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RESEARCH NOTE

‘Best in class’ – Healthy employees, athletic executives and functionally disabled jobseekers



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Summary This paper accounts for health initiatives for employees, competitive sports initiatives for corporate executives, and workability initiatives for functionally disabled individuals. On this basis the paper suggests that health, athletic competitiveness and functional disability have become central markers of employability associated with three bio-politically defined classes. A middle class of individuals that work on their lifestyles and selves to match health and employability ideals; an elite class of individuals that take part in sports activities to prove their ‘true’ competitive nature; finally, an underclass of individuals that identify with their functional disabilities and make use of them opportunistically as resources for getting employment. The paper furthermore suggests that all three initiatives are expressions of a neoliberal governmentality that cancel out the liberal distinction between an economic world of work and a private and social world by inciting individuals to use their lives in full as human capital.

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In this paper I account for initiatives, which are taken by companies, state authorities and individuals themselves for the sake of improving individuals’ health and, in that connection, their employability on the labor market. Three types of initiatives are accounted for, which concern three groups of individuals on the labor market: Work place health promotion programs which many companies have begun to offer their employees; competitive or endurance oriented sports activities that have become part of the daily practices among many corporate executives; and employability programs that so-called social firms offer long term unemployed individuals, who, as we will see, more and more often are diagnosed as functionally disabled.

I suggest the account for these initiatives can bring new light on the unobtrusive managerial controls, which have received so much attention in critical management studies (henceforth CMS) during the last two decades. Informed in particular by Foucault’s notion of discipline (e.g. 1977), CMS has typically argued that core employees, performing knowledge intensive work, are increasingly ruled indirectly by human resources management techniques or corporate culture programs, which regulate employees’ identities rather than their professional behavior (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fleming & Spicer, 2004; Knights & McGabe, 2003). Notwithstanding the merits of this research, I suggest it has three problems that the studies accounted for in this paper can help us deal with. First, while CMS’s focus on the regulation of identities indicates that management has become a phenomenon that concerns not just what employees do at work, but also how they live their lives and who they

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are in a sense that transcend the professional-private distinction, it has devoted little interest to studying authorities and techniques that reflect such a broadened managerial scope. On the surface the initiatives accounted for below do not concern individuals' work, but their private health, their recreational sports activities or functional disabilities. Yet, underneath the surface the initiatives emerge as examples of new techniques and authorities which have come to play important roles in making up individuals who self-manage not only their professional behavior and skills, but also their selves and lifestyles in accordance with managerial ideals.

Second, by focusing on core employees and knowledge intensive work, CMS has left us wondering how distinctive groups of employees differ with regards to how they are managed and what types of individual characteristics that are idealized. The accounts below suggest that health, athletic competitiveness and functional disability have become central markers of employability on contemporary labor markets, which are associated with three separate classes of individuals and three in part separate unobtrusive managerial controls. A middle class consisting of employees who are offered expert led programs, which are meant to advice and motivate them to improve their lifestyles in alignment with health and employability ideals. An elite class consisting of corporate executives who engage personal trainers and take part in competitive sports activities not primarily to become healthy, but to prove that they possess the 'true' competitive skills that are seen to define members of their elite executive class. Finally, an underclass consisting of individuals who, after long periods of unemployment, are diagnosed as functionally disabled so that they can be offered work programs, which teach them to identify with their disabilities and make use of them as resources that can increase their employability.

Third, by drawing on Foucault's notion of discipline CMS is hindered from fully grasping the extent to which recent unobtrusive managerial controls in fact idealize and seek to make up enterprising subjects that differ in certain respects from the normalized, docile subjects associated with disciplinary regulation. In this argument I draw on Foucault himself who showed in his latter works (2007: 2009) that the turn to neoliberal mentalities of rule in the 20th century results in that disciplinary regulation begins to be supplanted by post-disciplinary forms of regulation, which do not focus on regulating docile employees, but on making up self-improving entrepreneurs. In relation to this argument I show how the post-disciplinary approach at display in the health and employability initiatives accounted for differs from disciplinary regulation. Whereas discipline corrects deviances from pre-established collective norms for the sake of rendering individuals predictable, post-disciplinary regulation seeks to inculcate a competitive and self-improving state of mind in individuals, which is supposed to keep them transcending norms for the sake of increasing performance. Furthermore, whereas discipline focuses on regulating a restricted space (e.g. the work place), the post-disciplinary approaches accounted for make use of the life sciences to legitimately regulate individuals' lifestyles.

Below I will first develop how the turn to neoliberal mentalities of rule is associated with a shift to post-disciplinary techniques of regulating individual conduct. Thereafter I will account for the three initiatives dedicated to individuals' health and employability. The paper is ended with a discussion and conclusions.

Neoliberal governmentality and post-disciplinary regulation

Foucault's general thesis that modern power has become increasingly invisible and indirect, operating through experts' truth claims and techniques that accumulate knowledge about individuals and populations, has obvious relevance for the description and analysis of new unobtrusive managerial controls. Yet, I suggest the more specific analysis of unobtrusive managerial controls as examples of disciplinary regulation risks missing central aspects of their operation. To explain: Foucault's works on power revolves around three closely linked dimensions (Rose, 1993): A political dimension captured by the term governmentality, which signifies the complex of ideas, calculations and strategies through which diverse authorities – big capital, political institutions, medical authorities, and so on – attempt to act on individuals and populations for the sake of achieving certain ends (health, entrepreneurialism, and so on). A technical dimension relating to the specific arrangements – factories, bureaucracies, projects, health programs, etc., which put into play certain assumptions about what it means to be a particular human being – an employee, an entrepreneur, etc. – and that seeks to bring about orchestrated conduct that maximize certain capacities of individuals and constrain others in accordance with particular forms of expertise (health, profitability, and so on). Finally, an ethical dimension understood in a practical sense as modes and techniques by which individuals act on and evaluate their selves.

In this context, the concept of disciplinary regulation represents technical arrangements, which emerge in the early modern era and reach their apogee in relation to the dominance of a liberal governmentality in the 19th and 20th century. The emergence of neoliberal mentalities of rule in the mid-20th century shows Foucault (2009) is associated with an increasing critique of disciplinary regulation and a growing importance of partly new post-disciplinary forms of regulation (Munro, 2012). Post-disciplinary regulation develops hand in hand with the development of the new life sciences – biomedicine, physiology, psychology, etc., and is oriented towards administrating life in the circles of economic calculation through methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without making them more difficult to govern. These techniques means Foucault (2007) differ from disciplinary techniques, which basically isolate a space and segments within it for the sake of correcting deviances from a pre-established order. In post-disciplinary regulation the problem is no longer that of "fixing a territory, but of allowing circulations to take place, of controlling them, sifting the good from the bad, ensuring they are always in movement ... in such a way that the inherent dangers of this circulation are canceled out" (Foucault, 2007, p. 65).

The critique of discipline is closely associated with the way in which neoliberalism transforms basic tenants of liberal governmentality. As McNay (2009) has shown, liberal governmentality was deeply rooted in Smith's (2012/1776) view that the market and the individual homo-economicus were natural phenomena that should be protected by political power and interfered with only to subtly restrict their tendency to undermine social solidarity. That is, liberal governmentality idealized an individual that was autonomous

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