Existential Identity, Ontological Insecurity and Mental Well-being in the Workplace

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Introduction

This paper sets out to investigate the potential impact that organizational policies and practices may have on existential identity. In particular, the intention is to introduce the concept of ontological insecurity as a means to explore the possible links between working life, existential identity and mental health problems. It is argued that many procedures adopted by organizations, including organizational development, surveillance and monitoring, along with pressure towards emotional labour and presenteeism represent direct, often deliberate, attacks on the existential identity of individual employees, which may result in psychosis, particularly among vulnerable employees. Much has been written on the economic and social damage that work related mental health problems can cause, but here we wish to emphasise the ethical aspects of the matter from an existentialist perspective (see author removed for review purposes 2006b).

Mental well-being in the workplace

Recent reports from organizations campaigning on mental health issues have highlighted the increasing incidence of mental health related problems in the workplace. For instance, a publication commissioned by the International Labour Organization reported 'an alarming increase' in the incidence of mental health problems, particularly depression, in workplaces in the UK, Finland, Germany and Poland (McDaid *et al* 2005: 367*)*. A slightly earlier report by the Mental Health Foundation in the UK describes how work-life imbalance can result in irritability, anxiety and depression, noting that the number of hours worked correlates positively with hours spent worrying about work – an effect that "can be summed up as a regressive tax on one's private thoughts" (Mental Health Foundation 2003: 4).

Another report (Mind 2005) emphasises the by now well-known problem of the increasing incidence of stress occurring in employees and the link to mental illness. Stress is the greatest cause of absenteeism among non-manual employees and is clearly linked to conditions of anxiety and depression, which together now account for more incapacity benefit claims than back pain. These reports and others (e.g. Ivanov 2005) suggest that nearly one third of the EU working population experience mental health problems and that one fifth are affected by specific conditions including anxiety and depression. This is in keeping with Doherty and Tyson's (2000) assertion that mental illness is the primary cause of reduced productivity and high staff turnover.

What is interesting, and perhaps surprising from an ethical perspective, is that concern, even from mental health pressure groups, tends not to be with the plight of the individuals who actually have the misfortune to experience mental health trauma but rather with economic and organizational outcomes (productivity, absenteeism, turnover

2

etc). The arguments always seem to be couched in terms of the detrimental effect on balance sheets rather than the immorality of driving employees towards insanity. It seems that organizations are regarded as the unfortunate victims of the lack of mental well-being as opposed to the partial cause of the problem.

The UK Health and Safety Executive (European Industrial Relations Review, 2005) identified that stress, depression and anxiety comprised the second most commonly reported illness affecting a sample of over half a million workers, and yet it is only recently that such illnesses are being treated as a health and safety issue. A landmark case was Walker v Northumberland Country Council (1995 1 All ER 737) where the plaintiff was awarded £175,000 on the basis that chronic overwork had caused him to have two nervous breakdowns. Whilst it is considered morally and legally wrong to allow a working environment to develop that is dangerous to physical well being, the same principles are only slowly beginning to hold regarding mental well being. Clearly, as we shall see, part of the difficulty stems from the perceived objectivity of physical health compared with the perceived subjectivity of mental health, but that does not invalidate the inconsistency in the approach to the problem.

Overwork and job strain are indisputable contributors to all kinds of health problems, but here it is argued that a particular factor causing mental health problems is attacks on individual existential identity, which will now be delineated along with the associated concept of ontological insecurity.

Existential identity

According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1163):

> "Identity is one of the most popular topics in contemporary organization studies, as in many other branches of the social sciences. Identity themes are addressed on a multitude of levels: organizational, professional, social and individual."

Whilst this claim is not in question, relatively little attention has been paid to individual, personal, self, or, what we refer to here as, existential identity. Most discussions of identity in the business ethics literature concentrate on forms of collective identity (cultural, gender, corporate etc) and even across the wider management, organization studies and social psychology literature, where self-identity is considered, the accent tends to be on the social construction of identity, rather than on human agency (Woodward 2002: 1). Here we place the emphasis on self-identity as a personal, existentially created, albeit socially embedded, realm of consciousness.

Traditionally, identity is a term:

> "Used to convey the relatively stable and enduring sense that a person has of himself [or herself]." (Bullock and Trombley 1999: 413)

And for the most part that is the correct way to view it. Self-identity is associated with related concepts such as, self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-esteem and self-belief. It is recognised that multifarious sources can influence identity, including body

image, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, upbringing, life experiences and so forth.

From our standpoint the overemphasis on the social construction of the self perhaps stems from the pre-eminence of Mead's (1934) work on identity where he distinguishes between the 'I' and the 'me', through his theory of symbolic interactionism. The 'I' might be described as the consciousness of the individual, whereas the 'me' is how the individual imagines others understand them, that is, their self-consciousness. To put it another way, whilst identity is to an extent a reflection of how we see ourselves, a more significant influence is how we believe others see us. Thus, as Woodward (2002: 8) concludes:

> "For Mead it is self-consciousness that provides the core of the self."

Ultimately, according to the social interactionist perspective, the self concept is created by society, and requires social support to maintain it (Hayes 1994 p257).

There is no disputing the importance of external factors in creating identity, but for the existentialist the emphasis is somewhat different. Sartre, for instance, offers three distinct usages of the 'self':

> "First, the self of prereflective consciousness; second, the self as ego or as personality; third, the self as value." (Barnes 1993: 41)

For our purposes it is the first usage that is significant. Specifically, the inference is that we are much less self-conscious than Mead suggests. Sartre's argument is that the ego is not always present in our thoughts, which is in contrast with what, for instance, both Descartes and Husserl believed. He distinguishes between two distinct forms of consciousness - unreflected consciousness (which is identical to what Barnes above translates as 'prereflective') and reflected consciousness (Sartre 1960: 43-60). Unreflected consciousness is a consciousness of the first order, so the objects of consciousness are those objects outside of our self - there is no *I* in unreflected consciousness. Reflected consciousness, on the other hand, is of a secondary order because it involves a consciousness of our consciousness. In effect it takes the *I*, the ego, as an object of consciousness and treats it in relation to other objects external to the self. Sartre offers an example of running for a streetcar to distinguish between the two types. 'Normal' consciousness is unreflected such as when he admires a portrait or runs after a streetcar, there is no awareness of himself in his consciousness only an awareness of the object in front of him. It is only reflected consciousness when he becomes aware of his relationship to the other object - that he is late and has missed the streetcar he wished to catch - that the *I* appears in consciousness (Sartre 1960: 48-9).

Notionally, it might be assumed that reflected consciousness is a good thing. It might be assumed that it is important to be self-aware so that we can accurately locate ourselves in our social milieu – it is at the heart of contemporary concepts such as emotional intelligence. However, self-consciousness is, in truth, a burden; a condition of consciousness which can result in an almost permanent state of angst. Unreflected consciousness represents an authentic state of freedom whereas reflected consciousness involves the individual constantly making identity-defining choices, whilst

4

at the same time perhaps feeling their identity being intruded upon by others. Angst is not about anything in particular, it has no object as such; rather it is a condition that draws from the generality of existence, its sources are uncertainty, freedom, possibility and responsibility, but to this list, if Sartre is to be believed, can added '*other people*' (Sartre 1982). For the existentialist, angst represents an almost primordial and positive human condition. That is, a condition which reflects the authentic mode of existence. The person who is ridden with angst acknowledges their own freedom and the extent of their responsibilities. However, because the experience of angst is unpleasant people typically prefer to avoid it and a continuous state of angst can be completely debilitating.

Ontological insecurity

Many individuals go through their entire working lives without ever experiencing psychological problems, whereas others, under similar or identical circumstances may find themselves immediately and constantly prey to uncertainties regarding their own state of mind. This subjectivity associated with mental health matters is often taken for granted, but to understand how and why workplace activity impacts differentially among individuals we need a framework of understanding. The traditional view is to assume that some people are genetically predisposed to neurological disorder or that defective upbringing results in psychological flaws (Porter 2002), and whilst an existentialist approach does not reject these possibilities, it introduces the somewhat radical notion that what appear to be dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours might result from existential choices. R.D. Laing, perhaps the best-known psychiatrist associated with the existentialist tradition, offers the concept of *ontological insecurity* to explain why we find differences between individuals.

Laing was not an existentialist as such, there were far too many different influences on his life and writings for him to be so pigeon-holed, however, he was sufficiently impressed by existential philosophy, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and, in particular, Sartre, that he set about applying this thinking to understanding schizophrenia. In *The Divided Self* (1990 first published1960) Laing's argument is that contemporary psychiatry treats the patient as an isolated organism that exhibits certain socially undesirable behaviours that are to be 'cured' at the organic level by whatever means necessary - be the means drugs, electro-shock or a lobotomy (Laing 1990: 20-26). This narrow 'scientific' perspective ignores all other possible explanations of madness. He notes:

> "It seems extraordinary that whereas the physical and biological
> sciences of it-processes have generally won the day against tendencies
> to personalise the world of things or to read human intentions into the
> animal world, an authentic science of persons has hardly got started by
> reason of the inveterate tendency to depersonalise it or reify persons".
> (Laing 1990: 23)

Interestingly, thanks, at least in part, to the work of Laing and others who shared his beliefs, psychiatry has moved on from such an inhumane state of affairs, however, as we shall see, there is still a tendency for contemporary organizations to depersonalise and reify the individual.

Laing claims that psychotic conditions frequently do not result from physiological

imbalances but from existential choices that are made in the face of what he calls *ontological insecurity*. Care has to be taken in the use of a term like 'insecurity', as it is often used quite carelessly, simply to excuse inappropriate behaviour ("he's OK really, just insecure, so you never know what he will do" – Myerson 2001: 57), but here it refers to a deep-seated sense of self. Laing uses the term *ontological* not in its usual philosophical sense, but in an empirical sense that is the closest adverbial or adjectival derivative of 'being' he could locate (1990: 39). In other words *ontological insecurity* is an insecurity of being – literally a matter of life and death.

According to Laing the ontologically insecure person is (1990: 42):

> "Precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his *identity and autonomy* are always in question […] If a position of primary ontological security has been reached, the ordinary circumstances of life do not afford a perpetual threat to one's own existence. If such a basis for living has not been reached, the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat […] If *the individual cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself and others for granted*, then he has to become absorbed in contriving ways […] of *preserving his identity*, in efforts, as he will often put it, to prevent himself losing his self." (Laing 1990: 42 emphasis added)

Most people (hopefully) have a clear sense of space, time, continuity and, in particular, their presence and reality as lived out in the world. They have relatively little difficulty in confronting the hazards of life, be they physical, social, ethical or whatever, - they are ontologically secure (Laing 1990: 39). However, for the ontologically insecure person life is a state of perpetual angst (anxiety). Earlier we noted that angst is a positive and necessary mode of being, but also that perpetual angst is a different case altogether. Laing identified three forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure.

> *Engulfment* - the fear that relationships with other people or things, or even with oneself, will result in a total loss of self-identity and autonomy (existential death). Clearly, the logical strategy for *self*-preservation is isolation. (Laing1990: 43-5)

> *Implosion* - a sense of emptiness and the corresponding fear that contact with reality will result in a rush to fill that emptiness that again threatens self-identity and autonomy. (Laing 1990: 45-6)

> *Petrification and Depersonalisation* - the sense of feeling that one is a thing, a rock or automaton, rather than a person and the urge to treat others as though they are not people either. (Laing 1990: 46-7)

The cause or causes of these forms of anxiety may be many and varied (and need not be physiological) but that is not Laing's concern. What is his concern is that the strategy - the behaviour - used to cope with ontological insecurity is drawn from lucid choices that connect perfectly with the patient's predicament - a fundamentally anti-deterministic position. In *Sanity, Madness and the Family* Laing and Esterson (1970) proposed that some forms of madness were largely social creations exacerbated by patterns of hatred and affection, manipulation and indifference within the family. In an interesting parallel it

seems reasonable to suggest that in the early Twenty-first Century, with increasing economic activity rates and the decline in family units, the workplace has replaced the family as the main social environment.

Laing applied his arguments to individuals with acute psychoses, particularly schizophrenia, and used them to explain how the seemingly strange behaviour of the schizoid, including catatonia, aggression, objectification of others and so on, can represent meaningful and rational attempts to deal with identity crisis. Acute psychosis may seem far removed from the experience of everyday employment, nonetheless, present day Laingians no longer consider ontological insecurity to be the sole preserve of the psychotic – we all experience it to a greater or lesser extent. According to the Director of the Society for Laingian Studies:

> "The term schizoid was not restricted only to extreme forms of psychosis because most everyone experiences some degree of schizoid splitness at times in their lives. The defensive behaviour of 'normal' – that is ontologically secure – individuals differ only in degree, not kind, from that of ontologically insecure people." (Potter 2001)

The argument here is that, if we all suffer a degree of ontological insecurity, then specific organizational policies and activities that impinge upon individual existential identity have the potential to exacerbate mental health problems among all employees. As we have mentioned, the economic implications of this matter are often referred to by pressure groups, such as those mentioned earlier, but the moral dimension is rarely considered.

The employment relationship and workplace practices

The increasing incidence of work related mental health problems comes as no real surprise, and whilst long working hours and the problems of work/life balance contribute a great deal they are not the entire explanation. Organizations often pursue their interests, in the first place, by ensuring through careful selection, using personality diagnostics, that only those able to demonstrate mental stability are employed. However, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, they then proceed to make a sustained assault on existential identity in an attempt to optimise conformity, loyalty and performance.

With only a hint of parody Jackson and Carter (2000) offer a description of the typical employment relationship to illustrate the type of employee that organizations are wishing to create:

"If we look at the typical requirements that are demanded of people when they join an organization as employees, it is possible to infer from those requirements a 'model of a man' (sic) which is suggested. For example:

Employees are expected to	Which suggests
• Allow their time to be organised for them;	• This is what parents do for their CHILDREN;
• Do what they are told to do, in the way that they are told to do it;	• A person who decides for him or herself is autonomous, one deemed unable to do this is treated as an AUTOMATON;
• Sell control of their bodies to their employer, along with control of their labour;	• People who sell their bodies are known as PROSTITUTES;
• Allow themselves to be disciplined;	• Willingness to accept being disciplined might be a sign of MASOCHISM;
• Punish others who are naughty;	• Willingness to accept this role might be a sign of SADISM;
• Surrender moral responsibility for what they do, or produce, for the organization;	• The archetype who gave up his moral responsibility for gain was FAUST;
• Place the interests of the organization before their own interests;	• Such self-sacrifice on behalf of others is ALTRUISM;
• Accept that those who manage them deserve more money, better conditions etc. than themselves.	• Accepting that those with higher formal status than oneself are intrinsically better than oneself suggests feelings of INFERIORITY.

Put all this together, give it a good stir, and what do you get as the typical employee? A *sadomasochistic Faustian altruistic child-like automaton prostitute with feelings of inferiority!* Does this describe you? If not, you may not be suited to modern organizational life." (Jackson and Carter 2000: 158)

There are numerous commonplace organizational practices used to challenge the existential identity of employees and to shift them towards the desired 'model of man'. These practices, perhaps depending on the ontological insecurity of each individual, may have a detrimental impact. Most commentators seem to consider such practices as a legitimate control of identity rather than as potentially damaging and unethical activities. However, to suggest that organizational activities might be viewed as attacks on existential identity, as opposed to necessary attempts to manage employee behaviour is not unreasonable. In a sympathetic discussion of 'the self', quite untypical of the organizational behaviour genre within which they write, Jackson and Carter (2000: 159) argue that:

8

> "Because behaviour is a manifestation of desire, anything that anyone does in an organization needs to be understood as a manifestation of the self."

In the light of such a position they claim that:

> "Whichever the particular view taken of how desire works, motivation has to be seen as coming from within, and as inaccessible to being managed. Most especially, desire and motivation cannot be managed when the principle objective of those who seek to manage it is to satisfy their own desires, and to represent the desires and interests of those who benefit most from the way work is organized – the owners." (2000: 159)

Nonetheless, there is constant effort to manage the desires of individuals. We argue that a crucial strategy to this end is the undertaking of attacks on existential identity. Such assaults may be an unintended by-product of organizational activity (which is no excuse), but on occasions the attacks are quite intentional. Here we set out to illustrate some of the organizational practices that undermine existential identity, however, the underlying question is always to what extent it is ethical to undertake activities that may undermine existential identity – and what duty of care do managers have in judging the ontological insecurity of their subordinates.

Of course, a number of organizations are portrayed as following good practice in addressing the mental health of their employees and are recognised as satisfying a social and moral responsibility towards people. However, there may be a paradox here in the light of our discussions on identity, because there is a belief that those organizations that recognise the connection between employee well-being and organizational success are also those most likely to adopt a unitarist frame of reference to employee relations. Thus, they are likely to view HRM as a mechanism to bring about 'transformational change' that requires employees to shift their attitudes and values in order that they are accommodating towards, and congruent with organizational changes (Doherty and Tyson 2000). The techniques of 'organizational development (OD) are often the main drivers of changing attitudes and beliefs, but arguably those exact same techniques represent the most pernicious and direct challenges to existential identity and, therefore, individual mental health.

Organizational Development

The techniques of OD, and its close cousin HRD, are well known. From its origins in Kurt Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze model it is clear that OD intentionally violates the sanctity of existential identity. Despite assertions from practitioners and supporters of OD that individuals should not be coerced into divulging information about themselves (French and Bell 1999 p267), there is plenty of evidence that OD techniques associated with HRD and culture management are designed to target existential identity, which necessarily involves some degree of coercion.

Woodall and Daniel (1999: 121), reinforce this view when identifying the assumptions upon which culture management is based.

- effective management involves the alignment of values

9

- values can be easily changed
- only management can change these values
- successful organizations have strong cultures

It goes without saying that setting out to alter someone's values must reach to the heart of that person's identity. In the past OD consultants have used T-groups (a form sensitivity training in which the learners use feedback, problem solving, and role play to gain insights into themselves, others, and groups) as mechanisms for deconstructing the individual in the presence of others so as to build back a collective sense of identity in keeping with organizational objectives. Their use has declined as a result of the controversial techniques utilised, but today commonplace team building exercises adopt a similar approach. For instance, employees from all levels of public and private organizations are sent on 'outward bound' style programmes that are closer to military training than administrative training. Participants might be expected to partake in pot-holing, orienteering or nautical activities – all of which are intended to be 'character building'. There is an obvious concern for the physical safety of participants on this type of programme, but there must also be concern for psychological safety as individuals feel pressurised to 'prove their worth' (Woodall and Daniel 1999). Of course, many people enjoy the challenge of this type of training, but if an individual is ontologically insecure their sense of self worth is missing and so any experience of failure – real or imagined – could tip them into psychosis.

Cultural management programmes of the type that are sometimes described as 'inward bound' are, as the name implies' very direct attempts to influence the individual psyche. These methods of 'training' often expound a spiritual standpoint and involve participants 'opening up' to colleagues in attempts to establish important organizational *competences* such as faith and trust. Perhaps, in keeping with OD codes of conduct, there is no direct coercion of involvement from programme facilitators, but there doesn't need to be as pressures and sanctions applied by organizational leaders have already been internalised. The real problem is that whilst the secure employee is likely to be able to defend their self, perhaps by presenting a trivialised front or simply lying, the ontologically insecure participant will not recognise the possibility of such a strategy.

The media has taken an interest in some of the more extreme examples of this type of training. Programmes adopting the controversial principles of Californian *personal development guru* (and one time used car salesman), Werner Erhard were criticised in a BBC (1992) documentary for using techniques such as *Angel Hands* (involving sitting in a circle with others and being encouraged to emote about personal and painful subjects whilst being touched, hugged and stroked by 'helpers') and *Fire Walking* (walking barefoot across red hot coals). A number of attendees were interviewed and each claimed that psychological damage was done to either themselves or others as well as attesting to the pressures to attend and complete the programmes, despite considerable doubts about their efficacy and ethics.

The Times newspaper claimed that:

> "Management training, self improvement and prosperity courses
> offered to professionals and companies in Britain by American
> consultants are using disturbing New Age methods that can do more
> harm than good, according to an investigation by The Times. Senior
> managers have lost their jobs, experienced nervous breakdowns or

10

been unable to continue with personal relationships after taking the courses. They use simple but effective mind persuasion techniques which can have a devastating psychological effect." (Clancy 1992)

Despite a concerted review of contemporary sources, there appear to be no similar criticisms of OD techniques being aired at the present time. However, there is no reason to assume that there has been any decline in the use of such techniques in a current organizational climate that still promotes culture management and HRD.

Surveillance and Privacy

A second, and increasingly commonplace, organizational practice that impinges upon existential identity is the use of surveillance in the workplace and perhaps beyond. Generally, from an ethical standpoint, two connected issues of concern are highlighted by commentators. First, regarding the individual's right to privacy, and second, the extent to which constant surveillance results in conditions of stress and anxiety.

Generally, ethicists consider privacy to be a moral right (Miller and Weckert 2000). Brown (2000) explores the impact of a lack of workplace privacy by drawing together a number of themes from seminal sources and integrating them into *'a model of adaptation of self to panoptic power'*. In a rare reference to ontological (in)security within the business ethics literature, Brown (2000: 62) notes how loss of privacy can create feelings of vulnerability, violation and shame among vulnerable employees. The sense of being untrustworthy, of being treated like a child or a criminal can be all consuming. It is perhaps true to say that the monitoring of keystrokes, email, voicemail and internet traffic, along with CCTV coverage is endemic among employers. Any jobs involving the use of information technology lend themselves to EPMCSs (electronic performance-monitoring control systems) which has the effect of rendering no realm of employee activity beyond the gaze of the employer (Alge 2001). Matters worsen when we consider that even back in 1993 a survey of members of the Society of Human Resource Management in America found that up to a quarter believed that smoking habits, political activities and hobbies outside of the workplace were all legitimate subjects of management scrutiny (Brown 2000: 62).

There is evidence to suggest that employees subjected to EPMCSs, particularly in environments such as call centres, are likely to experience increased levels of anxiety and stress, simply from the increased pressure to perform and the concomitant sense of loss of control (DiTecco, Cwitco, Arsenault and Andre 1992; Smith, Carayon, Saunders, Lim and LeGrande 1992). However, some are now suggesting that recent research indicates a shift in the attitudes of employees towards electronic monitoring. For instance, Lee and Kleiner (2003: 77-8) claim that:

> "Since electronic monitoring has become popular in the workplace, employees seem to have adapted to this situation. Now, employees know that they are safe as long as they do their jobs; the nervousness about monitoring lessens. A reduction of anxiety will decrease job stress and health problems of workers."

On the surface this may appear to be a positive development perhaps resulting from the more sensitive management of monitoring systems promoted by bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE 2001). On the other hand, in keeping with Brown's notion of the *'adaptation of self to panoptic power'*, it may represent a victory for the

11

employers over the employees' sense of identity, with the latter becoming more passive in the face of the onslaught – retreating further in towards their core identity; their minimal self (Lasch 1985). As the core erodes the sense of ontological insecurity incubates and mental health problems may be being stored up for the future. The idea that the nature of work typically associated with EPMCS, in call centres for instance, is depersonalising is not new, but if we connect depersonalisation to petrification, as Laing does in explaining the anxiety of the ontologically insecure, then the notion takes on more worrying overtones. The subject that constantly has his or her privacy invaded not only fears petrification, but also is likely to depersonalise others (that is, objectify them) in an effort to stave off existential death.

Emotional Labour

The quality of service delivery is seen as being ever more important in both public and private sectors of the economy and with its higher status comes an obligation for employees to participate in emotion work. In most service orientated occupations, social interactions with customers, clients and patients form a significant part of the job. Furthermore, promulgating and maintaining a first-rate corporate image is also considered paramount for organizations and that too can demand emotional labour. As a consequence, employees are expected to project their role and their organization in a positive, enthusiastic and committed way and in order to do so, employees often have to falsify and/or suppress their true emotions. On the surface this practice of emotional labour may seem innocuous, however, it has been found to impact negatively on the mental well-being of employees, especially when low job autonomy or high job involvement is evident. As Zummuner and Galli (2005: 355) explain 'the regulation of emotions implies psychophysical effort, hence psychophysical cost, with implications for workers' psychological well-being'.

The regulation of emotions in the work context was first discussed by Hochschild (1983) when she discovered a variety of negative health consequences among flight attendants (for whom emotion work is a requisite) including psychosomatic symptoms, and alcohol and sex problems. Recent evidence continues to support this understanding describing how in some cases 'emotional labour can amount to emotion exploitation and can cause depression, alienation, exhaustion and loss of identity' (Constanti and Gibbs 2005: 105). The growing numbers of call centre workers, as we noted not long ago, who are the most likely type of employee to experience intensive monitoring, are also likely to experience emotional dissonance, emotional exhaustion and therefore, mental health problems (Lewis and Dollard 2003).

The experience of 'emotive dissonance', that is, feigning an emotional presentation that is at odds with a personal sense of emotional self, undermines existential identity (Mann 1999: 351). The state of dissonance drives the sufferer to try to achieve consistency and consonance. The emotional presentation is non-negotiable if the emotion worker wishes to keep their job, and so it is the emotional self (the way that they really feel) that has to be adjusted to relieve the tension. Ultimately, emotive dissonance can lead to 'personal and work-related maladjustment such as poor self-esteem, depression, cynicism and alienation from work, (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993: 97). Furthermore, it is a known cause of 'burnout', which is described as 'a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do "people work"', (Maslach and Jackson 1991: 99).

This apparent lack of authenticity in social interactions is not just limited to employee-client interactions. In attempting to foster desirable corporate cultures, employees are often encouraged to exhibit similar emotional labour in encounters with fellow colleagues. Mann (1999) found that not only is nearly one-third of communication between managers and colleagues faked, but also that genuine negative feelings are only revealed in 2 per cent of conversations. The suppression of emotions not only has the potential to aggravate psychological well-being, it also can have adverse physiological effects. Anger, thought to be one of the most commonly concealed emotions in the workplace, should of great concern given the correlation between anger suppression and physical illness such as coronary heart disease (Mann 1999).

Hochschild (2003) distinguishes between two forms of emotional labour, referred to as 'surface' acting and 'deep' acting, and it is perhaps important to consider this distinction in relation to our concern for existential identity. From an existentialist perspective perhaps of most significance is surface acting, whereby individuals temporarily suppress job incongruent emotions to display more fitting ones. It is this form of acting that has been found to positively correlate with exhaustion and depersonalisation, especially when employees experience a greater frequency of emotional labour with lower levels of duration. It is thought that the increasing regulation of emotions results in employees distancing themselves from the clients/customers and treating both the clients and themselves as mere objects (Zammuner and Galli 2005). Also, the effects of emotional labour have been associated with increases in withdrawal behaviour (Feldman and Morris 1996). It would appear that emotional labour has the potential to result in the forms of anxiety that Laing describes. If relationships in the workplace cannot be trusted then *engulfment* is a real possibility as an employee may experience their true emotions being squeezed out by the demands of the organization. Clearly, *depersonalization* is a danger, bearing in mind the stripping away of potentially deep seated values and emotions, the void to be filled by the burdens of the role, clients and colleagues (*implosion*).

On the other hand 'deep' acting is defined by Hochschild (2003: 33) as emotional labour at the level which deceives oneself as well as others. This idea has an intuitive appeal, but is unsustainable from an existentialist viewpoint because self-deception is logically impossible (Sartre 1996: 49-50) and although a discussion would be fascinating we do not have the space to pursue it here. To reiterate, those with a strong sense of ontological security may have no difficulty in engaging in emotional labour – they may even enjoy it in the way an actor enjoys a role. However, employees with any degree of ontological insecurity may feel in significant peril.

Work-life balance and presenteeism

Lastly we wish to address the issue of presenteeism and how it impacts upon work-life balance. Presenteeism is a recently applied epithet used to describe circumstances where employees are attending work while ill (physically or mentally) and so unable to function properly (Hemp 2004: 49), although others offer a broader definition that incorporates the idea that it is not necessarily linked to overwork:

> "The opposite of *absenteeism*, in which employees are so scared of
> losing their jobs through *downsizing*, *delayering* or just simple

13

redundancy that they work excessive hours or remain at work in the evenings in order to be seen to be there even when there is nothing to do." (Quinion 1996 at www.worldwidewords.org/turnsofphrase/tp-pre1.htm)

Presenteeism is acknowledged as being disadvantageous to both individuals and employers (Hemp 2004) and yet it is encouraged in organizations by reward mechanisms designed to cut down on malingering (BBC 2004) and because it is the only means by which employees can demonstrate what they believe to be the commitment expected by employers (Author removed for review purposes 1999, Author removed for review purposes 2006a).

It is conceivable that presenteeism operates as a 'double bind' for some workers. On the one hand it represents a possible strategy of *activity* coupled with *isolation* adopted by the ontologically insecure employee to ward off the fear of engulfment. Immersing themselves in their work, to the exclusion of other considerations, allows the individual to keep busy and at the same time avoid relationships that they fear may engulf them. In other words they isolate themselves in the role in order to avoid confrontation with the organisation or other aspects of their life.

On the other hand, presenteeism has the potential to restrict the opportunity for access to therapeutic activities. At the beginning of this paper we referred to the Mental Health Foundation's assertion that working long hours correlates positively with time spent worrying about work, which amounts to a "regressive tax on one's private thoughts". If the Foundation is correct, then many employees may not have even the ability to retreat into the sanctuary of their own psyche when faced with challenges to their existential identity.

Numerous recent surveys indicate the extent of work overload and problems of work-life balance. A study of 1654 respondents by the Work-Life Balance Centre (2006) found that the vast majority worked more than their contracted hours (35-40); nearly half found it difficult to balance work and home life; over a quarter claimed they never could; over half claimed that being unable to cope with work pressures endangered their health; and an additional third said that work demands were definitely affecting their health. A similar Mental Health Foundation (2003) survey involving 577 workers showed that one in six people worked more than sixty hours per week and one in three more than fifty hours. This form of presenteeism results in what the Foundation refers to as 'building out', which is the neglect of all other activities outside of work. The most frequently sacrificed activities were (Mental Health Foundation 2003: 18):

- Exercise (48% of respondents)

- Time with partner (45%)

- Socialising (42%)

- Hobbies and entertainment (41%)

The concern is that all of the above activities are known to promote mental well-being. To a considerable extent, also, it is these types of activity that enable us to construct and preserve a sense of self. It is in safe environments were a sense of control is maintained that ontological security can be reinforced.

Conclusion

We have claimed here that there is a great deal of what organizations do to employees that acts as direct and often deliberate attempts to challenge the individual's existential identity. It is now widely acknowledged that extended working hours and working pressure can lead to stress and anxiety, but there is an argument that the problem runs beyond that. Stress and anxiety can be alleviated by removing the stressors and prescribing rest and recuperation. Attacks on identity, on the other hand, have the potential to be much more damaging, particularly for those prone to ontological insecurity, and longer lasting. Attempts to interfere with individual identity characterize a particularly unethical aspect of organizational life, because the techniques utilised are often quite subtle and difficult for the individual to detect and react against; because the impact can be so deep set; and because the damage can be relatively long lasting.

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