ‘a fun place to work’ it commissioned the local university’s fine arts professor to paint the walls with ‘abstract washes of colour, enhancing the central structure as a focal point and sculptural presence’. More dramatically, the designer made no attempt to disguise the original industrial interior but instead had deliberately retained the exposed steel roof joists, the concrete floor and physical elements of the assembly line such as gantries and hoists. As the design architect was honest enough to explain:

The goal was to create a dynamic spatial landscape of forms and experiences that would relieve the monotony of working on the phones’ (Architectural Record, 2002).

While plant studies of the mid century demonstrated conclusively that assembly line work was anything but fun, its retrospective synthetic recreation, almost as theme park, now houses the ‘assembly line in the head’ (Taylor and Bain, 1999).

### **Reasons for fun**

While there is some overlap in the apparent rationales of these two variants of the ‘fun’ work environment, the core reason for managements to incorporate fun into the creative knowledge work environment is perhaps easier to discern than it is for the

routine service workplace. As indicated in the press reports of our earlier examples, there is much talk of synergy, creativity and cross-fertilisation of ideas. A recent account of a new HQ for a London public relations firm describes how the building's bistro, bar, library, glass walls, couches and soft furnishings foster, in the words of the CEO:

‘Transparency, socialising and collaboration. Everybody went “Wow!” when they walked in, which really lifted morale. People walk around, talk, bounce ideas and work creatively for the client’. (*The Guardian*, 2008)

Additionally, encouraging highly skilled and autonomous knowledge employees to work extremely long hours is problematic both for new graduates and more experienced, longer service employees. In the case of graduates fresh from university, the task is to help them overcome the common early dilemma of how to balance their desire to advance in their chosen career while at the same time not allow the expectations of the organization to dominate too much of their life (Herriot, 1993; Storey, 1997). For the older knowledge worker, a similar tension may also arise in the conflicting calls on their time by family and work (Perlow, 1999; Rutherford, 2001). For both types of knowledge worker, therefore, part of the ‘tough competition’ often faced by employers is literally the problem of controlling where the worker wants to be, especially after formal working hours. The semi-autonomous fun space thus is not merely used as a place for people to ‘chill’ during the working day, but also can be seen as a means to entice employees to stay in the office after hours rather than pursue alternative sites of pleasure and relaxation. As explained by the architect Erens: “If the office is right you will spend more time there after 5pm. And maybe you have better ideas than you do at 9am” (*The Independent on Sunday*, 2000).

Understanding the equivalent rationale for adopting the 'fun' environment in the routine service workplace requires a more detailed examination. Here certainly, the idea of 'having a laugh' to ease the boredom and stress of the work appears quite logical in itself. Nevertheless, a number of other issues are raised which need probing if we are to explain employers' rationale for the investment in the work space that has been witnessed in recent times. In everyday terms the notion of fun is equated with unfettered enjoyment, freedom to do as you wish, and activities that enable the person to escape temporarily from the pressures of obligation, duty and worry. While it is not inconceivable that job satisfaction for routine service workers may have some association with particular aspects of experiencing workplace fun, usually enjoyment at work is associated with a very much narrower range of satisfactions than are associated with fun experienced outside of the employment setting (Furnham, 1991). Given these ambiguities, we need to examine the rationale for assuming that a work space designed to direct how work fun is to be expressed will enhance worker identification with managements' objectives and why employers have chosen to focus on this issue rather than introduce other additional practices that might elicit employee commitment. To answer this question, we begin by examining the reasons why, in general, the outcomes of previous high commitment initiatives have failed to live up to management ambitions (Guest, 1998).

Despite a continued focus by management in the UK and USA on the goal of employee commitment (Walton, 1985), the consensus among critical commentators has been not only that these efforts have failed to develop substantial levels of workforce commitment, but also that employees generally have seen the contrasts between employers' messages of mutuality and the short-term, hard HRM reality

(Thompson, 2003; Baldry et al., 2007). Far from a willingness to accept management accounts, most employees have either deployed a resigned, often sceptical compliance, or they have attempted to mimic management's own 'rhetorics' in order to protect their positions by appearing to be 'on side' (Collinson and Collinson, 1997; Hallier, 2004). Here the finding that employees can see through the hollowness of high commitment practices is predicated on several features of its message and the type of practices that employers typically pursue.

In particular, the difficulty with securing widespread employee commitment to the organization and its management is by definition problematic because the primary locus of employees' engagement and identification at work tends to be located elsewhere. Findings have long revealed that employees' primary work identification is often not to their organization at all but to their skills, work function, or worker group (Marks and Lockyer, 2004; Baldry et al., 2007). Reference to some of the core principles of self categorization theory explains why organizational commitment is unlikely to be a natural focus for employee identification and the pursuit of self esteem (Turner, 1985; Turner and Oakes, 1997). Put simply, employees' identification is usually focused primarily at levels below the organization because they are more able to make meaningful and regular comparisons between different work groups than between different organizations. That is, in the pursuit of self esteem, work group identities allow more scope than at the organizational level for employees to stereotype judgments of their in-group membership as being in some way special, superior and distinct from others. This being so, management automatically faces an uphill struggle when pursuing organizational commitment since it represents a self-defining category which first has to be made salient for

employees over preferred group levels of self categorization before it can even begin to be pursued effectively.

If we accept that organizational commitment is rarely meaningful as an overriding source of workers' self identity and esteem, then it follows that management's attempts to generate substantial commitment to the organization will end up being critically scrutinised by workers when exhorted to see their interests and futures as compatible with those of their management. At the very least a cautious stance can be expected because employees will wish to avoid doing anything that could risk existing self-definitions. In those commonplace instances where the commitment message is characterised by a lack of consistency, therefore, it is entirely in keeping with social identity theory (Balaam and Haslam, 1998; Mackie et al., 1990; McGarty et al., 1993; 1994; Oakes et al, 1991) that studies adopting the rhetoric versus reality framework of analysis have routinely reported extensive workforce scepticism (Rousseau, 1995; Sparrow and Marchington, 1998; Thompson, 2003).

While employees often readily perceive when management's behaviour falls short of its high commitment rhetoric, so too are managements themselves often aware of their own failure either to secure the allegiance of their employees or to shape employee attitudes in spheres such as cooperativeness and self-discipline (Hallier and Leopold, 1996; Watson, 1994). In response, managements have not always been ready to let go of the commitment goal. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, studies were already showing a general tendency for employers to move from initiative to initiative in the wake of failures to develop substantial improvements in workforce commitment (Guest and Dewe, 1991; Kelly and Kelly, 1991; Ramsay, 1991 ), Since then, the range



of high commitment HRM techniques has grown both in America and the UK with survey and case study evidence showing managements frequently finding novel ways to justify both new and relaunched attempts at securing the attachment and loyalty of employees (Leopold and Hallier, 1997 ; Thompson and Findlay, 1999; Thompson and McHugh, 2002 ).

This failure to date of conventional HRM techniques in the USA and UK to achieve their stated goal of raised organisational commitment suggests a rationale for employers' new interest in the built environment as a vehicle for organisational culture-building. In the 'fun' work environment especially, employers' focus on the person's self categorization thus is not merely directed towards securing the employee's identification with the organization, but also towards capturing the identification of the whole person. In Yerkes' own words 'the integration of fun and work isn't about *what* you do, it's about *who* you're being when you do your work' (Yerkes, 2007; p.8, emphasis in original). That is, the design of the internal layout of the 'fun' workplace provides management with an opportunity not only formally to recognize that all workers seek opportunities to express non-worker identity during work time, but also to attempt to make salient the fusion of established non-work self definitions with their commitment to the organization. In this mindset, the objective of the built environment becomes one of infusing work commitment with other non-work aspects of employees' self definitions that nevertheless are still routinely enacted at points during the working day.

Fleming and Spicer (2004) have usefully suggested that the promotion of 'fun' may be seen as a deliberate attempt by the contemporary organisation to blur the line

between work and home, in that behaviours normally associated with home and leisure are officially encouraged within the workplace to promote the idea that work is play. If so, this has significant implications for the construction of social identity as, formerly, these kinds of behaviours were how workers reinforced the saliency of their membership of the external social groups (family, non-work friends, clubs) which differentiated them *from* the world of work. If such behaviours *were* conducted in the workplace, they were done covertly as forms of organisational misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). In those expanding sectors of employment where service quality and delivery are increasingly dependent on varieties of emotional work, it has been argued that the need to capture the ‘whole worker’ (Flecker and Hofbauer, 1998) is a need to subsume the employees’ social identity within an overarching organisational identity (Haslam et al., 2003). If behaviours that are normally used to reinforce non-work identities are officially sanctioned and even encouraged within the workplace, which itself is designed so as not to resemble a conventional workplace, then the organisational goal could almost be said to mimic a ‘closed institution’ (Goffman, 1968) where there is no other or external social reality.

This attempt to deploy the work space to enhance its capability to secure employee engagement and control is premised on three goals for its design and use: Firstly, the layout of the work space is used explicitly to reduce or remove places where workers can pursue unsanctioned non-work identity activity. In their place, the re-designed work space is used as a site where management attempts to replace informal non-work self expression with a sanctioned and orchestrated version of non-work activity that can appear to serve the employee’s need to express the other aspects of self: team

competitions and fancy dress days can *only* be made to work in a non-hierarchical open plan work space.

Secondly, the work space not only becomes a setting which encroaches on the customary activities that employees in conventional work settings allocate for enacting their own versions of non-work identity but also determines *when, where and how* management's alternative will occur. In orchestrating where and how private self activity can take place on management's terms, what is offered and presented as leisure breaks or self time in the guise of fun activities explicitly makes illegitimate those periods during working hours when workers' conventionally seek to express their self independence from work.

Thirdly, in attempting to shape the forms that sanctioned non-work self expression should take, the layout of the work environment is used to widen the scope of normative control by bringing the scope of what constitutes informal self expression in the workplace into line with management's objectives for work behaviour. Because what can constitute fun time also encompasses the types of behaviour that are also thought necessary to maximize positive responses from customers, such as 'smiling down the phone' or 'flirty selling' (Belt et al., 2002), management is actually pursuing a form of disguised culture training to further socialise a range of normatively embodied branding displays.

In essence, then, the aim is to make workplace identity more inclusive by capturing the expression of other valued features of the employee's identity. But for all the reasoning that this more inclusive approach displays, is it reasonable to expect that

identity salience will be actually increased in the way envisaged by managements adopting a fun environment? In the next section, our analysis of this question draws on two aspects of the social identity approach that specify the conditions for the adoption of a social identity; that is, normative and comparative fit.

### **A House of Bricks or Straw?**

In explaining the process by which group members' pursue self enhancement and protection, a social identity approach also offers useful insights about how management's message and treatment of workers in the fun environment are likely to be interpreted and acted upon. If we are to assess management's explanation of the meaning and effects of the fun layout and message, we need to explore the process by which the content and source of this approach impacts on employees' social categorizations about their organizational membership and self definitions.

In drawing on a social identity perspective, a more complex impact on organizational identity is suggested from the rhetoric of the 'fun' environment than is assumed by employers, and one which requires us to probe more deeply than is possible using the predominant rhetoric versus reality approach. According to social identity theory, any collective response is only made possible when group members are willing to depersonalise the self in favour of a collective categorization so that the advance or protection of self esteem is seen as best pursued through the collective actions of the group (Brown and Turner, 1981). In the preparation for adopting a new social identity, the development of normative fit is seen as particularly important (Bruner, 1957). Under normative fit the person attempts to find consistency between their expectations and the presumed goals, values, and behaviours associated with a

particular group membership (Haslam, 2004). Consequently, while the work environment may be designed and utilized with the capture of more of the person in mind, it is only when these normative assessments are perceived to make an available social identity desirable, that the person will become motivated less by personal gain and more by the prospect of achieving collective self satisfaction through contributing to group goals. To the extent that normative fit can be achieved, these principles suggest that managements are correct to assume that social influence is a self directing factor in developing prototypical and cohesive behaviour in a new or changed identity setting, since the individual's conformity to the group's norms is perceived to be shared with others. It is through this process that individual views become coordinated and transformed into shared beliefs, values and behaviours. That is, we are motivated to live up to the norms and to achieve the goals that are relevant to our newly categorised self-definition.

Nevertheless, management's assumptions about how a fun environment helps to develop organizational commitment neglect the fact that employees' willingness to commit this aspect of the self to the organization is dependent on a form of reality testing. In other words, if the embellishment of workers' identity by the fun environment is to be judged appropriate, then the experiences they encounter must conform to their expectations of managing and membership of the organization. Here Haslam (2004) has argued that should these content-related expectations fail to be met, then the prepared social categorization will cease to be evoked to make sense of events or define the person's actions. And so, irrespective of the exhortation to endorse the fun environment situation, where management's intentions and behaviour are seen to be inconsistent with workers' expectations of managing, then their

presumed sense of similarity with the organization will fail to develop. Thus, accepting these orchestrated activities as a legitimate form of self expression requires employees to reach a judgement about how this modified categorisation of who they are in a given moment and setting is seen to advance their interests. In this sense, employee willingness to accept such ideas from management will vary according to how workers structure their social self definitions in terms of the context applying at the time. To be sure, some workers may end up finding some pleasure in the emotional challenges of the fun working environment. Yet if some workers report the ‘buzz’ they get from delivering a fun structured service, others can be equally expected to resent the curtailment of freedom over their self expression (Hochschild, 1983). From a more detailed examination of the Holstravel case for example, we learn that, while a young Holstravel worker in her first job could declare ‘Everyone is up for a laugh, which is what it’s all about isn’t it?’, some of the older workers were much less enthusiastic and more cynical about the fun environment:

‘The sensorama, palm trees...It doesn’t motivate me. It didn’t make me feel as though I wanted to sell a holiday. It’s nice...’

Q: But it doesn’t actually help?

‘The sensorama, when it’s working, doesn’t make me feel as though I am in Turkey or somewhere’ (Baldry, 2010).

Seen from this perspective the environment and rhetoric of fun is merely a new embellishment to many employers’ existing demands that employees conform to emotion rules. And while in their personal lives, most workers will readily display emotions for a particular audience, such as looking interested even when a friend is being boring (Goffman, 1959), requiring emotional performances at work confiscates

another dimension of discretion and autonomy especially from the routinised service worker. As is the case with more commonplace examples of emotion work, therefore, the critical distinction applied here is that the fun environment is not designed to fit the needs of workers to express a range of emotions, but one that requires a particular emotional content be displayed to the organization's preferred audience at key points in the labour process. Thus, that part of the lowering of autonomy in contemporary service work which requires employees to relinquish control over their emotions has become amplified in the fun setting to include recreational aspects of the person's identity at work.

Besides this clash between the values of work and recreational identities, another critical flaw in management's rationale stems from the assumption that workers will readily accept managers as occupying a similar self categorized membership as themselves. Put another way, for workers to incorporate the fun environment into their own self definitions at work, managers would have to be seen as members of a similar group. Once again social categorization theory provides an explanation for why this will be difficult for management to achieve even where the fun activity is itself reasonably attractive. Under social categorization's principle of comparative fit, only those with whom we believe we share a common self definition will be seen as credible to inform us about relevant aspects of our social reality and thus reduce our uncertainty. Studies investigating this aspect of social categorization theory have shown that it is only possible to exert influence over how others pursue a particular version of self esteem where the communicator and receiver are seen to belong to a common social membership (Balaam and Haslam, 1998; Mackie et al., 1990; McGarty et al., 1993; 1994; Oakes et al, 1991).

This feature of the social categorization process means that any given group will be experienced as self defining to the extent that their differences are less than the differences between their membership and other possible categories (Haslam and Turner, 1998; Oakes, 1987). So for example, an economist and sociologist are more likely to see themselves as sharing the social identity of social scientist when they occupy a setting that includes other people who are non-social scientists such as engineers or computer scientists (Haslam, 2004). In contrast, the assumption of similarity between managers and workers in the 'fun' environment will be less likely to be made. This is because the members of existing groups with whom workers have fun informally both inside and outside of the work setting are likely to be perceived as more similar than their managers. The point is that the perceived similarity of friendship groups both inside and beyond the workplace arises because they are chosen, whereas by comparison managers, however fun-loving they attempt to make themselves appear, are imposed upon the workforce.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

These basic principles of how social categorization occurs undermine the likelihood of management being able to harness a fun environment to enhance widespread organizational identification. Yet if many, if not most, employees are reluctant to incorporate work and fun values in the way intended, this is not to say that employees' experience in this work setting is not eroded. A curious paradox of the linking of fun values to the control of work behaviour is that while management is seeking to develop employees' unitarist identification with the formal values and goals of the organization, the unintended result of such initiatives may be to create



uncomfortable dissonances for some employees between their separate work and non-work identities. Indeed, in accepting the complexity and fluidity of workplace identity, it follows that the requirement to perform ‘fun’ work may threaten the compatibility that has existed between work identity and parallel personal and recreational identities.

By the same token, ‘performing’ a holiday spirit beneath the palm trees at *Holstravel* will not alleviate existing employees’ experience of stress, nor a propensity to headaches and sore throats where these are themselves a direct consequence of the labour process and the built technical-environmental system (Baldry, 2010). While it is true that any work space a person occupies, however dysfunctional, will play a part in sustaining an individual’s identity or sense of self (Vischer, 2005), ultimately the built work environment can never offer the same basis for identity formation as the home, because of the vastly reduced ability to control and form that environment. It is management (or their design consultants) that decide what will be a ‘fun’ space to work in, *for* the workforce. Thus, for some workers, the intrusion of management into determining what is deemed fun may be seen as an illegitimate and unwelcome re-formulation of the effort-wage bargain. For them the fun environment may not only be resented because it intrudes on their existing private identities but also because it seeks to re-shape their value and expression. Hence, where the fun managed environment creates such tensions between non-work and workplace identities, the predicament faced by the individual is how to manage behaviour in each separate identity group so that they retain their original integrity.

Where employees see management's attempt to change their work identity to incorporate their private selves as unwelcome but unavoidable, they are likely to resolve this tension by attempting surreptitiously to interpret the new fun obligations in a way that protects the integrity of their private and leisure memberships. As with conventional emotion work, therefore, the image presented is not necessarily that of the 'real' self, but that which the worker perceives as appropriate for his or her self and the specified audience. Hence, it is likely that employees here will portray an identity that they think is desired from them by management rather than behave according to their authentic identity. In this way, workers may outwardly perform the job's expected identity as a tactic to distract management's gaze away from their authentic recreational identity.

Interestingly, this seems even to have been the case in that forerunner of all fun environments, Disneyland. The first rule transmitted in Disney staff training is 'first we practice the friendly smile' and the expected work behaviour is very much emotional work in which the employees are part of the product. However despite the fact that, unlike office workers, employees (or 'cast') in Disney are given actual roles to play (cowpokes, tugboat captains, Snow White) and the built fun environment is exactly that, Van Maanen found that many of the mainly young employees described their ability to put themselves on 'automatic pilot' or 'go robot' while maintaining the outward form of the desired behaviours for the benefit of customers and supervisors. Even new recruits and their trainers similarly agreed that there was a line beyond which one didn't accept the full company culture and that 'a full embrace of the Disneyland role would be as deviant as its full rejection' (van Maanen, 1991).

Our analysis therefore notes the belated discovery by sectors of contemporary management of the built working environment as an organisational variable, but concludes that, in lowering employees' emotional autonomy, the fun environment will often give rise to fragmentations between workers' social identities and management priorities. This is not to rule out the existence of some points of connection between organizational goals and these workers' identities. Nevertheless we may be confident that what even the wackiest of work surroundings cannot do, despite the managerial hopes placed in it, is disguise, blank or ameliorate the daily reality of an essentially alienated labour process. Goffman's (1959) emphasis on social identity as a performance analogous to that of an actor suggests that the need to 'perform fun' for management will be added to any existing strain felt from customer-directed emotion work. From this we can expect a deepening of the sources of alienation where workers perform inauthentically over prolonged periods as a means to defend their non-work selves from capture by management. Ultimately, beneath the increasing puffery of mirth and merriment, the fun environment represents an addition to current emotional loadings of low autonomy workers. It is time, therefore, to take the fun workplace seriously.

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