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Management in the “neo-paternalistic organization”: The case of worksite health promotion at Scania[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a qualitative study of Work Site Health Promotion (WHP) at the large Swedish producer of trucks and buses, Scania. While the concept of WHP implies that it is employees' improved health at work that is strived for, we suggest that its main area of intervention is neither the work environment, nor what employees do at work, but employees' lifestyles. To capture the potential of WHP for the management of organization, we introduce the concept of “neo-paternalistic organizational control.” By this term we want to draw attention to how WHP shares paternalistic approaches' tendency of disregarding the professional-private divide, while also drawing attention to how this extra-professional control dimension is at once less intrusive and more discriminatory than what is traditionally referred to as paternalism in the literature on managerial control.

1. Introduction

This is a study of Work Site Health Promotion (henceforth WHP) at the large Swedish international producer of trucks and buses, Scania. While the concept of WHP implies that it is employees' improved health at work that is strived for, we suggest that its main area of intervention is neither the work environment, nor what employees do at work, but employees' lifestyles. To be more precise, WHP aims to improve employees' capabilities and motivation to self-manage the way they design and style their lives, including such details as, for instance, eating, sleeping and exercising. Properly self-managed lifestyles are seen to be essential sources of health from a bio-medical point-of-view. But not only that, they are also seen to be essential sources of improved professional capabilities and greater organizational performance.

Given these characteristics, we suggest the investment in WHP made by Scania is an interesting example of an indirect form of organizational control which has become increasingly hegemonic in contemporary working life. This form of control, which downplays traditional bureaucratic regulation of employees' behaviour in favour of more subtle mechanisms of authority, essentially targets employees' subjectivities, i.e., their selves and identities (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1999; Courpasson, 2000; Fleming & Spicer, 2004; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Kunda, 1992). Studies of such “indirect forms of control” suggest that management is becoming a matter of regulating not only what

employees do in a professional work-context, but also how they live, who they are and, possibly, what their lives and selves may become (Sennett, 2003). Hereby the studies of indirect control imply that the very idea of management has begun to transcend the boundaries in which formal management procedures can legitimately intervene (see, e.g., Friedman, 2008; Zoller, 2003).

In this respect, we suggest, existing studies of indirect managerial control have a problem: While they suggest that management concerns activities and techniques that seek to regulate employees' lifestyles and selves, little interest has been devoted to studying the managerial role of other authorities than formal managers and supervisors, such as therapists, psychologists, health and lifestyle coaches, medical doctors and other medical experts. These can and indeed do take employees' selves and lifestyles as their legitimate target of intervention and could therefore be seen as a potential - yet so far largely neglected - group of “managers” (see Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011; Korp, 2007). Indeed, medicine has the potential to act as a critical mechanism of social control in that it can lay claim to know the truth about individuals' biological, psychological and social selves and how they ought to be changed (see, e.g., Conrad, 2007; Crawford, 1980; Holmqvist, 2008). Such a focus has, however, remained largely unexplored among students of organizations and management. With the study of WHP at Scania we attempt to compensate for this absence.

Below we briefly outline three separate approaches to indirect

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managerial control, which have emerged through the existing studies, normative/disciplinary control, neo-normative/post-disciplinary control and paternalistic control. We thereafter account for the study of Scania with the ambition of showing how its investments in WHP are at once closely related to these existing approaches and still uniquely different. More specifically, we suggest that WHP at Scania is an example of a neo-paternalistic control, a form of indirect managerial control, which shares paternalistic control approaches' tendency of disregarding the professional-private divide. Yet, instead of attempting to correct and change employees in relation to imposed collective norms, it shares the neo-normative/post-disciplinary control approaches' ambition of defining individuals existing idiosyncracies for the sake of exploiting them as organizational resources.

2. The management of self-managing employees

While the literature on indirect managerial control is variegated, we suggest it has studied three partly separate approaches. First and predominantly it has studied an approach typically referred to as “normative control” (e.g. Etzioni, 1964; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993) or, if a Foucauldian frame of reference has been used, “disciplinary control” (e.g. Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Townley, 1994). As stated by Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 620), normative/disciplinary control is then typically seen to be accomplished “through the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organization with which they may become more or less identified and committed”. Foucauldian studies of disciplinary control have illustrated well how this is accomplished in more specific terms. For instance, Townley (1994) and Covaleski et al. (1998) studies show how HRM techniques such as attitude surveys and yearly development talks enable organizations to “objectify” and thereby indirectly control their employees by observing, categorizing and hierarchically positioning employees with regards to their behavioural characteristics, function and performance. Furthermore, and more importantly, their studies show that employees, as they begin to make use of the knowledge about themselves and their place, function and performance in the organization, they gradually become “subjectified”. That is, they turn themselves into subjects of the knowledge about themselves and become docile organizational subjects who freely act in keeping with set organizational norms.

Normative/disciplinary control has been found to be most salient when work is knowledge intensive and non-routine, is handled by teams in the form of projects and in general, where employees have considerable professional autonomy (e.g. Barker, 1993; Kärreman, 2010; Kunda, 1992). In such circumstances, HRM techniques and programmatic managerial descriptions of corporate culture have been found to operate as means through which employees can find implicit answers to how they should handle their autonomy and – ultimately – who they should be to be accepted and valued as ‘insiders’ (Covaleski et al., 1998; Kunda, 1992; Maravelias, 2011; Willmott, 1993).

In close relation to the studies of normative/disciplinary control, a number of recent studies have outlined a second approach, referred to as “neo-normative control” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Kunda & Ailon-Souday, 2005), or, if a Foucauldian frame of reference has been used, “post-disciplinary control” (see Fleming, 2014; Maravelias, 2015; Munro, 2012; Weiskopf & Munro, 2012). These studies have suggested a type of indirect managerial control where the ambition is to recruit and promote employees who manage to turn their authentic, idiosyncratic selves into a human capital for the organization. As Fleming and Sturdy (2009: 571) point out, “there is growing wave of management rhetoric and associated practices that encourage diversity, dissent, idiosyncrasy and the expression of authentic feelings in the work environment ... Neo-normative control, then, involves the selective enlistment of the private dimensions of employee selves through a process of ‘existential empowerment’”.

Hence, while normative/disciplinary control has been found to be

pursued through managerial techniques (HRM, Corporate Culture rhetoric, etc.), which seek to correct and transform employees so that they eventually ‘freely’ subordinate to organizational norms, neo-normative/post-disciplinary control, is typically seen to be pursued via recruitment procedures, HRM techniques and managerial rhetorics, which seek to capture and enlist the idiosyncratic aspects of employees' selves as organizational resources. Hence, to the extent normative/disciplinary control seeks to incite employees to change and adapt their subjectivities to organizational norms, neo-normative/post-disciplinary control seeks to discover, include (or exclude) and exploit already existing employee subjectivities. In Foucault's (2007) own terms, post-discipline (neo-normative control) is more pronounced “centripetal” while discipline (normative control) remains primarily “centrifugal”: Discipline separates a space within which it subtly keeps individuals' conduct within organizationally set normative limits. Post-discipline seeks instead to define individuals in their existing diversity for the sake of enlisting this diversity and making it useful and valuable. Hereby it emerges at once as more radically liberal and totalizing than normative/disciplinary control. Liberal, in that it promotes individuals' idiosyncracies without the normative/disciplinary ambition of changing and correcting them. Yet, totalizing, in that it seeks to make even these idiosyncracies exploitable as organizational resources.

Finally, the literature has also discussed a third approach referred to as “paternalistic control”, which is primarily associated with Max Weber's notion of premodern, traditional authority (e.g. Ackers, 2001; Fleming, 2005; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993; Warren, 1999; Wray, 1996). While the general process of “modernization” is typically seen to have eroded the foundations of traditional paternalism (Padovic and Earnest, 1994), research on indirect managerial control has pointed towards how “some firms' HRM practice have moved in the direction of a new paternalism, and away from a strictly contractual relationship with employees” (Warren, 1999). Contemporary forms of paternalism are then seen to represent a third “sophisticated” stage in the development of paternalistic control (Wray, 1996). The first traditional paternalistic stage (Ackers, 2001, Barley & Kunda, 1992; Hooker, 1997) is associated with early small-scale industrial production where organizational procedures are still characterized by face-to-face relationships, personal obligations, indulgence and situational deference (Warde, 1989). The second stage, referred to as welfare paternalism, is developed in the early to mid 20th century as a response to the problems of maintaining face-to-face relationships when the organization increases in size. The Ford motor company's “welfare work” project, where medical doctors were employed to make homecalls among employees to encourage them live healthier, is the paramount example (Hooker, 1997). Finally, the third “sophisticated” stage of paternalism began to develop in the 1950s and 1960s with specialized personnel departments, which institutionalized largesse through profit sharing systems, social and family benefits (laundry service, cleaning services, etc.), and so on. This was done to secure employee loyalty and commitment in large-scale and impersonal organizations where more general welfare provision had largely been taken over by the state.

In all its three stages, the term paternalism has been used to depict a particular type of hierarchical relationship between employers and employees where the former provides a ‘father-like’ tutelage in return for the latter's loyalty, obedience and identification with the organization. Even when it appears through corporate culture programs and HRM techniques, paternalism, as Ackers (1999) puts it, is a personalized gift-relationship, between master and servant, which is founded upon substantial inequality. By personalized we mean that the relationship between employer and employee is mutually adapted to the specific needs and characteristics of both the employee and the employer; by ‘gift-oriented’ we mean that both parties, employee and employer, in terms of efforts and responsibilities are expected to go beyond what is contractually required of them.

As an approach to indirect organizational control paternalism is more encompassing than normative/disciplinary and neo-normative/

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