Fatien Pauline (Orcid ID: 0000-0001-7255-5361)
Islam Gazi (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-6503-6018)

Neutral In-tensions: Navigating Neutrality in Coaching

Pauline Fatien Diochon (Corresponding author)
Associate Professor
Grenoble Ecole de Management
12 Rue Pierre Sémard
38000 Grenoble
France
Pauline.fatien@grenoble-em.com

Dima Louis
Associate Professor
Grenoble Ecole de Management
12 Rue Pierre Sémard
38000 Grenoble
France
Dima.louis@grenoble-em.com

Gazi Islam
Professor
Grenoble Ecole de Management and IREGE
12 Rue Pierre Sémard
38000 Grenoble
France
Gazi.islam@grenoble-em.com

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Abstract

Neutrality in coaching, as an often-mentioned yet undertheorized norm of practice, is illustrative of how a lack of conceptualization leaves professionals with eclectic and contradictory tools and techniques. Therefore, the current study examines coaches' attempts to practice neutrality, with diverse implications for their conceptions of professional practice. Through a qualitative study of 57 executive coaches using a critical incident technique, we identify situations of conceptual and practical complexity. The ongoing practice of enacting neutrality gave rise to diverse tensions, to which coaches responded by formulating individualization and socialization strategies that had different consequences in terms of forms of awareness. Considering neutrality in terms of situated, engaged, and processual practice, we use these findings to theorize its enactment within the interest-laden world of organizations. Our study contributes to the theory and practice of coaching while also furthering understanding of the dynamic nature of seeking neutrality in professional contexts.

I was completely caught up in the neutrality principle.

So, I was hesitant about how I could allow myself to share my hypothesis about what was going on; I mean, who am I to go barking up a totally different tree than the one [my client] is pointing to...

Today, I think I would have had fewer reservations, I would easily put my foot in it, but with the needed tact.

Flora, coach #6

As part of a broader movement around external third parties providing guidance to managers and organizations, coaching involves short-to-medium term structured and focused interactions aimed at informing practice (Bachkirova et al., 2014; Garvey, 2011). Through developmental conversations facilitated by strategies, tools and techniques to foster a collaborative and facilitative role (Graßmann et al., 2020), coaches are expected to support coachees' self-directed goals without giving advice (Joullié et al., 2021). Typical coaching interventions target the development of personal related skills (such as better stress management), behavioral skills in relation to others (such as improved leadership skills) or work-related skills (such as increased performance) (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018).

Despite an emergent literature around its organizational and managerial processes and implications (e.g. Louis and Fatien, 2018; Graßmann et al., 2020; Shoukry and Cox, 2018), coaching has been portrayed as a practice running ahead of its supporting theories (Boyatzis et al., 2022; Cox et al., 2014), "an industry without a discipline" (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019, p. 337). This theoretical paucity leaves practitioners with an assortment of eclectic concepts and tools, with the risk of inconsistencies, incoherence or even harm when putting their ideas into practice within complex organizational contexts (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2020; Cox et al., 2014).

Emblematic of coaching's under-theorization and versatility in practice is the place of neutrality. As a working definition, neutrality in coaching designates the ability to provide objective, value-free support as an expert third-party while avoiding biases, personal interest or involvement. However, as Flora's quote above suggests, how and whether to practice neutrality in coaching is not set in stone. By some, neutrality has been assigned an "attribute of an exemplary coach" (James-Ward, 2013, p. 22), making coaching the "Switzerland of the helping profession" (Einzig, 2017, p. 43). Nevertheless, others, such as Hurlow (2022), view such neutrality as "purposed", "seeming", and "a façade", exemplifying the tendency of coaching practices to "frequently lack clear warrants for the claims they make" (p.121); and for some others, neutrality can even prove unethical when inappropriate in some intercultural or politically loaded contexts (Shoukry and Cox, 2018).

While we remain agnostic about the desirability of neutrality in coaching practice, using coaches' neutrality as an object of study rather than explicitly ethical, desirable or impossible, there are reasons to believe that putting neutrality concepts into coaching practice runs up against myriad challenges. For instance, as Smith (2015) notes, neutrality is often assumed as a consequence of coaches' external position to organizations, equated with professional disinterestedness. Yet this very exteriority may support coaches' instrumentalization for managerial ends (Schulz, 2018), serving political causes of which they are unaware from the outset (Shoukry, 2017). Moreover, to the extent that neutrality rests on what Bachkirova (2017) describes as the "modernist" aspect of coaching philosophy, it may clash with contemporary challenges to organizations to take on more activist and socially-embedded responsibilities (Boyatzis et al., 2022; Western, 2012).

Such examples suggest that conceptual treatments are likely to run into practical conundrums as attempts to enact neutrality raise questions that can only be addressed by examining coaches' situated, practical strategies. Indeed, the lack of theorization in coaching

also suggests that the conceptual possibilities of coaching lie embedded in the everyday attempts of coaches to work out the complexities of practice, and thus a practice-based approach is the appropriate one for such contexts. As noted by Ayache and Dumez (2021), for instance, coaching presents a "practice without theoretical foundation" (p. 46), or alternatively "theoryless by excess of theory" (p.47), given the plurality and potential cacophony of implicit approaches by coaches on the ground. This plurality, even as it renders a single conception difficult, provides a richness of possibilities for inductive approaches examining coaching "as practice". The plurality of coaching practice, an obstacle to a priori theorization, becomes a virtue once the approach is flipped to privilege the situated judgments of practitioners as source of theorization. Moreover, such struggles over neutrality in practice are emblematic of, but not exclusive to, coaching; that is, they may inform questions of professional neutrality (cf., Grey, 1996; Hodgson, 2002) in more far-reaching ways.

In short, rather than either assuming or critiquing the possibility and desirability of neutrality, empirical research can illuminate the processes by which neutrality is negotiated in coaching situations. In this way, examining how neutrality is enacted in practice by coaches can provide a valuable case of how professionals, confronted with the contradictions of practice, make situated judgments in which abstract ideals are of limited use in explaining complex organizational realities. Against this broader background of understanding professional practice, our specific goal of examining coaches' neutrality-oriented practices can be stated as the question: *How do coaches implement neutrality, and with what implications for their conceptions of professional practice?*

To address our research question, we conducted a qualitative study of executive coaches using a critical incidents technique (Flanagan, 1954). Focusing on complex coaching situations, we explored how coaches implemented neutrality when confronting these situations. Based on our results, we theorize a process by which multiple tensions arising in neutrality practices are

met with divergent framings by coaches, where these framings shape how neutrality is reconfigured in terms of values, power-relations and self-awareness. Considering neutrality as a situated, engaged practice rather than an a priori theoretical position led us to examine coaches' active engagement with neutrality concepts, mobilizing their critical and reflexive capacities.

Our study makes two broad contributions, the first, a specific theorization of neutrality-based practice, and the second, a broader paradigmatic approach by which we propose to study coaching as a practice. The first contribution involves specifying core tensions at the heart of neutrality practices, a division into socialization versus individualization practice, and the implications for neutrality awareness. The second contribution lies in our illustration of a practice-based approach to coaching which can be applied beyond neutrality to inform diverse coaching-related topics.

Below, we begin by examining conceptions of coaching as a site of implicit norms of practice, discussing neutrality as emblematic of such norms within coaching and beyond. We then draw on existing academic problematizations of neutrality to bridge to the question of how practitioners negotiate the complex issues around neutrality in practice. Outlining our empirical methods, we then present our findings around the neutrality-based tensions coaches reported and how they responded to these tensions, after which we theorize neutrality-in-practice as the result of active work within a complex political and professional environment. Finally, we discuss the implications of our study for understanding coaching practice, extending this contribution to a broader consideration of professional practices in contemporary organizations.

COACHING NEUTRALITY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The eclectic and varied nature of coaching, as well as its general undertheorization (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2018; Boyatzis et al., 2022), suggest that a priori concepts around coaching, such as neutrality, may imperfectly capture what coaches actually do in their

everyday work. By discussing coaching in terms of practices, we refer to everyday habits, routines, and actions (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008) through which coaching is done. These include tools and processes that are part of the everyday lexicon and activity of coaching, such as chemistry and three-way meetings; commercial as well as learning contracts; the use of psychometric tests, etc. Competent coaches are supposed to be able to mobilize these various practices effectively in their interventions. In this literature review section, we first outline theoretical issues in coaching neutrality, and then explore empirical complexities of neutrality.

Theoretical issues in coaching neutrality

With over 71,000 practitioners worldwide, coaching is a fast-developing industry (International Coach Federation, 2020), whose growth is primarily market-led (rather than theory-driven; Jackson, 2004). This has been presented as a problem since coaching's theoretical basis continues to lag behind the rapidly diffusing and institutionalizing practice (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). Scholarship has critiqued the application of coaching models and practices without a serious understanding of their underlying theories (Bachkirova, 2017; Hurlow, 2022). For instance, several models are reported opinion-based marketing devices developed by practitioners to promote their own approaches with poor empirical evidence or conceptual justifications (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019; Jackson, 2004). The lack of theoretical elaboration in coaching has led educators and researchers (Bachkirova et al., 2017; Boyatzis et al., 2022) to advocate strengthening coaching's intellectual foundations, encouraging "honest and courageous critique" for the "field and the practice of coaching [to] truly develop and overcome the distractions or seduction of fads and current political or value-based dictates" (Boyatzis et al., 2022). Authors worry that otherwise, coaches may apply tools atheoretically and engage in "cherry picking as coaching tools and techniques proliferate" (Hurlow, 2022, p. 121). As captured by Bachkirova and Borrington (2020), some of coaching's

"beautiful ideas (…) can make us ill", meaning that concepts that are applied unthinkingly and inappropriately can be a "source of harm" (p. 17).

Neutrality is emblematic of the theoretical difficulties of coaching, as an often emphasized but rarely elaborated norm. It is most explicitly discussed by critical scholars highlighting its limitations (Hurlow, 2022; Shoukry, 2017), but tends to be more implicit or vague when authors outline its benefits (e.g., James-Ward, 2012). For instance, neutrality is evoked in empirical research around positive coaching attributes (James-Ward, 2012) and helpful behaviors (Smith, 2015). However, we lack theorization around the practices of neutrality or the conditions of its implementation and feasibility, and do not know how it is achieved. As a result, neutrality may be assumed unproblematic by coaches. As noted above, we do not deny the neutrality assumption outright, but do argue that the lack of conceptual elaboration of neutrality in coaching raises concerns.

For instance, coaching's provenance from other helping disciplines such as psychology (Wildflower, 2013) may imply assumptions about the nature and context of helping relationships, as well as the importation of concepts and tools that are inappropriate to the organizational contexts of coaching (Cox et al., 2014). For instance, neutrality, derived from humanistic psychological traditions, is often used to advocate for a facilitative style based on non-judgment, non-interference, and absence of a priori objectives for the client. This non-directive approach and the reticence to challenge client agendas reflects psychotherapy's legacy within coaching (Blakey and Day, 2009; Salman, 2019; 2021). But Schulz (2018, p.59) explains how, "in the course of being translated into management, [coaching] practices were also detached from the original psychotherapeutic discourse of sickness and cure" and were subsequently used in performance-oriented context that sat awkwardly with respect to the original practices. Over-relying on certain premises of psychology and therapy, the coaching

literature failed to address certain concepts such as neutrality within the specific contexts of organizational coaching.

Further, default assumptions of neutrality in coaching have been described as problematic in recent literature. Indeed, several authors explain how neutrality pervades certain learning approaches in coaching (behaviorism and cognitive constructivism [Hurlow, 2022]); pedagogies of change (the training tradition [Shoukry, 2017]); worldviews (value-neutral instrumentalism [Bachkirova et al., 2017]); and discourses (Psy-expert and Managerialist [Western, 2012]). Each author critiques this natural, default position, describing assumptions of neutrality as reducing the scope of available practices and suggesting alternative approaches that de-emphasize neutrality. Reflecting a broader movement of the field, Bachkirova et al. (2017) attribute the narrowing of scope in coaching to a lack of conceptual development, with an underestimation of "the value of conceptual understanding and the integration of that knowledge into practice" (p.33). In this way, the taken-for-grantedness of neutrality is symptomatic of partiality in theory and a lack of theoretical robustness.

The lack of theorization of neutrality in coaching creates difficulties in understanding how coaches think about or enact neutrality in practice. Given the under-theorization of neutrality in coaching contexts, we found it useful to turn to social-theoretical conceptions of neutrality, specifically, Barthes' (2002) conception of neutrality as embedded within a field of tensions. Barthes argues that the neutral is inherently tension-fraught, because it involves a desire for a disinterestedness that escapes the partial and engaged world of action. In this view, the desire for neutrality may reflect a norm that is unreachable in practice, expressing a tension between the activity of the desire, and the passivity of suspension. Practicing neutrality thus involves enacting a suspension of action, which seems like a contradiction in terms. In fact, Barthes reflects on how actors fall victim to reducing neutrality to an "inactive" activity of silence, retreat, oscillation, which for him leads to a dead-end where one disavows ongoing

conflict. The neutral, as the idealization of the non-conflictual, escapes the production of meaning, of one's responsibility and of one's ethics. Barthes substitutes to this pale and flat version of neutrality a committed and dynamic version (Badmington, 2020), which consists in a fragmented, discontinuous, unexpected and oscillating engagement (Zhuo, 2020). On this basis, it would be possible to practice neutrality, although never in a complete or seamless way, as the tensions between suspension and action would remain ubiquitous.

Inspired by Barthes' (2002) problematization of neutrality, we reflected on how the imperative for action and impact in coaching relates to the norm of distance implied by neutrality. In this sense, our research question around implementation is not only an empirical question around describing coaches' behavior; beyond that, it expresses a theoretical aporia around the possibility of acting neutrally. Translating this theorization into our current problematic led us to consider how the desire of neutrality impels actors to confront the complexities of multiple organizational forces and interests, raising the question of how in practice these are negotiated.

The complexities of practicing neutrality

Given the frequency of assumptions of neutrality in some coaching practices, what aspects of organizational contexts would lead some authors to view these assumptions as problematic in practice? The example of externality is illustrative. Neutrality has often been attributed to coaches based on their external position (Smith, 2015; Wilson, 2011), associated with impartiality and credibility (Smith, 2015) as well as objectivity (Alvey and Barclay, 2007). Clients have described external coaches as "help[ing] the executive to process feedback objectively and neutrally" (Alvey and Barclay, 2007, p. 33). However, the resulting belief in the independence of coaches, deriving from externality, has been problematized by scholarship focusing on the power dynamics inherent in coaching (Du Toit and Sim, 2010; Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2018; Shoukry, 2016). Such studies call into doubt the possibility of evading power

in coaching relationships. Coaches might rather be instrumentalized and serve causes they are unaware of; for instance, they may consciously or unconsciously deliver difficult messages on behalf of organizational members or report certain behaviors (Lai and Smith, 2021; Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2014). They can also be a vehicle that perpetrates gendered (Knoppers, 2012; Theberge, 1990) or racialized dominance (Roche, 2022) under the veil of neutrality. For instance, Roche and Passmore (Roche & Passmore, 2021, p. 12) depict coaching and coach training as "white spaces" where "the assumed neutrality is explicitly connected to colour-blindness" (p.12).

In brief, in certain contexts, practitioners run the risk of "acting politically, even without being fully aware of it" (Shoukry, 2017, p. 185). Therefore, coaches' external position does not guarantee neutrality, and attributing neutrality in such a way may obscure the political and power implications of coaching practice and its organizational contexts.

Another illustration involves the facilitation role, associated with neutrality to the extent that coaches are "sounding boards" (Du Toit, 2007, p. 283) or "mirror[s] of the Soul" (Western, 2012). Coaches are advised to withdraw from advice-giving. Du Toit (2007, p. 283) notes that "unlike other methods of intervention, coaching resists the temptation to tell people what to do". This resistance, akin to Barthes' (2002) suspension, leads coaches to practice self-transcending language that emphasizes their coachees' competence, autonomy and willpower (Joullié et al., 2021), and devoutly avoids excessive reliance on the coach. Yet, such positioning sits awkwardly with the parallel norm of expert council of some approaches, in which the coach acting as a sense-making device helps "the client achieve more accurate interpretations of their experiences to enhance performance" (Hurlow, 2022, p.123). Both reflective mirrors and authoritative experts, neutrality norms seem to make contradictory demands, leading one to wonder how in fact coaches would attempt this in practice.

As a final illustration, practicing neutrality seems to clash with Einzig's (2017, p. i) call for the "role of the coach today [to] evolve to become fit for purpose in challenging times". Coaches are turning to questions of social responsibility and "grand challenges" (Boyatzis et al., 2022) that may render neutrality norms outdated. Blakey and Day (2009), in their book "Where were all the coaches when the banks went down?", challenged "vanilla plain" (p.35) coaches to re-examine the non-directivity that may promote moral blindness and lack of engaged action. Boyatzis et al. (2022) note calls for coaches to address "the meta and hard-to-understand issues" surpassing mere performance-related facilitation and suggest that the "coach might go beyond what the client raises to include exploration about 'bigger picture' issues facing our society and planet" (p. 4). Each of the above descriptions of the context of coaching shakes what some call coaching's "absolute commitment to neutrality" (Gannon, 2021) or "tenets of neutrality" (Einzig, 2017, p. i). Gannon (2021) identifies a "social turn" (p.6) in coaching, evidencing recent calls and shifts in practices "to remedy the excesses of corporate behaviours, tackle social inequalities and disadvantage, address climate change and support empowerment in adverse political regimes" (p. 5). It is notable that the most recent global code of ethics in coaching cites coaches' responsibility regarding the "wider society, or the natural environment" (GCoE, 2021, p. 4), and encourages members to ensure that their clients do not "harm those [interests] of sponsors, stakeholders, wider society, or the natural environment" (p. 4). In the light of such developments, coaches weigh the expectations of neutrality against its increased problematization, begging the question of how they implement neutrality in practice.

METHOD

Our study adopted a qualitative research design, grounded in an interpretive and constructivist philosophical position that focuses on how organizing is achieved in situated practice (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008). In our case, we were interested in how coaches understood their work and engaged in practice, not to discover universal laws but rather to

understand a particular situation and on that basis develop emerging theory, while considering context as essential to interpreting the data (Willis, 2007).

Specifically, we began with a broader interest in understanding coaches' experience and action within complex organizational settings, with the intent of inductively working back from these experiences to build theory, rather than theorizing coaching according to a priori categories. Early in our analysis, as themes of neutrality began to frequently appear, we focused more specifically on the complexities of enacting neutrality, which ran through the interviews and seemed emblematic of broader practice-related theoretical questions. On this basis, we went back to the literature to retroactively rethink our conceptual problem and question, moving from the broader issue of coaching complexities to those revolving around neutrality specifically. In this sense, our early inductive focus gave way to an iterative, abductive process of moving between data and emerging concepts, drawing on extant literature as these concepts came into focus (cf., Saetre and Van de Ven, 2021).

Data collection method: Critical incident technique

As noted, our data collection was designed with broad focus on coaches' experiences of and practices within complex situations. We understood "complex" situations to refer to those "situations [that] may have made it difficult for [people] to act, to know what to do, or to determine how to resolve the situation." (Chell, 2004, p. 48). By asking respondents to describe such situations, we sought to discover moments of conceptual and practical difficulty that were salient to them and trace their responses to such situations.

On this basis, we used the critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) to interview coaches about their personal experiences of complex challenges. CIT is designed to collect real-life activities and behaviors perceived as particularly central for a given activity; in this sense, it is an interview-based method with a focus on describing practices (Flanagan, 1954), making it appropriate for our practice-focused research question. CIT has become an

established technique with a proven record as an investigative tool in a wide range of academic settings (Chell, 2004). In the current study, the objective of CIT was to understand individual cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of practice. We invited the interviewees to think of an incident in their coaching practice when they were faced with a complex challenge. Interviewees were asked about the nature of the challenge and their thoughts and feelings at the time, which led to subsequent follow-up questions.

Interviewee characteristics

We used a judgment sampling method where we sought participants with particular characteristics (Morse, 2003), as external executive coaches engaging in triangular contracts. In other words, the coaches needed to have been hired and paid by the organization to coach an executive within the organization. Second, interviewees had to be certified by a professional coaching body to ensure a minimum level of coach education and exposure to professional and ethical codes of conduct. Our sample was comprised of 57 executive coaches exercising in the US (12), the UK (8), and France (37), who responded to a call sent across professional coaching bodies and through the professional networks of the researchers. For the current analysis, we felt justified in working across these national contexts because of the prevalence of professional norms regulated at the global level (ICF, 2021). Nevertheless, we acknowledge the subsequent need to examine differences across regions, as has been noted by some scholars (Shoukry, 2016). Table I describes the sample characteristics, including gender (36 female and 21 male), geographical location, coaching approach, and years of coaching experience. A sample list of incidents can be found in Table II. Two of the researchers conducted the interviews via Skype in the language of the participants, English or French depending on the country of the coach. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

Data analysis

Our data analytic approach involved an iterative process of coding and theorizing by which we converged on a set of thematic concepts for subsequent theorization (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the process, authors discussed ambiguities that surfaced, and while we tried to reach consensus, we acknowledge that interpretive ambiguity characterizes qualitative coding and allow for some openness of interpretation.

We began with a round of "open coding" (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), during which we read, discussed, and re-read the interview transcripts. From this early analysis, we moved from the broader issue of complexities of practices to the more specific question of complexities trying to be neutral in a complex environment. This led us to discuss and research neutrality in coaching, sharpening and reformulating our research question around neutrality-based practices. On the basis of this research question, we examined the moments in which coaches discussed neutrality, identifying how they spoke about it and the complexities identified. Here, we looked specifically into moments when coaches referred, either explicitly or implicitly, to neutrality to either frame the complex issue and/or discuss how to solve issues. Explicit reference involves the use of the words "neutral" or "neutrality". Implicit referred to position and attitudes depicting neutrality as described in literature (e.g., suspension or distance, in line with our theory section). This led us to organize our coding around the tensions arising between the ideal facets of neutrality and the associated risks. Three broad sources of tensions emerged, involving the value bases of neutrality (in which suspending judgment stood in tension with the affirmation of values with the risk of compromising one's values), the relational bases of neutrality (in which balancing the relationship stood in tension with the risk of distorting the relationship) and the emotional bases of neutrality (in which the norm of detachment stood in

tension with the demand for emotional sensitivity with the risk of reification of the coach's emotions).

Given this emergent focus on tensions, we turned our analysis to the reactions of the coaches to these perceived tensions around neutrality and how they managed them (cf. Islam and Sferazzo, 2021). On this basis, we identified two overarching strategies. In the first, an individualizing strategy, the tension was understood as reflecting an internal struggle of the coach to meet expectations and find a way to solve the tension through personal competence. Alternatively, a socializing strategy understood the tension to exist as a feature of the environment, requiring circulation within the stakeholders.

Based on these divergent strategies, we examined how the coaches' different reactions shaped understandings of neutrality. Both individualizing and socializing strategies shared a focus on values, stressing value-awareness specifically as a key to navigating the tensions of neutrality. However, individualizing strategies also focused on self-awareness as a vehicle by which this navigation was made possible, while socializing strategies focused on awareness of power relations and a more "politicized" view of the organization. Our findings are detailed in the next section and sample quotes related to the emerging categories are found in Table III below.

INSERT TABLE III ABOUT HERE

FINDINGS

The tensions of practicing neutrality

As noted above, coaches' neutrality-related practices were characterized according to three broad tensions, corresponding to value, relational and emotional levels. Each tension involved a clash between neutrality-related norms and the attempted realization of neutrality in practice, giving rise to divergent reconsiderations of practice. We present these schematically in Figure 1 below.

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Value level: Suspension of judgment leading to value compromising. Neutrality, expressed as a matter of values, involved distancing from personal judgment on the part of the coach. Yet, when coaches described their attempts to put non-judgmentalism into practice, they worried about having their values compromised by connection with non-desired aspects of their context. We elaborate on this tension below.

Suspension of Judgment. Neutrality was described by coaches as requiring some form of suspension of judgment. Respondents described themselves as a kind of neutral instrument to offer guidance regardless of objectives, the specific context, situation or client. As Lisa (#43) put it, "I am simply there as a tool to help them (…). It could be a tool in the garage, or it could be a tool in the kitchen… I am that tool. You can misuse me…" Lisa's description highlights the non-personal aspect of value neutrality, related to her distancing from subjective intent and her instrumental use by others. By choosing to suspend her judgement, Lisa's response could also be interpreted as a way of differing the responsibility to the use of the tool. Tom (#21) reiterated this sentiment by explaining that coaches are engaged "on means, not results", with the idea that the final ends of actions were determined by others.

The valuing of suspension of judgment led Laetitia (#30) to coach a socialist mayor of a large French city despite her own leanings towards conservatism; Jacky (#20), a strong pro-life catholic, worked with an atheist client who wished to abort after discovering her unexpected pregnancy. Ryan (#24) went so far as to describe how he accepted to intervene in an organization whose culture "makes him sick". Adam (#47) further explained this position by saying

> *"If I started judging companies, well maybe I should not work with Coke companies, or junk food companies or pharmaceutical companies or petroleum companies, or banks... So, who do I work with if I judge people before I work? Am I so clean that I only work with perfect people?"*

Relatedly, our informants explained that not only should coaches remain silent about the content and formulation of coaching objectives, they should also have no specific personal objective for their client. As Caroline (#15) explained, coaches "have nothing to want from nor to know for their client". She went as far as to express shame when, in a specific situation, she had expressed "an objective for her client (…) for him to succeed". Caroline lamented she had stepped away from coaching's neutrality principle by adopting a directive approach to fix what she framed as Matt's "dysfunctional" behavior, and openly acknowledged coaching's norm of suspension ("a coach…must not have any plans").

Value compromising. While expressing value neutrality as important to their coaching practice, the coaches also noted how suspending judgment exposed them to risks, what we term "value compromising": coaches might end up serving a cause that they disagree with, which goes against their values to the point that they might "lose their soul" (Flora, #6) or "be riding an unbalanced bike (…) when wheels are not aligned" (Joanna, #44). Lisa's above quote about being "misused" reveals the sense of being compromised and powerless due to a suspension of one's own view.

Jose (#14) identified himself as a pacifist and described his dilemma when offered a coaching contract in the military industry. While very attractive from a financial standpoint, this intervention deeply conflicted with his personal values. He expressed a fear of value compromise:

> "*Based on the fact of projecting oneself into the future with the apprehension of one day being called a 'traitor'. In other words, to have collaborated with the enemy...to betray my values, the people I am attached to and who are attached to me*".

In his hesitation to be a "traitor", Jose struggled between the demand for neutrality and his own value orientation towards taking an ethical stance against certain industries.

Relatedly, while the coaches stressed value neutrality, they often also rejected the ultra-emphasis on job performance that was perceived as harming coachees' wellbeing. Ryan (#24),

for instance, wondered what might happen "if, as a coach, I give the keys to the coachee to be further pressurized [by the organization's power]. I do not want to be responsible for a nervous breakdown." When asked if coaches contribute to help coachees endure "inhumane" organizational cultures, Ryan described how he witnessed companies treating valuable employees ("rare gems") in a very derogatory way, and he wondered how much he should compromise his values for "people who just want to do business".

In sum, while the coaches stressed the need for value neutrality, non-judgmentalism and keeping a distance from substantive value considerations, they also worried that the instrumental orientation thereby enabled could lead to being compromised.

Relational level: Relational balance at the risk of relational distortion. A second tension, at the *relational level,* involved coaches' multiple relationships. On one hand, the coaches expressed a vision of neutrality by insisting on balanced relationships and taking different needs into account. On the other hand, organizational realities of asymmetrical power dynamics challenged coaches' attempts to practice relational neutrality, leading to potential relational distortion, with manipulations of the coach by the organization or the coachee, as well as a manipulation of the coachee by the coach, as we elaborate below.

Relational balance. A key pillar of neutrality expressed by coaches was the view that coaching takes place within a web of relationships governed by a pre-defined process and key principles. The coaching process often established norms around the rhythm of coaching, how meetings with stakeholders should take place, and other relational aspects. Coaches referred to such norms to justify interrupting an intervention when "the request steps outside of the initially defined framework" (Mila, #16).

The principle of relational neutrality involved not "taking sides" while respecting the three-party contract between key stakeholders. This form of neutrality was well illustrated by Diego (#17), who was commissioned to coach Phil, a member of the board of directors of a

major bank subsidiary. Diego faced a challenge when Phil, after having acquired his new position, did not want to put his new boss "in the coaching loop" by informing him that he was being coached. Diego was concerned by this exclusion and felt the need to ensure "an equilibrium within the system, and not take any specific side; the tripartite dimension needs to be respected". While, in Diego's case, the manager was at risk of exclusion, in Monique's case, it was the coachee. She reported that, one day, contrary to usual practice, Monique (#29) met her coachee's manager and HR manager before encountering the coachee. This order of meeting gave her "discomfort not to arrive totally neutral in front of her coachee; both the HR manager and the manager were very biased towards the coachee, with heavy information shared."

These examples make clear that for the coaches, the neutrality ideal involved balancing across actors, including those in the coachee's organization, to avoid becoming an open advocate or ally of one party over another. This ideal gave rise to tensions when it came up against the realities of organizational power dynamics involving coachees.

Relational distortion. Our interviewees noted that relational neutrality carried a danger of manipulation that was inherent in the coaching relationship. Manipulation could originate from the organization, the coachee or coaches themselves. Regarding the organization, coaches worried about the risk of coercion, as expressed by Samantha (#36):

"HR came to me and instructed me to send them a written memo on the coachee and his professional skills (...). They threatened me and said, 'you comply or you no longer do the coaching, and we won't pay you for the first sessions you have done'.(...) I was so angry that the HR manager wanted to associate coaching with pure manipulation, while coaching is not manipulation!"

In the same vein, coaches feared that the coaching process might be "instrumentalized" (Tom, #21) by the organization to coerce them into playing a role they might disapprove of, or to be a "loudspeaker" (Lucy, #23) to voice what managers did not have the courage to express to the coachee. Samantha (#36) complained that "HR really counted on her to do what they

failed in doing", giving the sense that the coach was surreptitiously acting on behalf of the HR to shape the subjectivity of the coachee.

Manipulation also could arise from coachees' privileged relationships with coaches. Beth (#9), for instance, signed a contract for a team coaching in a company where Melissa – her neighbor- worked. Subsequently, Melissa began asking her for individual coaching sessions, running contrary to her commitment to the team coaching and seeming like a conflict of interest. Feeling both grateful to Melissa but wary of compromising her neutrality, Beth expressed that, "I found a bit caught in a trap. Because it was the person who had brought me the contract and I felt a little indebted. So I had a hard time confronting her about her request". Finally, the coaches described being wary of their own potential for manipulating others, a breach of neutrality framed in terms of abusing their power. As Sandro (#27) explained:

"The limit between the power of coaching and omnipotence is fragile, and the coach can easily, without realizing it, move from the power of coaching to omnipotence, which is an abuse of power."

Tom (#21) described this kind of power abuse as "becoming a guru" and attributed it to coaches' failure to "make their clients independent from them".

In sum, the coaches emphasized neutrality in relationships, yet enumerated situations of relational distortion, with manipulation performed by the organization, coachee or coaches themselves, forcing choices or allegiances that were both unavoidable and inconsistent with neutrality.

Emotional level: Emotional detachment at the risk of reification. At the emotional level, neutrality implied an emotional orientation toward detachment, along with separating the coach's emotions from those of the client. Emotional neutrality was seen as part of the process of promoting the coachee's autonomous development and avoiding a controlling posture by the coach. However, assuming a posture of emotional neutrality risked foreclosing on relational dynamics that formed part of the self-developmental process, involving emotional connection

and interpersonal regard. This foreclosing could result in a view of the coachee as an "object" of action rather than as a fellow human with whom social bonds could be built, a process we termed "reification".

Emotional detachment. The impetus for emotional detachment described by coaches began with concerns around controlling their own emotions. They highlighted issues involving when one should share one's emotions, or even what would be the appropriate emotions to feel vis-à-vis the coachee. Sandro (#27) wondered whether and how he should share his lack of emotional connection with his client, whether the emotional honesty implicated in sharing would be undermined by the fact that he did not feel emotionally sympathetic toward the client. This negotiation between one's "inner" feelings and the social information reflected in those feelings was illustrated by Jacky (#20), who described her attempts to be mindful to differentiate what "belongs" to her, to her own difficulty of dealing with violence and injustice, and what relates specifically to the client. As she explained:

> *"Given my Jewish origins, I have an inherent interest for the law, the framework (...)
> And here seeing how the team was stepping outside of the framework… When I witness
> such direct violence, I cannot stay inactive."*

Jacky observed that her own reaction could have been shaped by her past experience (in this case, her Jewish origins), and she struggled to distinguish between what could be "authentically" attributed to the client and what was "her own challenges".

While emotional detachment involved positioning vis-à-vis the coaches' own emotions and their coachee, it also concerned emotional distance towards the issue at hand. Because for coaches neutrality implied not having a "personal" stake in the issues managed by the coach, it required avoiding or at least not acting upon emotions directly related to the issue. Caroline (#15) lamented not having been able to assume a posture of emotional neutrality in her work, regretting that she "got caught in the messy situation, in the complexity and difficulty of the situation." Unable to take the necessary emotional distance, she explained how she became

emotionally caught up in the client's affairs. "This is never good", she added, as "coaches' presence is all the stronger as they disappear."

Risk of reification. While coaches tried to demonstrate emotional detachment, they also faced problems stemming from the difficulties and the risk of over-distancing emotionally. Several coaches questioned whether a relationship can really be fully detached. Many informants explained the success of coaching as laying in the social bond created through the coaching relationship, as Sandro (#27) put it, "the ability of people to meet (…) and that they are going to enjoy meeting someone". Shutting down the possibility of emotional connection compromised the *raison d'être* of coaching, that is, the ability to develop through one's relation to a supportive other.

We term "reification" the emotional distancing that compromises the social bond underlying the coaching relationship. This term was used originally to describe the objectification of social relationships into opaque or non-personal forms such as the commodity (cf., Lukacs, 1971). In the current context, the demand to keep social relations emotionally distant while simultaneously insisting on a developmental relationship to promote success and performance, reproduces the tensions inherent in the reification of social relations by treating the relationship as an object to be deployed instrumentally.

In practice, the difficulty of maintaining a social relationship in such an objectified way took multiple forms. Several factors were cited as undermining the possibility of detachment by coaches. For instance, coaches' empathy with clients, arising from their experience with similar situations, led to emotional connection. Jacky (#20) explained how she "committed a mistake and dragged [the coachee] into her own issues." Moreover, some coaches described being emotionally moved by the suffering of the client. For instance, Alex (#2), who explained that:

> *"The suffering was obvious (…). The manager broke down in tears in his office when I met him on an individual basis. And then, once I started my debriefing with the team, he broke*

down again. Several people started to break down(...), it was really obvious that there was pain."

Some described that they could not "abandon their client" (Tom, #21) with so much suffering, because of an inherent "savior side" (Amy, #32), a tendency to "save the widow and orphan" (Bob, #5), in Bob's words, meaning those in distress.

In sum, across value, relational and emotional levels, the coaches in our study reported tensions arising from their attempts to practice neutrality in situations where it seemed contradictory, complex or impossible. Their reactions to such tensions in terms of attributions and interpretations varied, however, in two broadly divergent ways, which we elaborate below.

Individualization and socialization of coaching tensions

Given the proliferation of diverse tensions within coaching practice, the coaches attempted to interpret these tensions so as to make sense of their own practices within the organizational context. Examining these interpretations and their associated ways of thinking about this broader context, we grouped coaches' responses into two broad strategies. The first, which we termed *individualization*, involved framing tensions in terms of their own personal feelings and competencies, psychologizing them as markers of internal struggles. The second, which we termed *socialization*, involved framing tensions as reflecting structural or systemic aspects of the wider environment. Individualization and socialization had broader implications for how neutrality norms were experienced and whether they were revised in the face of tensions. We describe each of these facets below.

Individualization of neutrality-related tensions. Faced with neutrality-related tensions, a first set of reactions involved the *individualization* of neutrality challenges. Individualization refers to locating the source of the challenge within themselves as an issue of competence or conduct, which we summarize as "The problem is mine, I am the problem." Individualization was often associated with self-blaming on the part of coaches, who took the tensions as a mark of personal

weakness. As Patricia (#8) describes her difficulties in achieving neutrality, she calls herself "a zero". Similarly, Jacky's (#20) first reaction was "guilt":

"Instead of telling myself, 'well this is interesting, what appears in this organization', right away, not knowing what to do at that time when I was young and inexperienced, I did not feel good at all. I felt guilty for having made it possible for this to happen."

The individualization of tensions was associated with judgments around *individual competencies*. Denise (#39) described how she could not equally engage the coachee and the organization in the process and as a result she "blamed" herself for failing to achieve such equality. Vincent (#25) explained that he felt "screwed" by a client who acted behind his back and how what he had done was "lame and shameful":

"I got screwed by this bitch, like a rookie. She maneuvered, behind my back. I thought to myself: 'Damn, you're a kid, you got screwed by this fat bitch!' I didn't see it coming."

The resentment and self-punishment in this quote illustrate how individualization was associated with coaches' strong sense of personal burden for the tensions described above. The aggressively gendered terms in which it is articulated reinforces how such individualization led the coach to overlook his own structural and social biases by focusing on his personal failures.

The reaction of individualization involved either maintaining the previous conception of neutrality or revising it to adapt to the perceived tension. Maintaining the dissonance created by the tension would result in frustrating or painful situations, as noted by Paul (#56) who noted that his "inner conflicts" put him in an inner state of "constant battle". Tom (#21) explained how he "felt entrapped by the relationship" and was "totally unable to put a stop to it", pointing to his "savior side that took place and explained they were stuck." At the extreme, it promoted self-effacement, as put by Jacky (#8) who wished she "could take the magic potion, fly away (…) and disappear".

Alternatively, several coaches endorsed personal responsibility for managing the challenges of neutrality, and the need to find solutions at the individual level by reconsidering

what neutrality meant in practice. Stressing local solutions to applied problems, they emphasized the personal nature of such practices rather than implications for the organization. Several coaches, for instance, focused on coachee requests and kept their own concerns about organizational dysfunction to themselves. Ryan (#24), for example, explained how he decided to focus on the client's needs and told her "Listen…inasmuch as the content of our sessions is confidential… Look, you just say that everything is going well… And then I get you to work on what you want to work on". Openly discounting the organization, Ryan disavowed the strategy of systemic change, focusing on a personal relation with the client as a terrain in which autonomy is possible.

Socialization of neutrality-related tensions. In contrast to individualization responses, the *socialization* of tensions involved emphasizing the organizational and systemic roots of tensions while making them visible and sharing them with others. Taking a socialization approach, the coaches treated tensions as autonomous objects of analysis, reflecting on them analytically as entities relevant to their work but not personal in nature. This position could be summarized as "The problem is the problem, I and the problem are separate entities".

A first form of socialization involved transforming challenges into *a third object* to make issues *visible*. Coaches used different expressions for this third object, such as "music" or "little box". For example, Flora (#6) described how she "came back to the facts. I just collected them; I reassembled them in a neutral way. I brought this 'little box' to the client and asked: 'How is it like to see these facts brought together?'" By conceiving of the tension as a "box", it became an object of analysis rather than a background of personal anxiety, allowing reflexive distance to be taken regarding the tension. Following a similar idea, Judy (#3) referred to asking the client to hear the "music in the process", instead of taking on her "Zorro cape" and trying to "save" her client.

In addition to objectifying tensions as a third object, coaches *created spaces to circulate* these tension-objects. This was described by Patricia (#8) who explained her role as "managing the different viewpoints to be expressed, creating a framework to allow the split to be contained, and people to stay connected despite their differences." The container metaphor was also noted by Judy, who described her work as:

"To create a container for the different viewpoints to be expressed, and to make sure that people stick together even if they have expressed different opinions.".

Noting oppositions over and above plurality, Stan (#41) encouraged coachees to "look at the other side of the coin", or as put by Mike (#52), "look at the physics of the situation". In sum, plurality, opposition and complexity are considered as parts of the external environment and managing these as part of the coaches' work.

Moreover, we considered socialization as reflected in the *systematization* of tensions, where experienced tensions were viewed as consequences of organizational and systemic processes. Adam (#47) explained that for him, coaching issues are never related to just one person. "An issue is a process and the process is between different people. Somebody who is alone cannot change everything because there is no organization around". As Josh (#49) also articulates it, "coaching should no longer be viewed as a one-by-one endeavor"; he compared coaching with therapy in terms of the need to examine the surrounding environment:

"It's like with children. If a child comes into a psychologist for help and the parents want the psychologist to fix the children, we often also have to look at the parents... Some organizations are ready for this, and some aren't."

A common practice among coaches, based on the socialization approach, was to confront those who requested coaching (typically the HR Manager), pointing out organizational dysfunctions that could be sources of the coachees' problems. Julie, for instance, explained how she ended up "voicing the issue" of the HR dysfunctions and how they "contribute to the problem by not trying harder to come up with solutions."

Paul-Roger (#12) described how he confronts organizational tensions when asking for the initial objectives of the contract to be redefined. He explained his belief that the HR diagnosis involved an incorrect level of analysis:

> *"The organization is sick but I am asked to heal the person… That's the system that we need to take care of. If the system does not move… nothing will."*

In sum, faced with tensions arising from their different neutrality positions, the coaches diverged how they internalized or externalized these tensions as part of their approach. Individualization led coaches to look at themselves, psychologizing the tensions and often taking responsibility for the irresolvability of tensions, while socialization involved objectifying tensions and focusing on organizational and systematic roots, often coupled with active communication strategies to HR or other organizational actors.

Revisiting neutrality in the face of tensions

In the face of neutrality tensions, individualization and socialization responses led coaches to revisit their neutrality-related practices. Rather than giving up on the idea of neutrality as impossible, the coaches focused on different aspects of the tensions; at times running across individualization and socialization strategies, and at times diverging, these revisited foci created different terrains for coaching concerns.

Value-aware Neutrality. First, independently of the approach vis-a-vis tensions, the existence of incompatible elements within the neutrality norm gave rise to a demand for judgment in the moment and a focus on value-consciousness. The heightened vigilance required in situations of tension implied a need to consciously engage in actions with ongoing awareness of the values guiding their action. Here, the ability to recognize guiding values protected against a potential blindness in action and incoherence in the face of competing aspects of neutrality. Sophia (#1), for instance, explained that:

> *"At a certain point, I, myself, decided, in good conscience, to continue without the direct manager, and even advised the coachee to protect her against her manager. Issues of*

physical and mental health were at stake, and from an ethical point of view, the coach could not discount them."

In related situations, some coaches (Chloe #19, Tom #21, Laetitia #30) had to make similar decisions when their values, in particular religious and political, were challenged and the norm of neutrality was too contradictory and multi-faceted to give specific guidance.

Self-aware neutrality. While the need for value-awareness was ubiquitous across coaches, those adopting individualization strategies tended to focus on emotional aspects of tensions, questioning their own motivations and emphasizing *self-awareness*. This meant that coaches reflected on the right distance to maintain between the coaching and their own egos. They emphasized the importance of being helpful to their clients, avoiding asking questions "just to please oneself" (Sandro, #27). They interrogated how much they did or should invest of themselves, their personal issues and their intimate problems while intervening in a coaching situation. Such concerns arose as coaches reflected on how much they should try to solve their own issues by attending to their clients' problems. For instance, Judy (#3) explained her need to "distinguish between what relates to her own story and issues, and what relates to the case". Through a self-effacing and clarifying reflection, she engaged in a form of neutrality that emphasized ego-awareness, trying to determine what was at stake for her, and how the coaching situation resonated with her own situation. In Patricia's (#8) case, she concluded that her anger towards her client, a powerful person seemingly unaware of their own power, triggered "her own anger, in regards to her personal story", about irresponsible authority figures. Rather than interpreting her reaction as reflecting a wider political consciousness, she saw it as a source of bias that needed to be exercised to unbiasedly coach on the coachees' own terms.

Power-aware neutrality. By contrast, coaches who socialized their view of tensions tended to focus on the risk of obscuring power dynamics present in the wider environment and emphasized the need for *power-awareness*. Keeping in mind that they might be manipulated or instrumentalized by the organization, these coaches actively reflected on the roles they or the

process might be playing within organizational politics. Ryan (#24), for instance, explained that "he is aware that there is a risk that he might feed the system and contribute to its dysfunctions, so he must remain vigilant".

Others expressed this power-awareness by maneuvering towards more transparency in the system. This was instantiated by coaches clarifying initial coaching demands or other aspects of the intervention, when unsure that their client shared their level of information. For instance, Tom's (#21) client seemed to be unaware of the potential outcomes of a failed coaching process – being let go. Tom's concern for his coachee could not be abstracted from the underlying power dynamic in which the coachee's job security was on the line in the process. Tom struggled to abide by his original conception of process-based neutrality, requiring him to keep silent on this confidential information. Rather, by focusing on power-dynamics, he wanted to make sure that his coaching process would not be used to legitimize the firing of the employee. He therefore tried to ensure maximum transparency around the stakes of the coaching intervention, asking the manager to clarify what would happen if the coaching intervention did not succeed.

Coaches' power-awareness shaped their interactions with coachees, when they attempted to raise client awareness about power dynamics within the system. This is illustrated by Marie (#7), who shared her diagnosis with her client Julie, "that there were many games, perverted games, with many people speaking behind other people's backs." As a result, Marie worked with Julie on how Julie "could protect herself and take distance with the organization." Progressively, Julie realized that "it is also about playing a game" and "she learnt to "develop skills to get over complicated situations when things are always very political."

In sum, value-awareness, self-awareness and power-awareness resulted from the tensions arising in neutrality practice, refracted through the different approaches taken in response to these tensions. Below, we address these three levels of findings – tensions,

responses, revisions – to elaborate and theorize the dynamics of neutrality tensions in coaching situations.

DISCUSSION

Theorizing coaching neutrality through practice

The current study builds on the argument that the lack of explicit theorization in coaching confronts coaches with complexity in practice, due to the need to maneuver with eclectic and potentially contradictory tools and techniques. Neutrality, with its lack of theoretical grounding, is emblematic of this process of maneuvering. The above findings show how, in practice, coaches navigate tensions resulting from neutrality norms. Based on these, we formulated an emergent theorization of the process of navigating tensions of neutrality in coaching (see Figure 2 below).

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In this conception, the practice of neutrality reveals core tensions that lead to ongoing searches by coaches for ways to position their work in the face of these tensions, involving differentiated strategies. Individualizing strategies reflect internal responsibility while socializing strategies point to structural aspects. Individualizing strategies could lead to a loop of maintaining pre-conceived versions of neutrality and facing impasses or see coaches to revisit neutrality to highlight self-awareness and acknowledge one's inherently engaged position. In contrast, socializing strategies persistently challenged the possibility of neutrality as pre-elaborated, highlighting power-awareness and the politicized organization. What was common across the two was an orientation toward value-awareness, promoting transparency around the values governing any given choice; what differed was the level of political awareness, with some coaches leaning more towards self-awareness and others towards reflexivity about power issues. Overall, our study shows that coaches end up not bringing a priori concepts of neutrality to application mechanically; instead, they formulate provisional,

ad hoc practical solutions that involve reflexively engaging with neutrality. Rather than applying neutrality as a static element, coaches engage a dynamic form of neutrality.

Based on these findings, we develop below two main contributions. First, we produce an inductive theorization around neutrality. Second, we offer a more general theoretical and methodological innovation for coaching as practice, based on our approach and illustrated by the neutrality case. In brief, while contributing to the practices of neutrality in coaching, the current study also informs more broadly a practice-based view of both neutrality and coaching.

Theoretical contributions

Our first contribution consists in providing a theorization of neutrality-based practice, which we can call neutrality as practice, developed within coaching and that can be extended beyond.

We showed that confronted with several tensions, coaches weighed their neutrality ideals against various risks. Working through their situated dilemmas led coaches to choose specific pathways which implied differing aspects of self-awareness and political awareness. Coaches therefore engaged in an active confrontation of neutrality's tensions through an ongoing struggle, and waged this struggle along either more "psychological" or more "social" terrains, with diverse consequences. This committed version entails an active position where one builds alternative forms of reflexivity through practical strategies. Barthes' exhortation to substitute a passive conception of neutrality with an active one may be thus consistent with that taken by coaches themselves. Coaches did not fall into a dead-end of oscillations (Barthes, 2002), with "indifference, a blasé attitude that evokes a gray impression of inactivity" (Zhu, 2020, p. 88) by taking a passive approach to neutrality. Rather than a simple application of a professional ideal, neutrality in practice became a generator for diverse maneuvers with respect to a reality that did not easily yield to such application. Neutrality therefore exemplifies coaches' situated theorizing in and through practice.

These findings around neutrality in coaching, moreover, may hold broader lessons for neutrality practices across professional contexts. Neutrality norms cut across managerial and organizational functions and characterize many professions. Classical administrative theory emphasizes the neutrality of professional practice (cf., du Gay, ed. 2005) while critical organizational scholarship has long called into doubt the possibility of such neutrality (Grey, 1996). Critical scholarship has suggested that the impasses resulting from trying to implementing recalcitrant or contradictory norms (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Islam and Sferrazzo, 2021) generate varied practical pathways by professionals, with implications for how they carry out their organizational functions. Neutrality is exemplary of such a norm, although its enactment and practical negotiation have not received specific treatment in this literature. By highlighting neutrality as a site of tensions, and examining the grounded efforts of practitioners in their ongoing enactment of neutrality, our study informs the understanding of professional neutrality more broadly, and by extension, the processes by which professionals try to realize their normative expectations in practice

Beyond neutrality, our practice-based approach provides a further contribution that is particularly valuable for a practical field that has gotten ahead of its theoretical base (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). Coaching has drawn extensively on diverse theoretical traditions (Cox et al., 2014), particularly psychology, from which its conceptions of neutrality as objectivity have drawn. Nevertheless, coaches exercise their profession in complex positions marked by an entanglement of market, relational and scientific concepts (Jackson, 2004). As Cox et al. (2014) note, the "eclectic" conceptual bases of coaching create "uncertainty and an unnecessary mystique" (p.140), echoing Ayache and Dumez's (2021) point that an excess of diverse theories has created a cacophony in coaching practice. In such situations, scholars can sidestep the question of how theory is put into practice by focusing their attention *on* practice and drawing their theoretical insights from practice itself (Jarzabkowski and Whittington,

2008). Our application of this approach to coaching is novel and results from the fact that theoretical proliferation has not provided adequate conceptions of coaching. Rather, coaches' engagement with complex situations leads them to engage in their own situated theorizing through practical coping. Our tracing of such coach-led conceptions of neutrality provides a case in point of how the critical and reflexive capacities of coaches are of paramount importance (Bachkirova et al., 2017) and enacted through such practical struggles; the enduring ambition of coaching communities to make it knowledge based should not overshadow the centrality of the person of the coach (Bachkirova, 2016), which remains central in this relation-based activity, and calls for ongoing reflexive work.

A result of this novel approach promoting coaching as practice is to encourage closer attention to the relational and political aspects of coaching (e.g., Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2018), and to the tension-laden settings in which they operate (e.g., Shoukry and Cox, 2018). Critical coaching literature has focused on power and context, while acknowledging the processual aspects of coaching practice (Shoukry and Cox, 2018). Nevertheless, this literature has not asked what coaches actually do in settings where their a priori ideals are unlikely to be fully realizable. The current study thus contributes to this literature by adopting an emic approach examining practitioners' attempts to put neutrality into practice, generating diverse strategies and associated forms of awareness. These have implications for the politicization/de-politicization of coaching, as well as the types of reflexivity that are promoted or eclipsed by coaches' approaches. Self-focused strategies often led to feelings of being internally riven by the contradictions, frustration and betrayal at their entanglement in office politics, revealing the limitations of therapeutic skills to navigate what seemed like problems happening over their heads. As indicated by Cox et al. (2014), coaching approaches often build on sister practices that use "organization-friendly theories" (p.139). Those theories might not equip coaches to navigate organizational complexities within an "industry fraught with conflicts of interests"

(Coutu and Kauffman, 2009, p. 27). By contrast, coaches who reverted to "socializing" strategies dealt with tensions by transforming them into objects of contemplation and critique, working externally rather than internally to locate tensions in the organizational environment. These coaches often counseled their coachees in terms of political tactics, focusing on navigating externally fraught organizational situations and confronting power relations. This strategy might be more likely to support the empowering, rather than limiting, function of coaching (Louis and Fatien, 2018). Understanding the processes by which practitioners ideologically understand their activities sets the stage for a future research agenda around how ongoing practices function politically within organizations. Neutrality within coaching practice is a current and understudied case of this broader theoretical and empirical goal.

Future research agenda

Our study grounded neutrality's tensions in everyday coaching practice, treating those tensions as motives for action reconfiguration with varying consequences. We analyzed coaches' neutrality practices as an object of study, rather than explicitly ethical (neutrality as a good) or problematizing (neutrality as undesirable/impossible) perspectives. This broad reframing, however, raises several questions that require further study to bring the current research agenda to fruition.

Regarding the empirical issue of neutrality as practice, one natural next step for empirical development pertains to the question of the conditions of emergence of different approaches to neutrality. Why some coaches begin a dynamic process of reappraisal while others enter a repetitive loop, and why this bifurcation involved internalization and socialization strategies, are questions with theoretical promise in and beyond the coaching setting. For instance, attending to power and politicizing the organization had very different implications than internalization and self-awareness, which were often coupled with self-demands and blame for one's inability to square the circle of neutrality. As some critical scholarship argues, internalizing conceptual tensions as psychological traits can short-circuit processes of social

struggle (cf., Islam and Sanderson, 2021), and it may be that coaches framing such tensions as internal challenges may be missing opportunities for organizational and social change in the process, a growing demand though in coaching today (Shoukry, 2016) and beyond.

Our approach to coaching as a practice also gives particular margin to actors' own situated choices, meaning that diversity across actors is likely to be particularly important to understanding their neutrality approaches. For instance, studies examining the role of gender in coaches' positioning (Bozer et al., 2015) can theorize how differences in self-responsibilization versus politicking fall across gender lines. Newsom and Dent (2011) provide preliminary evidence that relational approaches to coaching can vary across gender. Similarly, Gray and Goregaokar (2010) note how relational aspects of matching are particularly important in less-standardized coaching situations, making gender effects particularly important in these situations. Regarding approaches to power in coaching, Theberge (1990) notes that female sport coaches tend to resist conceptions of power as dominance; it would be interesting to study whether the same mistrust regarding "the power they hold" (p.72) is true for female executive coaches, and the implications for gender in coaching more generally. Regarding neutrality specifically, Mugge (2015) describes a gender-based critique of neutrality in which gender justice requires moving beyond neutrality norms.

In our own data, we found suggestions of gendered approaches to neutrality. Sometimes these were subtle and implicit, for instance, Sophia's desire to "protect" her client contrasted with Judy's warning against donning a "Zorro cape". Mikes exhortation to "look at the physics of the situation" versus Judy's desire to "create a container" for expression. At other times these were explicit; Vincent's self-blame expressed as resentment against a scheming woman client in the strongest gendered terms. Drawing on the above literature, such moments could be used to understand the gendered aspects of leadership development and among coaches themselves, in terms of how neutrality is understood and practiced.

Relatedly, we have not focused on the leadership development aspect of coaching, but rather on the neutrality issues in coaching relationships. Yet, given that coaching is often considered a leadership development tool (cf., Carey et al, 2011), and emerging leaders may have effects on the subsequent power dynamics within organizations, coaches potentially have great leverage to incite organizational changes. While beyond our scope, this issue adds urgency to the question of neutrality, given that apolitical conceptions of coaching neutrality may foreclose opportunities for organizational transformation.

Regarding the coaching process itself, the division between internalization and socialization strategies is interesting in light of the central influence of psychology in coaching specifically (Salman, 2019; 2021; Williams, 2003), which may lead to a privileging of micro-level coping strategies. Indeed, recent coaching literature has attempted to establish more systemically-oriented coaching forms and effectuate a "social turn" (Gannon, 2021, p.6), but the micro-level groundwork of the coaching field is undeniable (Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2018). Comparison with neutrality discourses in fields with different historical configurations of micro and macro-level discourses, such as law, diplomacy or medicine, for example, would be fruitful comparisons.

Building on this point, given that neutrality is an important norm across professional fields (Tasselli and Kilduff, 2018), it is likely to produce forms of tension and dynamic coping in these fields. Especially so in the light of recent social, economic and political crises, it may become increasingly important for professionals to reconsider their engagement towards absolute neutrality (Gannon, 2021). Coaching initiatives such as the newly created coaching alliance for climate or in medicine, pleas for assisted dying, indicate that norms of neutrality are evolving and reconsidered. Our perspective therefore calls for research to examine how neutrality comes to matter in other professional contexts today, and how professionals navigate its tensions.

Methodologically, our approach essentially displaces the normative work of deciding if and how neutrality should be practiced by the participants and focuses instead on how they understand and enact neutrality, information that they elaborated in the interviews. Multiple consequences flow from this choice. First, how interview discourses about practices relate to actual practices remains an issue, and ethnographic, observational or participatory research processes would be needed to get more direct access to practices. We recommend such immersive methods for future research in coaching. Second, the studies of neutrality-in-practice should eventually bridge back into normative or applied research about how and when neutrality is desirable or possible; that bridge involves a paradigmatic leap beyond the scope of the current study, as well as methodological questions around the descriptive-normative distinction. Although it is beyond the scope, we point to this leap as a challenge for future research around neutrality and other professional norms more generally.

In conclusion, neutrality is a key matter of concern in and beyond coaching, and our examination of coaching as a site for the negotiation of neutrality tensions suggests an underexplored dynamic that is important for organizational functioning. As an ethical challenge that is formative for professional selfhood yet clashes with the engagement required by professional practice, it is a personal, and political issue. If and how it is understood as such is a matter for ongoing attention.

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Table I. Interviewee characteristics

Interview #	Interview length	Pseudonym	Gender	Country	Age	Coaching experience	Background/education	Approaches/Expertise
1	53	Sophia	F	France	60	10	Law & Psychology	Positive Psychology; Appreciative Inquiry
2	63	Alex	M	France	52	11	Engineer	Systemic approaches
3	70	Judy	F	France	51	12	Social Psychology	Systemic approaches
4	48	Ruth	F	France	53	13	Management, Marketing, Psychology	Gestalt; Crisis Management
5	53	Bob	M	France	52	10	Psychology; Human Resources	Transactional Analysis; Systemic; Gestalt
6	47	Flora	F	France	48	17	Management; Clinical psychology	Gestalt
7	53	Marie	F	France	45	14	Psychology; Sociology	Career transitions
8	52	Patricia	F	France	44	10	Communication; Political science	Systemic approaches; Executive coaching
9	48	David	M	France	60	11	Human Resources	Process Com
10	52	Julie	F	France	54	11	Management	Systemic approaches; mindfulness
11	53	Merryl	F	France	50	5	Management; internal coach	PNL
12	57	Paul-Roger	M	France	39	6	Engineer	Systemic approaches
13	56	Amanda	F	France	50	11	Psychology	Transactional Analysis; Systemic; Gestalt
14	34	Jose	M	France	54	16	Management	Brief Therapy; systemic approaches
15	52	Caroline	F	France	60	13	Psychology; Psychoanalysis	Systemic approaches
16	34	Mila	F	France	35	5	Engineer	Transactional analysis
17	47	Diego	M	France	49	9	Management	Transactional analysis
18	37	Virginia	F	France	49	11	Political science; Management	Systemic approaches
19	66	Chloe	F	France	51	5	Pharmacy and Management	Systemic approaches
20	78	Jacky	F	France	51	9	Engineer; Management	360 Feedback; Cultural change
21	71	Tom	M	France	48	7	Management	Leadership coaching
22	41	Michelle	F	France	54	6	Engineer; HR	Gestalt
23	45	Lucy	F	France	44	6	Psychology	Organizational development
24	50	Ryan	M	France	42	5	Psychotherapy; management	Performance and career development
25	57	Vincent	M	France	50	10	Art	Gestalt
26	66	Beth	F	France	52	5	Chemistry; Management	Conflict management
27	66	Sandro	M	France	57	8	Engineer	Gestalt
28	42	Nick	M	France	44	10	Engineer; HR	Transactional Analysis
29	52	Monique	F	France	50	9	Management	Systemic approaches; transactional analysis
30	56	Laetitia	F	France	45	7	Management	Transactional Analysis
31	60	Stephany	F	France	42	5	HR	PNL, hypnosis
32	41	Amy	F	France	44	9	Management	Systemic approaches
33	52	Maya	F	France	49	5	Law; Art	Systemic approaches
34	31	Gabriella	F	France	45	6	HR	Systemic approaches

35	53	Alice	F	France	52	5	Management	Systemic approaches
36	43	Samantha	F	France	55	12	Psychology	Behavioral approaches
37	95	Dorian	M	France	52	3	Philosophy; Management	Systemic approaches
38	47	Ben	M	Ireland	50	11	Sales Manager	Transitioning from task to process leadership
39	48	Denise	F	UK	54	12	Managing Consultant	NLP, Nonviolent communication
40	52	Greg	M	UK	45	2	HR Consultant, University Lecturer	MTR Coaching approach
41	56	Stan	M	UK	46	15	Recruitment and Training	One-to-one coaching sessions, group coaching
42	53	Jeff	M	UK	46	9	CEO + training in psychosynthesis	Performance, team, and strategy coaching
43	49	Lisa	F	UK	56	11	Business Consultant	Business Executive Coaching
44	51	Joanna	F	UK	49	10	Marketing Manager / HR Consultant	Organizational Development and Leadership
45	49	Kelly	F	UK	45	10	Theatre actress	Communication, influencing people
46	51	Sarah	F	US	53	15	Marketing Manager	Executive Coach, Team Facilitator and Trainer
47	64	Adam	M	France/ US	57	37	Trainer, consultant	Systemic executive coaching
48	55	Alexandra	F	US	47	6	Training and Leadership development	Big Five, team building and conflict resolution
49	42	Josh	M	Canada	51	20	Marketing/Product Management	Developing competencies for executives
50	50	Alyson	F	US	46	22	Coach	Strategic Executive Coaching ®
51	44	John	M	US	44	15	HR Consultant and Trainer	Strategic Executive Coaching®
52	52	Mike	M	US	49	4	Financial services and consulting.	Talent and leadership development specialist
53	47	Emily	F	US	52	12	Training	Coaching and training foreign-born execs
54	48	Ellen	F	US	54	10	HR / Market Analyst	Innovation and leadership techniques.
55	43	Emma	F	US	53	18	HR	Exec Development/Leadership Development
56	56	Paul	M	US	56	8	Insurance and financial services	Mediation, training and coaching
57	59	Charlotte	F	US	57	20	Branding Communications / Training	Leadership, Behavioral and Career Coaching

Table II. Sample list of incidents

Pseudonym (#)	Complex situation
Sophia (#1)	Sophia wonders whether she should step up outside of the initial contract boundaries and advise her coachee to protect herself from her manipulative boss or whether Sophia should stay within the initially defined boundaries of the coaching contract.
Judy (#3)	Judy is torn between honoring the pressing request of her coachee's director for speedy coaching results and respecting her coachee's lesser demand for change.
Flora (#6)	When Flora realizes that her coachee is a victim of moral harassment by his direct supervisor, she wonders whether she should discuss this realization with her coachee even though he never requested such a discussion.
Patricia (#8)	Patricia is uncomfortable with the HR Manager's request to use coaching to "get rid of" the coachee, Helen, through internal mobility and to pass on the message that she should change her attire. Patricia feels awkward and dislikes the organizational culture of secrecy.
Paul-Roger (#12)	While Paul-Roger is supposed to coach Joshua to be "a more assertive leader", he realizes that Joshua's difficulties are rooted in a dysfunctional organizational system. He wonders whether he can share his analysis to the sponsor and step outside of the initial request of individual coaching.
Jose (#14)	Jose, a pacifist, is offered a coaching contract in the military industry. He feels extremely conflicted that he is betraying his values while at the same time very excited about this challenging business opportunity.
Jacky (#20)	During a 360° session debrief with a team, Jacky is puzzled when a doctor acts violently toward a nurse, twisting her arm and making a chair fall over. She wonders how she allowed this incident to happen, and how best to react now towards the team, the nurse, and the doctor without pointing out fingers.
Tom (#21)	Facing huge pressure from HR for the coaching to be successful, Tom fears that he will be discredited if he "fails", but he does not want to "abandon" a coachee in need either. Throughout the process, it is difficult for Tom to maintain the right balance among all the stakeholders.
Samantha (#36)	Samantha is very angry with the HR manager, who asks for directive coaching, framing it as a "polishing tool." She regrets having missed an opportunity to better explain what coaching is at the beginning of the job. What should she do now?
Dorian (#37)	When a coaching contract ends, Dorian receives a call from the HR Manager letting him know that he is dissatisfied with the outcomes. Should Dorian remain silent about the contents of the completed job, at the risk of being perceived as inefficient and discrediting a whole profession? Or should he obey the HR Manager's request, break the confidentiality clause, and potentially provide information that could prove harmful for the coachee?
Ben (#38)	Ben is confronted to different perspectives on the same issue at hand, from different stakeholders, including the coachee, her line manager, and HR management, and finds himself going into conflict management instead of coaching.
Denise (#39)	Denise detected a lack of a trusting relationship between her coachee and the commissioning manager. While she was hired to coach her coachee, she felt that this coaching would not be successful if the underlying relationship issues are not addressed.
Sarah (#46)	Sarah is uncomfortable with the fact that her coachee's line manager is asking her to get certain outcomes from the coaching, which are not directly communicated or shared with the coachee.
Adam (#47)	Adam considers the fact that the coachee is "designated" as the person who needs coaching, to address more systemic issues. He ends up spending most of his time in the organization working on the interfaces between different stakeholders. In doing so, he departs from the initial identified coaching objective and ends up working on systemic (relational and political) issues within the organization.
Alexandra (#48)	Alexandra's coachee has been presented to her by her manager from a biased place, in a negative manner. While the coachee admitted to the behavioral issues raised by his manager, Alexandra felt that there was much more to the story and that she needed to bring these things out from a neutral place.
DIMENSIONS OF THE TENSION	

Value	
Suspension of Judgment	At this specific moment, I did not manage to be a coach anymore. I failed in taking distance from the content of the coaching. (Tom, #21) I think the coach can have his own opinion, but he is not supposed to share it and especially to contribute to the debate on the substance. If you do, you are not in a coaching posture, rather a consultant's. And, at the end of the day, a coach can very well say: "well listen, I'll take off my coach's hat and if I talk to you from a consultant's point of view (…)". But in no case should we pass judgment. (Beth, #26) Coaching is like a journey… I am travelling with someone but I do not know the destination [i.e. what we are working on]. (Monique, #29)
Value Compromising	So, you see, this feeling of betrayal is a risk. It is the fact of projecting oneself into the future with the fear of one day being called a "traitor". That is, to have collaborated with the enemy (…) And so, when I chose to say "yes" to [this company], I was taking a risk with respect to this whole of which I am a part, which is called humanity, planet or universe. To betray the moral laws of the universe, of the cosmos, is no small thing! Betraying both my values, the groups of people that I am attached to, the group of people that are attached to me… (Jose, #14) In this situation, I wasn't in agreement with the leadership style promoted within this company. But, I had this pressure to be viewed as competent and effective (…) so I did whatever it took to do effective coaching. (Mike, #52)
Relational	
Relational balance	Since I am part of a system, how do I make sure that everyone gets what he deserves? I feel challenged here in my values of equity; how to preserve the interests of both the coachee and the organization which pays him? How to make sure that the work we are going to do will benefit all if the N+1 is left aside? (Diego, #17) As firms are spaces of power, you cannot coach two crocodiles at the same time. But I did, I coached the President and then his colleague, who later managed to overthrow him. I got manipulated by this woman, she tricked me; I opened her eyes, so in that sense the coaching was successful, but she misused her increased power; I got the impression to have played with fire. I didn't see it coming. (Vincent, #25) While the coachee was on sick leave, I received a call from the HR manager and she told me the whole story… that the coachee's colleagues were accusing her of moral harassment and so on. I was really not comfortable because the HR contacted me directly… and I had information I was not supposed to have; I did not know what to do with them. There was a lack of transparency in the system. (Stephany, #31)
Relational distortion	[The issue was that] at a certain point, I got the feeling that the CEO wanted to coach his managers so that "they behave as he wanted them to behave". (Laetitia, #30) I got manipulated by this [client]; I managed to open her eyes to the situation she was in, so her coaching was a success, but this power has been diverted. I have this impression to have played with fire… Now my antennas are more receptive towards potential risks of manipulation. One needs to learn from one's mistakes. (Vincent, #25) This was a very complex situation. The newly appointed manager had gotten into the head of the team, with harsh, intrusive and even manipulative processes. Really, it covered the whole range of what you can imagine. The challenge for me was not to fall myself into a game of "scapegoating"

	which had been launched by the system and which had led to the destabilization of the team manager, who was also used as a scapegoat (…) (Alex, #2)
Emotional	
Detachment	I really needed to set aside my negative feelings towards my client, he was so unsympathetic. But I had to protect him, even if, deep down, I wish he could have 'received a good one' (Jacky, #20) The value of coaching is to bring an external and new viewpoint; for that, you should not be engaged too much with the company's issues. (Laetitia, #30) Coaches attract situations that require to step back; we are in situations that are humanly sensitive… there are conflicts of interest between stakeholders; It is good to be where it is difficult, it is important to be there, but we need not to get emotional; we need to maintain inner calm, to maintain a distance (…) (Michelle, #22)
Reification	In theory, it's easy to say: "well, let's just say it's not in the contract". But in everyday life it's not as simple… When someone is not well, and deep down… Because what makes it all the more challenging is to take sides and telling yourself: 'but she is partly right'. And this is where we see that we are entering into the process, as we mentioned earlier, of being part of the transformation, of being involved and therefore of losing our freedom, our capacity to stand back, etc. (Beth, #26) And so, I worked on that situation in supervision, asking myself, "When is the best time to speak up? And when relevant, I shared with her: "Look, I feel like when I'm working with you I'm next to you, but I'm not sure if I'm really meeting you, I'm not sure that you're really meeting me. (Sandro, #27)
REACTIONS OF COACHES TO TENSIONS	
Individualization (leading to maintenance)	I'm really stuck on this one. I really don't think that I can help if I think I'm not qualified to create the space for the right conversation… we're coaches, we're not experts in everything… maybe I am not the right person in this case… maybe it is too personal for me, too close to something I need to improve on. I don't know… (John, #51) I experienced a feeling of powerlessness because when you coach in such dysfunctional environments, you reach the limits of what you can do. (Sophia, #1) My coaching clients challenge me all the time. They challenge me with the issues and problems they bring to our sessions. They challenge me with trying to be neutral in keeping my bias out. They challenge me with sometimes I'm the one that has to be tough on them. Hold them really accountable on what they said they were going to do and that's not always easy for me you know (Alexandra, #48)

Individualization (leading to revisiting)	I started using confidentiality forms and then I dumped them, because now I focus 100% on building the relationship with the coachee and with the manager. And so, I could disclose back to the manager certain things when needed because I think it can be quite helpful for future development. Not personal things, you know. I wouldn't disclose that. But anything that's pertinent. (Kelly, #45) I solved the issue by focusing on the client because there is a human person, who is in her situation, who has her projects, who has her emotions, who has her way of life. And I tell myself that my ethics is to take care of the person. That's it. And I can do this independently of this environment, of this multinational. Yes, that's it, I have been able to find my zone, my little territory of autonomy. And since confidentiality is guaranteed… (David, #9)
Socialization (leading to revisiting)	I told the HR that I would not sign the contract; they really yelled at me and threatened that they would never work again with me. But in doing so, I sent a signal to the coach, that she did not need to stay in this company (Chloe, #1). The coachee may have been presented to me from a biased place of someone who is perhaps affected by those behaviors, negatively, however, for me to get anywhere with the client, I felt like I needed to bring these things out from a neutral place. So that I could get the client's perspective on that particular situation or instance that they had been addressed on. (Alexandra, #48)
REVISITED NEUTRALITY	
Value-aware	It took me several weeks before I could say 'yes'. And it took a real internal negotiation with my values. And in this case, I worked in supervision to be able to see, if when I said "yes", I was in an ethical compromise or if I was strengthening my ethics. And I found that I was in conformity with my ethics, even, that I strengthened it (Jose, #14). So I found myself confronted with, 'it's not in my values, it's not how I see a company. That's not how I see a sustainable company. And it doesn't fit with my values as a former HRD. Do I have to work with them? It is a political problem and a value problem (David, #9).
Self-aware	As coaches, we are a tool that shape coaching. We are in a profession where our tool is ourselves, like psychologists, like many other professions. And so we are involved in the process that is taking place. Therefore, we are not immune to being embroiled in a process of transformation…As we are part of the system, it is not impossible that at times we ourselves are affected and thus embroiled in the transformation. Because the relationship is never totally neutral. It seems impossible to me, because we are… It's like the Heisenberg principle. By the very fact of being the observer, we modify the system. So by the very fact of being the coach, we are an instrument of transformation involved. (Beth, #26) The coaches who are starting into this field usually will repress their own emotions or will have an intuition or something and not just put it aside and is having the courage to actually voice what you're feeling within your body what, you're sensing, you know sensing is a good word and obviously, of factual observation during the conversations that you have. And the psychological contracting, it's really about putting this into a container and how to contain that emotional environment, if you want to put it that way, whether the temperature is heated up or whether it's normal, so it if heats up, you don't want to heat up too much and you want to be able to voice it. (Ben, #38)
Power-aware	In the helping profession, it's very easy to be in power over the person in front of you, so you have to be even more aligned with your values, to be clear with power games. (Laetitia, #30)

	An ethical question I asked myself at the beginning, because I quickly identified the manager's suffering, was to ask myself to what extent I was not at risk of being an element in the game that allowed the manager to become the "executioner" of his own teams. It's clear that I acted as a speaker, so to speak, because it was becoming unspeakable for him. But for me it was okay because he got to a point where he was no longer heard, he no longer existed in the system (…). At the same time as I was interviewing him, his hierarchy put him in the banner of managers and dismissed him. So there was a need to rehabilitate him at that time. (…) So the "duty to alert" allowed me to leave the initial contract or to go beyond it, and thus to authorize myself to point out a danger. There was a real danger there, from my own perspective of course. (Alex, #2)

Table III. Examples of verbatim

DIMENSIONS OF THE TENSION	
Value	
Suspension of Judgment	At this specific moment, I did not manage to be a coach anymore. I failed in taking distance from the content of the coaching. (Tom, #21) I think the coach can have his own opinion, but he is not supposed to share it and especially to contribute to the debate on the substance. If you do, you are not in a coaching posture, rather a consultant's. And, at the end of the day, a coach can very well say: "well listen, I'll take off my coach's hat and if I talk to you from a consultant's point of view (…)". But in no case should we pass judgment. (Beth, #26) Coaching is like a journey… I am travelling with someone but I do not know the destination [i.e. what we are working on]. (Monique, #29)
Value Compromising	So, you see, this feeling of betrayal is a risk. It is the fact of projecting oneself into the future with the fear of one day being called a "traitor". That is, to have collaborated with the enemy (…) And so, when I chose to say "yes" to [this company], I was taking a risk with respect to this whole of which I am a part, which is called humanity, planet or universe. To betray the moral laws of the universe, of the cosmos, is no small thing! Betraying both my values, the groups of people that I am attached to, the group of people that are attached to me… (Jose, #14) In this situation, I wasn't in agreement with the leadership style promoted within this company. But, I had this pressure to be viewed as competent and effective (…) so I did whatever it took to do effective coaching. (Mike, #52)
Relational	
Relational balance	Since I am part of a system, how do I make sure that everyone gets what he deserves? I feel challenged here in my values of equity; how to preserve the interests of both the coachee and the organization which pays him? How to make sure that the work we are going to do will benefit all if the N+1 is left aside? (Diego, #17) As firms are spaces of power, you cannot coach two crocodiles at the same time. But I did, I coached the President and then his colleague, who later managed to overthrow him. I got manipulated by this woman, she tricked me; I opened her eyes, so in that sense the coaching was successful, but she misused her increased power; I got the impression to have played with fire. I didn't see it coming. (Vincent, #25) While the coachee was on sick leave, I received a call from the HR manager and she told me the whole story… that the coachee's colleagues were accusing her of moral harassment and so on. I was really not comfortable because the HR contacted me directly… and I had information I was not supposed to have; I did not know what to do with them. There was a lack of transparency in the system. (Stephany, #31)
Relational distortion	[The issue was that] at a certain point, I got the feeling that the CEO wanted to coach his managers so that "they behave as he wanted them to behave". (Laetitia, #30) I got manipulated by this [client]; I managed to open her eyes to the situation she was in, so her coaching was a success, but this power has been diverted. I have this impression to have played with fire… Now my antennas are more receptive towards potential risks of manipulation. One needs to learn from one's mistakes. (Vincent, #25)

	This was a very complex situation. The newly appointed manager had gotten into the head of the team, with harsh, intrusive and even manipulative processes. Really, it covered the whole range of what you can imagine. The challenge for me was not to fall myself into a game of "scapegoating" which had been launched by the system and which had led to the destabilization of the team manager, who was also used as a scapegoat (…) (Alex, #2)
Emotional	
Detachment	I really needed to set aside my negative feelings towards my client, he was so unsympathetic. But I had to protect him, even if, deep down, I wish he could have 'received a good one' (Jacky, #20)
	The value of coaching is to bring an external and new viewpoint; for that, you should not be engaged too much with the company's issues. (Laetitia, #30)
	Coaches attract situations that require to step back; we are in situations that are humanly sensitive… there are conflicts of interest between stakeholders; It is good to be where it is difficult, it is important to be there, but we need not to get emotional; we need to maintain inner calm, to maintain a distance (…) (Michelle, #22)
Reification	In theory, it's easy to say: "well, let's just say it's not in the contract". But in everyday life it's not as simple... When someone is not well, and deep down... Because what makes it all the more challenging is to take sides and telling yourself: 'but she is partly right'. And this is where we see that we are entering into the process, as we mentioned earlier, of being part of the transformation, of being involved and therefore of losing our freedom, our capacity to stand back, etc. (Beth, #26)
	And so, I worked on that situation in supervision, asking myself, "When is the best time to speak up? And when relevant, I shared with her: "Look, I feel like when I'm working with you I'm next to you, but I'm not sure if I'm really meeting you, I'm not sure that you're really meeting me. (Sandro, #27)
REACTIONS OF COACHES TO TENSIONS	
Individualization (leading to maintenance)	I'm really stuck on this one. I really don't think that I can help if I think I'm not qualified to create the space for the right conversation... we're coaches, we're not experts in everything... maybe I am not the right person in this case... maybe it is too personal for me, too close to something I need to improve on. I don't know... (John, #51)
	I experienced a feeling of powerlessness because when you coach in such dysfunctional environments, you reach the limits of what you can do. (Sophia, #1)
	My coaching clients challenge me all the time. They challenge me with the issues and problems they bring to our sessions. They challenge me with trying to be neutral in keeping my bias out. They challenge me with sometimes I'm the one that has to be tough on them. Hold them really accountable on what they said they were going to do and that's not always easy for me you know (Alexandra, #48)

Individualization (leading to revisiting)	I started using confidentiality forms and then I dumped them, because now I focus 100% on building the relationship with the coachee and with the manager. And so, I could disclose back to the manager certain things when needed because I think it can be quite helpful for future development. Not personal things, you know. I wouldn't disclose that. But anything that's pertinent. (Kelly, #45) I solved the issue by focusing on the client because there is a human person, who is in her situation, who has her projects, who has her emotions, who has her way of life. And I tell myself that my ethics is to take care of the person. That's it. And I can do this independently of this environment, of this multinational. Yes, that's it, I have been able to find my zone, my little territory of autonomy. And since confidentiality is guaranteed... (David, #9)
Socialization (leading to revisiting)	I told the HR that I would not sign the contract; they really yelled at me and threatened that they would never work again with me. But in doing so, I sent a signal to the coach, that she did not need to stay in this company (Chloe, #1). The coachee may have been presented to me from a biased place of someone who is perhaps affected by those behaviors, negatively, however, for me to get anywhere with the client, I felt like I needed to bring these things out from a neutral place. So that I could get the client's perspective on that particular situation or instance that they had been addressed on. (Alexandra, #48)
REVISITED NEUTRALITY	
Value-aware	It took me several weeks before I could say 'yes'. And it took a real internal negotiation with my values. And in this case, I worked in supervision to be able to see, if when I said "yes", I was in an ethical compromise or if I was strengthening my ethics. And I found that I was in conformity with my ethics, even, that I strengthened it (Jose, #14). So I found myself confronted with, 'it's not in my values, it's not how I see a company. That's not how I see a sustainable company. And it doesn't fit with my values as a former HRD. Do I have to work with them? It is a political problem and a value problem (David, #9).
Self-aware	As coaches, we are a tool that shape coaching. We are in a profession where our tool is ourselves, like psychologists, like many other professions. And so we are involved in the process that is taking place. Therefore, we are not immune to being embroiled in a process of transformation…As we are part of the system, it is not impossible that at times we ourselves are affected and thus embroiled in the transformation. Because the relationship is never totally neutral. It seems impossible to me, because we are... It's like the Heisenberg principle. By the very fact of being the observer, we modify the system. So by the very fact of being the coach, we are an instrument of transformation involved. (Beth, #26) The coaches who are starting into this field usually will repress their own emotions or will have an intuition or something and not just put it aside and is having the courage to actually voice what you're feeling within your body what, you're sensing, you know sensing is a good word and obviously, of factual observation during the conversations that you have. And the psychological contracting, it's really about putting this into a container and how to contain that emotional environment, if you want to put it that way, whether the temperature is heated up or whether it's normal, so it if heats up, you don't want to heat up too much and you want to be able to voice it. (Ben, #38)
Power-aware	In the helping profession, it's very easy to be in power over the person in front of you, so you have to be even more aligned with your values, to be clear with power games. (Laetitia, #30)

	An ethical question I asked myself at the beginning, because I quickly identified the manager's suffering, was to ask myself to what extent I was not at risk of being an element in the game that allowed the manager to become the "executioner" of his own teams. It's clear that I acted as a speaker, so to speak, because it was becoming unspeakable for him. But for me it was okay because he got to a point where he was no longer heard, he no longer existed in the system (…). At the same time as I was interviewing him, his hierarchy put him in the banner of managers and dismissed him. So there was a need to rehabilitate him at that time. (…) So the "duty to alert" allowed me to leave the initial contract or to go beyond it, and thus to authorize myself to point out a danger. There was a real danger there, from my own perspective of course. (Alex, #2)

Figure 1. The tensions of practicing neutrality

IDEAL FACETS	INHERENT TENSIONS	RISKS
Suspension of judgment	Value level	Value compromising
Relational balance	Relational level	Relational distortion
Detachment	Emotional level	Reification
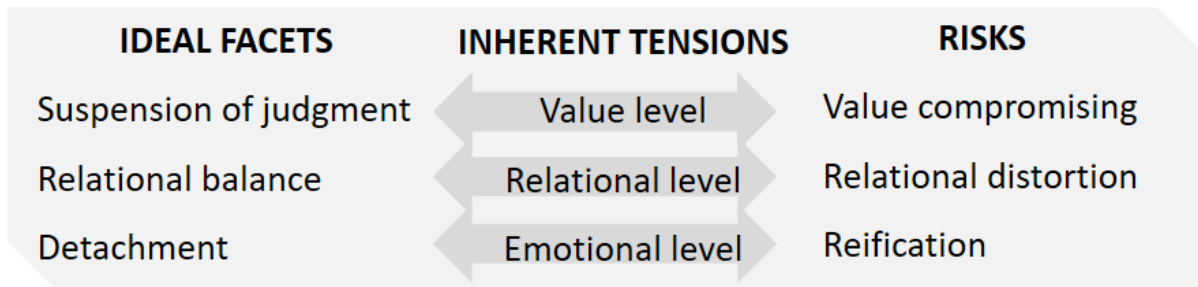
Figure 2. The process of navigating tensions of neutrality in coaching
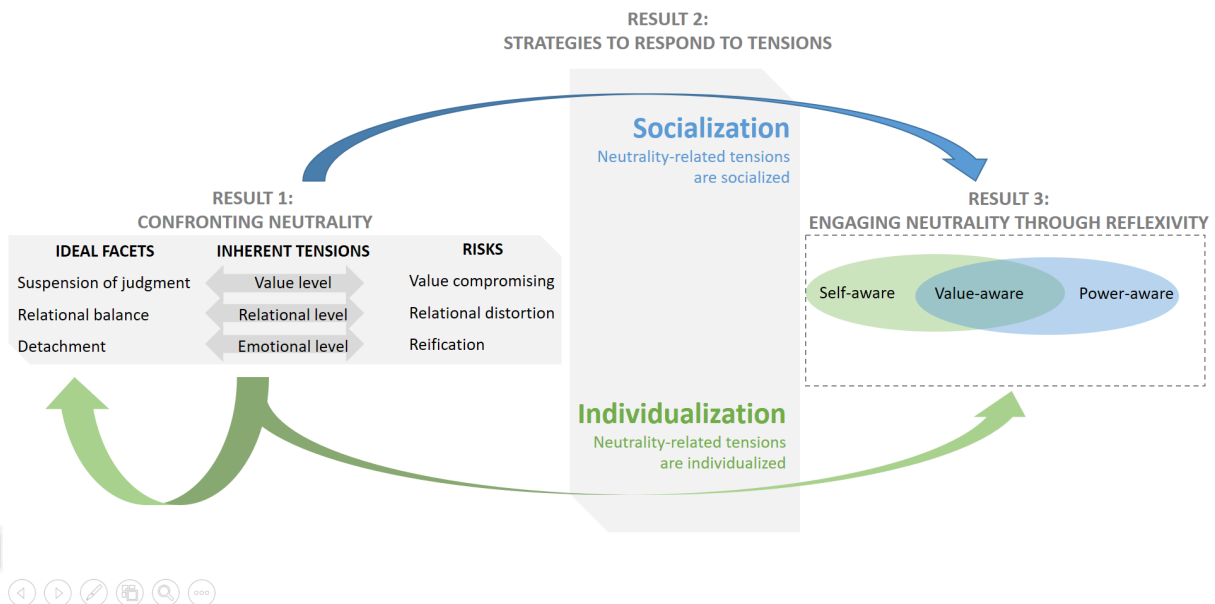
High-performance connections: Digital holism and communicative capitalism at HappyAppy

Gazi Islam [iD]

Grenoble Ecole de Management and IREGE, France

Jean-Charles Pillet

University of Lausanne, Switzerland

Kseniya Navazhylava

Leonardo Da Vinci Pôle Universitaire, School of Management, France

Marcos Barros

Grenoble Ecole de Management, France

Abstract

The current study examines the ways in which new age organizations use digital culture to promote "holistic" visions of personal and social well-being. Concepts of holism are common in contemporary and new age management settings, but are largely undertheorized by organizational scholars; moreover, the relations between holism and techno-culture, increasingly recognized by digital sociologists, are largely missing from organizational scholarship. Using the lens of "communicative capitalism," we carry out a case study of "HappyAppy," a French techno-startup association concerned with well-being related applications, to understand how holistic ideas are deployed and shaped within this association. We find that that holism is marked, on the one hand, by "autarkic" fantasies, involving subjective integration and immersion, and on the other, by "relational" fantasies, involving interpersonal connection and participation. Moreover, each of these versions of holism is associated with distinct critical possibilities. We use these results to

Corresponding author:
Gazi Islam, Grenoble Ecole de Management and Institut de Recherche en Gestion et Économie (IREGE), Université Savoie Mont Blanc, 12 Rue Pierre Semard, 38000 Grenoble, France
Email: gislamster@gmail.com

theorize the role of digital holism at the intersection of new age management and digital culture, outlining an agenda for future research.

Keywords

Communicative capitalism, digital culture, new age management, technology, well-being

> *The abolishment of the separation between different spheres of life, requiring interaction of a more holistic nature. . .is experienced by some as a genuine gain in freedom (Stalder, The Digital Condition p105)*

A specter of holism haunts contemporary organizations (e.g. Bell and Taylor, 2004; Gog et al., 2020). Whether through a renewed focus on self-exploration and individual growth (Bell and Taylor, 2004; Pagis, 2016), workplace mindfulness and spirituality practices (Islam et al., 2017), or programs promoting self-expression and authenticity (Fleming, 2009), contemporary management approaches claim to re-enchant workplaces by integrating the "whole person" within fragmented and alienating work conditions (LoRusso, 2017). While a burgeoning organizational literature assesses, deconstructs, and critiques such developments (e.g. Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Endrissat et al., 2015; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014), less noticed has been the role of digital technology in shaping fantasies of wholeness and reenchanting workplaces.

Digital technology is not a bystander in the workplace transformations envisaged in holistic approaches; it is essential to a culture of "*technê*-zen" that infuses contemporary capitalism with a counter-cultural ethos (Hancock, 2019; Lusoli and Turner, 2021; Turner, 2006; Williams, 2011). From the 1960's, post-Taylorist critiques of alienated work produced cybernetic visions of holism and flow, imagining the seamless integration of worker and technology in ways resonant with a phenomenological focus on the unity of the self (Coyne, 1999; Rutsky, 1999; Williams, 2011). Such unity often centered on individuals by default, with a lone worker imagined in meditative engagement, a tendency which has drawn recent criticism (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Williams, 2011). As Przegalinska (2019: 79) notes, technologically-mediated subjectivity "reduced visions of social change to dreams of individual transformation." In parallel, however, notions of digital "tribalism" emphasized holistic visions of community, whether through a new communalism (Turner, 2006), or a nostalgic yet elusive "digital commons" (cf., Kostakis, 2018; Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017). Despite these variations, the notion of holism was a persistent component, in need of attention within organizational scholarship.

Digital cultural fantasies of holism dovetail with emerging critical perspectives around "new age" organizational scholarship, highlighting ongoing tensions between humanistic promises of individual fulfilment (e.g. through self-actualization or authenticity; e.g. Land and Taylor, 2010; Pagis, 2016) and the collective possibilities of new age organizing (cf., Islam and Sferrazzo, 2021). This tension lays at the heart of neo-normative critiques that take the foreclosure of the social as an endemic short-coming of humanistic management (e.g. Walsh, 2018). How holism is shaped within technê-zen transformations of digital culture, however, remains less well-understood. For instance, while digital technology is invoked to integrate different life domains (e.g. Peticca-Harris et al., 2020a), and produces fantasies of organizational transformation (Hensmans, 2021), a broader theorization around how the promise of holism is sustained, and how certain forms of holism are privileged over others, remains elusive. Understanding holism in the context of digital technologies is key to a robust theory

of the role of the digital in enchanting organizational life, and to a critical theory of digital organizing. Thus, our study asks:

> *How are discourses around digital technology mobilized to produce holistic organizational visions, and how do such visions enable or foreclose on critical possibilities within the workplace?*

This two-part question involves a descriptive account of how holism operates in the context of digital technologies, and a normative/critical aspect, situating this operation within the wider critical literature on new age organizations to understand how it creates or obstructs workplace critique. By focusing on discourses around holistic "visions," we refer to how actors imagine organizational reality (cf., Bell and Taylor, 2004); when these visions become invested with affect or desire, they function as psychological "fantasies" of holism, and this feature of fixing desire will be central to our critical perspective on digital holism (cf., Dean, 2005).

As an analytical lens, we draw upon Jodi Dean's work on communicative capitalism, a critical-psychoanalytic approach centered around technology in generating economic value from human affect (Dean, 2010). Dean (2005: 67) argues that digital technology generates a fantasized "imagined totality," where the social world is presented as an integrated whole "unruptured by antagonism." This fantasy supports capital accumulation by leading people to channel attention into repetitive patterns of frustration as they seek the unattainable connection. Dean's Lacanian-Marxian approach has the advantage of both descriptively analyzing digitalization of social relations (e.g. Dean, 2010) and highlighting the ideological uses of individuation and collective desire (e.g. Dean, 2016), a combination ideal for the current context. While work using this approach is still incipient in organizational scholarship (e.g. Bell and Leonard, 2018; Mumby, 2016; Zanoni, 2020), increasing concerns with critical assessments of technology suggest that it is a promising approach for organization studies. Through an inductive study of a French technology association dedicated to workplace well-being-related software applications, we examine the varieties of digital holism and their implications for the critical possibilities of these technologies.

"Digital holism" and the enchantments of new age management

While managerial techniques have drawn on technological imaginaries at least since Taylorism, the holistic turn in management's relation to technology derives from a techno-spiritual movement closely linked to new age countercultural movements (e.g. Lusoli and Turner, 2021; Turner, 2006; Williams, 2011). What Williams (2011) termed "*technê*-zen" developed from a heady mix of cybernetics, Buddhist religion and Japanese management (see also Turner, 2006, for the relation between cybernetics and digital culture). In its early versions, this mix was embodied in programs like Total Quality and Lean management that promised to seamlessly integrate technical and human elements (Alcadipani et al., 2018; Williams, 2011). Later generations involved self-knowledge and holistic well-being initiatives such as Google's "Search Inside Yourself" program (LoRusso, 2017), and similar physical and spiritual practices such as yoga (Peticca-Harris et al., 2020b) and mindfulness (Purser, 2019), which increasingly involved digitalized variants (cf., Mrazek et al., 2019; Przegalinska, 2019).

These developments form part of a broader set of attempts to "re-enchant" neoliberal workplaces and reframe work as socially and personally valuable (Endrissat et al., 2015; Fleming, 2009). Enchanting productive activity often involves claims of holism (e.g. Mauksch, 2017; Stalder, 2017), that is, a suturing of disparate life elements—for example, self and other, work and leisure, instrumental, and expressive—into an integrated whole experienced as fulfilling or self-realized (cf., Heelas, 2008). While re-enchantment, as the name suggests, often invokes nostalgic,

romantic, or pastoral images to clothe productive activity as culturally authentic (cf., Fleming, 2009), *technê*-zen offers a future-oriented holism that sees technology as instrumental in re-connecting humans to each other and to their environments (Williams, 2011).

We refer to "digital holism" as the participation of digital technologies such as mobile telephones and applications in the ideal of seamless connection, a development which has greatly potentiated the *technê*-zen discourses of holism and enchantment (cf., Coyne, 1999; Leeker et al., 2017). While holism is only one part of the re-enchantment of new age work, it points to an ideologically powerful form of affective and subjective investment that can effectively capture other critical tendencies within capitalism (Dean, 2009). Digital holism aims at a smart spirituality, uniting aesthetic design, functionality, and personalization to perfect the seamless integration promised by the cybernetic prophets of *technê*-zen (Williams, 2011).

The idea of holism as a supplement to capitalism is not new; as (Heelas, 2008) notes, capitalism since the 19th century has drawn upon romantic, pastoral, or transcendentalist ideologies to provide a sense of connection and suture its structural tensions. Digital holism shares with its more pastoral variants a focus on fulfillment and connection, coupled with a normative and technical control apparatus that shapes behavior and extracts rents in often imperceptible ways (Beverungen et al., 2015). As an analytical lens to frame this issue, we turn to the communicative capitalism perspective (e.g. Dean, 2005, 2009), focusing on how the digital mobilizes desires for connection and collectivity.

Communicative capitalism and the fantasy of wholeness

Communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005, 2009, 2010) refers to the processes by which mediated social interactions enter into capitalist relations. Responding to overly "cognitive" digital theorizing (Dean, 2013), Dean draws upon Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorize digital culture in terms of affect and drive, where digital communications individuate fragmented subjects while holding out a promise of collective connection (e.g. Dean, 2010). Communicative capitalism describes a world in which "access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications" (Dean, 2005: 55). Although some have argued that digital tools support a culture of networked individualism (e.g. Castells, 2002), Dean (2016: 101) adds that digital technologies "reassure us that we are not unique, but common" and that the promise of attaining connection are driving forces behind digital technology's popularity.

Yet, while the promise of connection is an intrinsic part of digital technology's appeal, it also enables the expropriation of value under communicative capitalism. As Dean (2012) notes, the *impossibility* of total connection constitutes a political reality whose disavowal leads to ideology. Rather than acknowledging separation as a starting point or "horizon," communicative capitalism convinces subjects that this horizon can be attained definitively through inventive technology. The fantasy of unity keeps actors invested in technologies, motivating compulsive action, because the "technological fetish covers over and sustains a lack on the part of the subject" (Dean, 2009: 37), a lack that is itself shaped, paradoxically, by the instrumental rationality built into the technology. Noting the irony of a capitalism constructed from the fantasy of an integrated whole, Dean (2016: 5) describes digital social communications as a "communist form of expression, social products appropriated by capitalism." In this sense, the fetishism of digital technology lies in the fact that it creates a fantasy of wholeness even as it undermines this fantasy in practice.

From the analytical frame of communicative capitalism, we can consider our research question in relation to the forms of wholeness promoted through digital holism, and the varieties of personal and social lack that are represented and stood in for by digital technologies. Like other new age

phenomena, these can involve individual forms of enjoyment and well-being (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014) or can be communal (Toraldo et al., 2019) or spiritual (Bell and Taylor, 2003). The lack of empirical research around digital holism suggests that inductive, qualitative research around how it is constructed in practices is the appropriate starting point for a discussion over these diverse forms.

Methods

Site selection and background

Our goal of understanding holistic discourses in digital culture led us to HappyAppy, a non-profit meta-organization founded in 2017 to coordinate, organize, and promote well-being related technology start-ups and their partners. The organization describes its core membership as involving innovation-related start-ups ("happy solutions"), clients who invest in employee-well-being solutions ("happy users"), and institutional actors, experts, and communication and media in the well-being ecosystem ("happy partners"). HappyAppy's focus on personal (and personnel) development, combining well-being with work, and linking technological solutions to psycho-social issues, resonated with our readings of *technê*-zen and the holistic ethos (Turner, 2006; Williams, 2011), making HappyAppy an intuitive site for empirical examination.

HappyAppy was formed as part of a larger attempt to position French technology firms as leaders in an emerging "happiness" industry, with Paris as the center of this emerging sector, as explained to us by Sean, (co-Founder & CEO of Socian and cofounder of HappyAppy). HappyAppy was imagined by two initial start-ups to respond to a growing demand from large businesses to promote well-being-related solutions. In addition to voluntary membership with annual fees, HappyAppy implements strict selection criteria and claims that technology acts as a vehicle through which ideas about well-being can be designed and promoted.

HappyAppy organizes and spreads its mission by conducting collective events and informal meetings, where start-ups are invited to share their practices, form business networks facilitated by the HappyAppy hub, building legitimacy around well-being-related technology as a group. Sample technologies handled by these members include virtual reality systems and neuroelectric headgear, mobile applications, artificial intelligence systems, and tools for managing personal health and group coordination.

Because HappyAppy is an overarching meta-organization comprised of member-startups, it exerts some normative control around the principles of the group as well as control in selecting and retaining members. At the same time, each member organization is distinct in business model, founding members, and other organizational aspects. Our focus on digital holism thus allows diversity and even contradictions among members, although such diversity has some limits in that the start-ups must share the overarching stated well-being related goals. This plurality was conceptualized by HappyAppy through six categories by which it explained its approach to well-being in its communications with external stakeholders: "Improving the environment and working conditions," "Improve mental and physical health," "Encouraging physical activity," "Facilitate daily life/work-life balance," "Promote exchanges and communication," and "Enable the expression of opinions and feelings."

Data collection

Our data collection took place between November, 2017 and June, 2019, and involved observations, interviews and archival materials such as organizational documents, images and marketing

materials. We contacted the leader of the HappyAppy organization in 2017, to discuss the organization and its goals and practices, and were granted access to observe and interview the members. At this moment, HappyAppy included five initial start-ups, but had grown to 30 members by the time of our first interviews 4 months later. We attended HappyAppy's organized events, including the "Monthly Happy," where the members gathered to discuss the practices and strategies of the group. These meetings centered around the purposes of HappyAppy, as well as ways to put into practice and measure impacts of the members. The group also organized a "summit," in which the by then 36-strong membership pitched their models to a crowd of several hundred audience members. During these events, we engaged in observation, took field notes, and recorded/transcribed conversations and informal interviews. After the events, we made follow-up calls to the organizing team to discuss the events. We interviewed the executive team, start-ups, and partners, to ensure diverse views on the organization, and held regular meetings with our informants to keep track of news and internal issues for the organization. In total, during this period, we collected 28 interviews, observations, and field notes over four events and collected over 700 pages of written and marketing material from the events as well as from the web pages of the individual start-ups. We summarize our data collection and use of the different data forms in Table 1, while Table 2 gives an overview of the start-ups affiliated to HappyAppy and details about interviewees.

Analytical strategy

To analyze our data, we followed an abductive approach, moving iteratively between our theoretical question, data, and emerging codes. At each stage of coding, the authors met to compare and theorize emerging categories, progressively moving beyond categorizing toward theoretically explaining how each form of digital holism involved distinct ways of imagining self and other, expressing different ways of valuing the resulting whole (see Table 3, Figure 6 below). This grounding of digital holism variants supported our subsequent discussion around *technê-*zen aspects of digital culture, comparing them to show their distinct ideological premises and emancipatory promises.

Our initial analytical focus involved a broad search for moments related to holism, connection or unity as discourses surrounding the digital technology. Initially, we were led to a categorization scheme composed of individual, group, and contextual fantasies of holism, suggesting a notion of holism organized by "levels." Yet as we composed and discussed these categories, we noticed a surprising feature; namely, that individual (i.e. persons and their self-related activities) and contextual (i.e. nature, societal/cultural, and other "macro" issues) often seemed almost indistinguishable, which was initially surprising to us. For instance, notions of self-development would be described as "changing the world" or natural landscapes would be portrayed with a single individual on the horizon. While the distinction between "micro" and "macro" levels seemed blurrier than we expected, the "meso" level of interpersonal interactions was clearly distinct. For instance, social and group relations were rarely depicted in natural or "cosmic" terms.

This insight led us to return to the data and recode around a revised conceptual axis, this time resulting in a general distinction between what we termed "autarkic" holism, in which a self-contained and unified subject seemed to be the object and the goal of holism, and a "relational" holism, in which the subject appeared with "others" in situations of coordination, communication, or participation. Discourses of balance, harmony, or completeness ran throughout both conceptions, but took distinct and sometimes opposing forms, providing a conceptual discovery in our analysis. While we do not consider these forms to be mutually exclusive, they represent distinct personal and social fantasies and, as we explain below, carry different critical and ideological possibilities.

Table 1. Types and uses of data collection.

Source	Data type	Use in the analysis
Interviews (recorded and transcribed— translated from French to English when applicable)	-Interviews with informants at HappyAppy (8 interviews, 7 hours, 57 pages) -The interviews were conducted by one of the author and did not follow a structured format.	Gain insight of the values and vision of the founders of the organization, of the rationale behind some of the decisions made behind HappyAppy (e.g. membership criteria decisions) and of the challenges that the organization faces (e.g. managing conflicting expectations of its members).
	-Interviews with Happy-Solution designers (17 interviews, 16 hours, 135 pages) -The interviews were conducted by one of the author using a semi-structured format with predefined themes and questions.	Explore start-up founders' understanding of the well-being issue and how they perceive their solution as being able to contribute to improving well-being.
Observations and field notes	-Two events targeted at internal audience (start-up members): 2 events, 8 hours of observation, 43 pages of notes) -Two of the authors attended the events separately and shared their field notes and analysis with the rest of team afterward.	Explore the co-construction of wellbeing and the intricacies of the relationship between the organization and its members (e.g. conflicting and complementary views on well-being).
	-Two events targeted at an external audience (prospective clients and industry stakeholders): 2 events, 11 hours of observation, 17 pages of notes. -One of the authors attended both events and shared his field notes and analysis with the rest of team afterward.	Analyze the narrative strategies that are used by startups to promote their solution, the approaches that they rely on to gain legitimacy, and the various depictions that they make of the notion of well-being.
Archival materials and multimedia	-Material developed by HappyAppy: white papers, meeting reports, internal organizing documents, communication material, press coverage, etc. (23 minutes of video/audio material and 251 pages of written/visual material).	Analyze how a holistic view of wellbeing is being shaped, transformed, and maintained within the institutional environment of HappyAppy.
	-Material developed by HappySolution providers: sales and communication material, press releases, webpage content, interviews in the media, white papers, etc. (1 hour 30 minutes of video/audio material and 504 pages of written/visual material).	Analyze the narrative strategies that are used by startups to promote their solution, the approaches that they have to gain legitimacy, and the various depictions that they make of the notion of well-being.

Finally, as a last step in theorizing these possibilities, we analyzed the interviews and promotion material in terms of the values and justifications given around holism. In many cases, productivist motives of performance or financial gain were given to make the "business case" for holistic solutions. Yet, many of the startups also claimed emancipatory goals in their promotional materials. We organized the different forms of holism according to how they took up these productivist versus emancipatory discourses, with implications for the critical possibilities of digital holism that we discuss below. Table 3 provides illustrative examples from our analysis.

Table 2. Startup and interviewee details.

Start up	Description	Category	Interviewee	Role
Socian	Facilitator and embellisher of professional life, Socian is the indispensable partner for the fulfillment and progress in the company.	Promote exchanges and communication	Sean	(co)Founder and CEO
Pational	Pational offers a wide variety of activities, which allows us to respond to everyone's needs in terms of pro/life balance. Thanks to Pational I can create a human dynamic with cohesion within the company.	Promote exchanges and communication	Vic	Chief marketing officer
Comweb	Comweb supports HR and managers in the future of work. We are the first complete solution capable of transforming your business through activities and training, all managed by our digital platform.	Promote exchanges and communication	Megan	Chief operation officer
Empathyy	Empathyy is a digital solution for continuous training in emotional skills. We help companies willing to undertake a change of managerial culture centered on the person.	Promote exchanges and communication	N.A.	N.A.
Traft	Traft connects clients (from start-ups to international groups) with the best consulting firms. For our clients, we select the most qualified consultants from our 180 partners, in assignments that perfectly match their profile.	Promote exchanges and communication	Borys	(co)Founder and CEO
Modery	Modery puts Art at the service of business and makes culture accessible, thanks to its digital art gallery. An alternative to renting works of art.	Improving environment and working conditions	Christopher	(co)Founder and CEO
FolderSpace	FolderSpace is a Workplace Management solution for coworking space, building office, or companies.	Improving environment and working conditions	Glenn	Chief marketing officer
Cwire	Cwire is a french software editor specialized since 15years in "robotic process automation." Contextor accelerates the digital transformation by improving the customer experience and the working comfort of the collaborators.	Improving environment and working conditions	Preston	Chief marketing officer
Theraphonic	The Theraphonic headset immerses you into a natural soundscape. While you are resting your mind to the sounds of waves breaking on the shore, our integrated sensors are measuring your brain activity.	Improve mental and physical health	N.A.	N.A.
Dreamaze	Dreamaze allows you to immerse yourself in 100% natural landscapes and ambiences that accompany thematic vocal guidance for autonomous relaxation sessions and exercises.	Improve mental and physical health	Evalyn	Co-Founder and Chief marketing officer
Lucidsoul	Lucidsoul combines cutting-edge disciplines such as cognitive neuroscience, data science, psychology, awareness, and game design in virtual reality for successful self-development throughout life.	Improve mental and physical health	N.A.	N.A.
Humant	As a wellness and health expert, Humant offers the implementation and complete management of tailor-made wellness programs within companies.	Improve mental and physical health	Austin	(co)Founder and CEO
Feelight	Feelight offers a digital, educational and playful path to each employee to act daily on their happiness at work.	Improve mental and physical health	Larry	(co)Founder and CEO
Conciergg	Conciergg offers the first personal assistant dedicated to assets, available 24/7 everywhere in France.	Facilitate daily life/work-life balance	Jeffrey	(co)Founder and CEO
Aidquest	Aidquest allows companies to offer their employees personal assistance services, animal care, or coaching sessions in order to lighten their daily life.	Facilitate daily life/work-life balance	N.A.	N.A.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Start up	Description	Category	Interviewee	Role
ActivityPulse	ActivityPulse is the first corporate social network based on sports activities. A mobile application to strengthen cohesion and improve the well-being of employees while enhancing the company's employer brand.	Encouraging physical activity	Floyd	(co)Founder and CEO
Maxtivity	Maxtivity is the first web application and app offering the connection between sports professionals (sports coaches, yoga teachers, pilates, fitness, boxing . . .) and individuals.	Encouraging physical activity	George	(co)Founder and CEO
Actioma	Actioma deploys connected health prevention programs based on play, physical activity and collective commitment to promote behavior change. Actioma uses gamification and collective mobilization for adhesion and commitment.	Encouraging physical activity	Brook	Business development director
Pollink	With short, simple and fun anonymous questionnaires sent to employees on a regular basis, Pollink allows you to measure commitment, analyze action levers, and boost fulfillment with concrete actions.	Enable the expression of opinions and feelings	Clayton	(co)Founder and CEO
Meetingo	Meetingo is a platform for collecting feedback for your meetings, conferences, workshops, trainings, etc. in order to make them more productive and satisfying for each participant.	Enable the expression of opinions and feelings	Arnold	(co)Founder and CEO
Hyperity	Hyperity is the first digital coach in collective intelligence. In just a few minutes, he tells you what kind of teammate you are, how your team works and how to improve its atmosphere and efficiency.	Enable the expression of opinions and feelings	Freddie	(co)Founder and CEO

All the names have been anonymized. Descriptions have been extracted from the company website or collected documentation. Start-ups that have not responded to our formal interview request are listed as N.A. in the interview column.

Table 3. Illustration of thematic dimensions and example quotes.

Aggregate dimensions	Theoretical category	Illustrative data: interview extracts/observations/archives
Autarkic holism	Synthesis	We're sure about all these aspects. After maybe people can specialize, go into a niche around 1 of the 6 elements, but today, we are really into a global solution, each of the elements can be linked to the *Comweb* solution. Because we consider that the prescription is global, and not only one of the points. Of course it would be good to incite people to do physical activity, but we don't believe that this should be in isolation, that's why we look to have a truly global approach (interview with Megan, Chief operation officer at Comweb) For me there is a synergy since when you take a solution in one of the six categories they are all included. Because, more or less, they respond to the wider problematics linked to well-being at work. They will take care of their employees, encourage them to do a sport, to communicate and know each other, to be in something that is really interesting. (interview with Evalyn, Co-Founder & Chief marketing officer at Dreamaze) *Pollink,* marketing material ascribing specific attributes to body parts: Head = cognitive, evaluative happiness. It's when we think and are happy with our work. Not to fall into hyper-work investment. Heart = hedonic, emotional happiness. To feel one's emotions, positive affect (joy, laughter. . .) and reduce negative affect (tension, stress. . .). Body = physical well-being. To feel healthy, energetic, with good diet, physical activity, and sleep. Vitality. Meaning = eudaimonic, aspirational happiness. To perceive the utility of one's work, have the feeling of contributing to a collective project that goes beyond oneself and of which one can be proud. *FolderSpace* proposes specifically to put together all the services that are selected by the business in one single and overall application (FolderSpace, Press release) Workplace well-being integrates all the aspects of professional life: from quality of life at work to safe environment, along with the feelings of the employees toward their work, their space, the professional climate and the organization of their tasks. (interview with Patrick, President of HappyAppy) *Outcome: integration* And why culture? I think because at the end, art and business are two worlds that have historically been often separated. We put artworks, paintings, but without making any connection between the worlds. And now the connection is beginning to be made. (interview with Christopher, (co)Founder & CEO of Modery) *******************************

Table 3. (Continued)

Aggregate dimensions	Theoretical category	Illustrative data: interview extracts/observations/archives
	Totalization	It's not because a single managers in his corner says "that's great, I'm going to do something," it's that the enterprise has a global vision of how, via Humanity, it can make its processes fluid, accelerate transformation, simplify its reorganization. (interview with Patrick, President of HappyAppy)
		The Smart Office, that means taking into account the individual in his globality, and not considering him only from the point of view of a function. (FolderSpace, White Paper)
		Well-being makes up part of my everyday life and to aim for this feeling of equilibrium, of serenity and happiness. I am the carrier of a vision of transformation of society. I am not only responsible for that which I do but also for that which I allow to happen, collectively or individually. (Socian, Vision statement)
		Aidquest (Total Well-being Experience). *Aidquest* is the first platform for global employee support for all the stakes of well-being and workplace life quality. (Aidquest, Sales brochure)
		Outcome: immersion
		Space, its ordering and its animation should thus bring with it sensations of well-being, that produce the desire to give oneself up to get there. An environment that one can take up into oneself and that transforms the member and his colleagues into actors in their workspaces. It will also go beyond only the professional sphere, to embrace the everyday desires and the needs of employees. (FolderSpace, White Paper) **
Relational holism	Connection	But in fact we often forget the point of the catalyst, which is the person. How in creating a bond we can simplify the cross-departmental processes in the business. This is never discussed. So on the contrary, HappyAppy talks nonstop about that. Thanks to the person, thanks to listening to people, thanks to social cohesion, via sports, personal vectors, we can fluidify the organizational culture, and resolve problems very simply. (interview with Patrick, President of HappyAppy)
		To favor integration, exchange and communication are equally at the heart of the challenges of organizations to create a group cohesion and a climate of goodwill. In this, technology is nonstop producing mobile solutions and platforms to make it so that the collaborators find themselves surrounded by fun activities. Far from isolating, the technology brings people together. (HappyAppy, Press release)
		Outcome: accumulation
		We have a very broad vision of workplace well-being, basically about self-growth. It's an ensemble of good practices. There is a management dimension that can't be neglected, a social dimension around encounters that you have in your organization, a cohesion dimension, there are a good number of dimensions and we would like to intervene in a general way across all of that. (interview with Megan, Chief operation officer at Comweb) **
	Democratic balancing	The concept of workplace sport should, in my view, differentiate itself from sport more generally. It should involve itself in a movement around cohesion more than challenge, to be able to be relevant to the largest number of people, the athlete, the passionate about sports, the amateur, the beginner. In short, to integrate as widely as possible in the workplace, the internal project proposers shouldn't hesitate to speak of sporting activities or of "sport for all." (ActivityPulse, Press release)
		Today, the strength of the digital allows us to democratize individual support to propose to the largest number of people. At every level of the business, each person can from now on take control of his own personal growth. (Recorden, White Paper)
		We need to find a fair equilibrium between the digital and the human, autonomy and support, trust and guidance. (Recorden, White Paper)
		Outcome: participation
		The strong point of tech is to be able to make possible the democratization of well-being, to transform single initiatives, formerly reserved for a few privileged people, into a support for the largest number of people. (HappyAppy, Press release)

Conceptions of holism

HappyAppy was pervaded with discourses and images of holism related to digital technologies, communicated through collective events, interviews with start-ups, and in the promotional materials and media images of the organization and its members. The complex relationship between holistic fantasies and business success ran throughout our data; for instances, as noted in one start-up description:

> "*The objective of* Lucidsoul is *to allow each individual to have a complete vision of himself and to reach self-knowledge: they will reach consciousness of their physical and mental states, of the mechanisms that will permit them to develop powers of the mind and of the body."* (*Lucidsoul*, Sales brochure, December 2018):

Here, the relation between holism ("complete vision of himself") and the motor of performance ("develop powers") is exemplary of the neoliberal fantasies described in the communicative capitalism framework. Yet the heterogeneous forms of holism reflected different underlying configurations and conceptions of wholeness, which we analyzed in terms of the relation between the "whole" and its "other," and which, as mentioned above, we termed "autarkic" and "relational" holism. These two ways of presenting holism involved distinct underlying conceptions of wholeness, based on the importance of other actors in the construction of an integrated whole. We treat each of these in turn.

Oneness with self and world: Autarkic holism

We termed "autarkic" a broad array of holistic discourses in which the idea of holism involved visions of unity where divergent terms were absorbed into a complete and single whole. In autarkic holism, opposing pairs or pluralities (e.g. mind and body, self and other, personal, and social) were unified and seen as part of a single thing. Autarkic holism displayed a logic of "from many to one," which could result in a vision of a "whole" person (i.e. one who has overcome internal fragmentation) or an integrated world (where nature, society or the universe are seen as some kind of unity), supported through the digital technology. In both cases, the erasure of difference supported the ideal of a self-contained person, which inspired us to adopt the label "autarkic." Under this broad label, we distinguished between digital technologies aimed at synthesizing, in which multiple terms were claimed to be brought together into a unity, and totalizing, where the distinction between the two was negated or obscured.

Holism as synthesis. HappyAppy, whose stakeholders involved business clients and whose members produced well-being related digital applications directed at organizational actors, emphasized the interface of work and life, economic and personal. Holistic visions in their organizational discourse (e.g. in events and documents), as well as across the member startups, functioned to bring these parts of life together in a form of synthesis. Solutions aimed at transcending partial views to provide "global" well-being. As George, (co)Founder & CEO at Maxtivity, noted in an interview:

> "*Finally, why did we choose HappyAppy? because the external stakeholders will be looking for a global solution, not only sport, not only healthy food, not only massage. And to have a global offering. . .in the end the client wants a global offer.*"

We note in this statement the logic of "not only X, not only Y, but the whole thing," summarizing the idea of synthesizing with its goal of a unified and integrated whole (autarkic holism). A

similar example was noted in *Comweb*, a digital application focused on soft skills (e.g. conflict management, improving concentration, telework policy). Megan, its Chief operation officer, explained the well-being aspects of the technology as follows:

> "*Today we opt for a global solution, with each element linked to the solution. We consider that our service should be around a global prescription, not merely on one of the points. For sure, it would be nice to incite people to physical activity, but we don't think it should be something in isolation – that's why we look to have a truly global approach.*"

The synthesizing logic transpires in the statement that specific activities should be apprehended in a global rather than an isolated manner. This does not negate the uniqueness of specific well-being solutions but stresses their togetherness within an overall "global solution."

Synthesizing as a fantasy of integration. Synthesizing as a vision of holism envisaged the integration of distinct parts, where difference is accepted in a first moment, only to then be superseded by a unity. Fantasies involved overcoming difference to reach wholeness. HappyAppy itself approached its mission as integrating distinct solutions covering unique aspects and finding useful complementarities by combining them, thus synthesizing the disparate startups into a movement. Its president detailed this vision in one interview:

> "*A start-up may concentrate on team building or cohesion but may pay much less attention to mood questionnaires or commitment. Or it might not pay attention to stress-reduction solutions and end up competing with these. But in an 'integrated well-being blueprint' all these solutions, in an urbanized way, address different problematics and will all be coordinated together.*"

Here, the emphasis is on bringing together elements covering distinct well-being facets. Patrick recognizes diversity in the different digital applications (although not, as we do here, in the diverse forms of holism they may embody) and is committed to an "integrated well-being blueprint/masterplan." As he notes, integration into a unified whole is considered the condition for "transformation" on the basis of well-being.

Illustrating the fantasy of integration with an example from a presentation from the technology start up *Pational* (see Figure 1 below), we note how the self is considered as composed of disparate elements or capacities (psychological, sportive, artistic, intellectual), where the function of the application is to integrate a "personalized" (*cours personnalisés*, top right-hand side) self that is at the same time a "common core" (*tronc commun*, bottom left-hand side). The slightly overlapping images of meditation, design, debate, and sport are visually separated, but then reintegrated as part of the self-development of the client.

Holism as totalization. Distinct from synthesizing, which involved bringing together distinct parts, we termed "totalization" a vision of holism in which individual and context were seamlessly integrated, often with cosmic implications or the denial of difference between the individual and the world through the use of the technology. Totalization tended to involve a vertiginous leap between individual and context through digital engagement, skipping over local relationships or constraints (e.g. rather than technology facilitating communication, the technology would "change the world"). Further, totalization involved a "remainderless" aspect in which the self-world connection was seen as frictionless and easy. For instance, an app publicity material stated, "*Dreamaze permits you to immerse yourself in 100% natural landscape*"(Dreamaze,
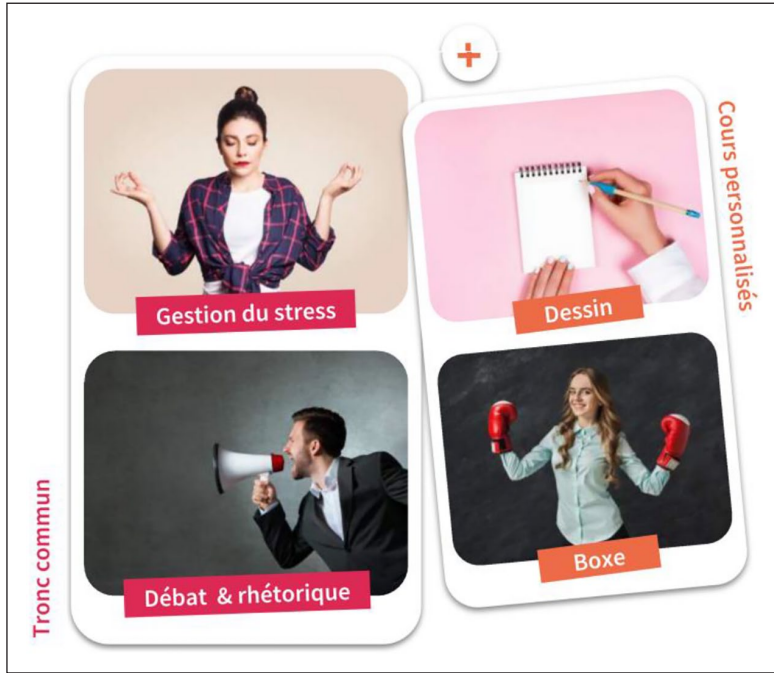
Figure 1. Visual example of fantasy of integration (Pational, Sales brochure).

Sales brochure), while a similar application, *Theraphonic*, frames such immersion as without tension (Theraphonic, Sales brochure):

> *"Nothing that is invasive or painful. And no need to have 20 years of meditation experience to get there. A few aversions to the sound of strolling through the forest, to the songs of birds or underwater diving. . . may be felt initially. These may be symptoms of their lingering stress!"*

The denial of negativity ("nothing[..]invasive or painful") frames the remainderless world in which any friction ("a few aversions") is left-over from a previous non-totalized state.

In interviews, HappyAppy members expressed their visions of totalization by linking individual happiness to the social good, to nature, or to other universalistic or broad concepts. These visions tended to emphasize a seamless continuity between individual and environment, an astute denial of possible tensions or frictions. Such experience was narrated by an anonymous participant who was interviewed after experimenting with one of these immersive solutions during a Welltech Summit:

> *"Sensory immersions with* Theraphonic, *stretched on the couch, you've got a background sound and all of the music vibrating in the couch. So you feel the music. And the other one I did was an aquatic immersion, you plunge into and are completely under water, you find yourself under a waterfall, and it's really done by sound, with your eyes closed, and the feeling of the couch.*"

In such technologies, multiple perceptual stimuli combining sound, visual, and even sometimes olfactory perceptions have a totalizing effect. Similarly, the idea of changing society or

"the world" through technology often involved totalizing aspects that jumped from relatively technical details to bombastic claims of revolutionary change. This surfaced during an internal HappyAppy event, whose purpose was to reach consensus on the group's collective purpose. The following excerpt from the end of the event shed light on the emphasis on totalization:

> *"We've identified that HappyAppy's role is to spark a global cultural transformation. . ... In short, technology has enslaved employees and finally through HappyAppy we will liberate employees through technology. And produce, as a result, a virtuous circle, the Happy Circle."* (transcription of the recording of an internal HappyAppy event)

Technology is here described as either "enslaving" or "liberating," but if used in the right way, as supporting a "global cultural transformation." The totalization involved in this global vision is repeated in the virtuous "Happy Circle," a metaphor invoking a totalistic whole.

Totalization as a fantasy of immersion. Totalizing as a vision of holism frames well-being as a fantasmatic immersion in which difference is negated and a unity of self and world is imagined as a discovery of full potential. Fantasies of holism as totalization frame the digital experience as an expansive and absorptive self-world relation where otherness disappears and the person is at one with their environment. We illustrate this mode of fantasy with a promotional image from *Dreamaze*, whose immersive application purports to link self and universe (see Figure 2 below):

Figure 2. Visual example of fantasy of immersion (Dreamaze, Sales brochure).

Figure 3. Visual example of connecting (Socian, Sales brochure).

This image, with the masked self in the center, surrounded by natural and cosmic images, demonstrates a totalizing vision of the self in which other persons are absent, and the only other living beings are birds. Visions of horizons lead the person beyond the here-and-now of situated experience into a suggestion of transcendence. The company logo (blurred for anonymity) is included in the circle of the imagined world and shaped to suggest an infinite circle to suggest a fantasmatic completion of the real with the imputed totality, mediated by the digital product. The upward-turning face and direction of the visual regard seem to suggest an aspirational and dreamlike state that is neither introverted nor engaged with specific social interactants.

Frictionless interaction: Relational holism

In addition to autarkic holism, in which unity trumps plurality through either synthesis or totalization, we observed an approach to digital holism focusing on interpersonal relations, communication, and participation. We termed these "relational holism" because they focused on smoothing interpersonal boundaries and promoting connection, without thereby erasing the plurality of actors. Start-ups around team organizing, communication tools, or team-building often involved technologies focused on relational holism, which raised a paradoxical situation: how to maintain the sense of a plurality while emphasizing the wholeness or connection of actors? This tension was often palpable in the slight-of-hand between team affirmation and disciplining of members, as noted on the website of the startup *Hyperity*, a technology that "*reinforces the team spirit that is already present and also points out the strengths and weaknesses of each one to improve our common work*" (Hyperity, Sales brochure). We note the eagerness to avoid intra-group antagonism ("team spirit that is already present") while disciplining individual members into the common ("improve our common work"). Two ways of framing holism to allow this move to the group level were observed, which we labeled "connecting" and "democratic balancing," both of which attempted to frame holistic visions in pluralistic ways.

Holism as connecting. We described holistic fantasies as "connecting" where they imagine holism as bringing people together into networks or relationships. Rather than an integrated self, connecting involves integration among social relationships (see Figure 3 below).

Some HappyAppy technologies dealt directly with connecting through messaging and team-related technologies, with specific missions of creating networks. In these situations, building social connections was the direct goal of the technology or program. *Socian*, for instance, is an application that encourages people to meet and develop social ties. The app "Connects people, places and activities" (see Figure 3) (*Socian*, Sales brochure). When interviewed, *Socian*'s founder, Sean, noted the centrality of connection as a form of holism that is often overlooked by a fascination with the "virtual":

> "*We are the inverse of the course of history, of the digital world. You put on a virtual reality headset and you're cut off from the world, you're integrated in a totally digital mode, while us, we say that HappyAppy should forget that and re-center on the human, re-evaluate the human. Consider* Socian *for instance, you totally forget the virtual and come back to the real world to remake activities with other people. . .* Socian *creates occasions to find each other in the real world. It's 'leaving the Matrix', and that's the vision.*"

As noted, the vision of connection, rather than aiming for a peaceful immersion or unified self, administers a dose of "reality" ("the opposite of the virtual"), and emphasizes the social rather than the transcendental self.

Connecting was also apparent in relation to digital applications that created broader ecosystems to connect various stakeholders (e.g. partners, individuals, suppliers). Connecting takes the form of matching groups that have overlapping or complementary goals or resources. Connecting also involves optimizing resource allocation within a given ecosystem. A holistic vision in such systems means placing the individual and their needs at the core of the matching process. As Borys, the founder of *Traft*, a platform connecting individual consultants and business organizations, explained:

> "*The idea of* Traft *was 'we need to put the person in the center of the tool (dispositive). . . making the model virtuous in this way, no one is hurt and everyone finds their niche (trouver son compte). The ensemble of the parties is encouraged to help the other parties to find their interest*."

As can be seen here, actors pursue distinct interests that converge in a virtuous manner. The idea that "everyone finds their niche" acknowledges the uniqueness of each party but shows that these can work in harmony when each and everyone's interest is apprehended in a holistic manner. Connecting, in this view, operates at the process level and influences the nature of transactions and social and economic exchanges.

Similarly, Clayton from Pollink notes that connecting goes beyond data matching to involve the relational aspects of the person: "*if you just have calibrated data, beautiful data, you're not necessarily going to take action. There is a step between data and action. We think that this stage is* dialog. (interview with Clayton, (co)Founder & CEO at Pollink). Building on this rationale, Pollink encourages employees to express their feelings, emotions moods, and any other affects through its weekly polls. The ritualized weekly dialogs that are supposed to result from these polls require emphatic listening which Pollink defines as "*being attentive to the person, lifting our own* filters *and blocks to receive the entire message your interlocutor is willing to send you*" (*Pollink, Newsletter).* Pollink's model of affective, cognitive, and communicative bonding is visually illustrated in Figure 4:
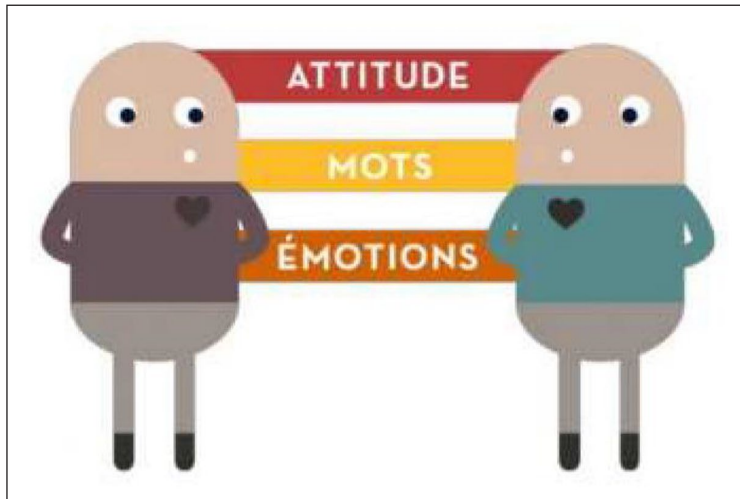
Figure 4. Visual example of connecting (Pollink, Newsletter).

Connecting as a fantasy of accumulation. Connecting at HappyAppy involved the idea of a plurality, with the goal of building networks or creating relationships. Some of these networks were limited to small groups and work teams and so reached numerical limit while others held out the possibility for limitless expansion of connections (e.g. *Socian*). Either way, the holistic vision was additive, being achieved through accumulating connections to expand or consolidate a group. In this sense, we describe connection as embodying a fantasy of "accumulation," through which added relationships bring one closer to a state of connectedness. Whether technology is at forefront (e.g. a communication medium) or in the background (e.g. an algorithm automatically connecting individual and groups), the underlying accumulative nature of expansion was apparent in several segments. *FolderSpace* is a business solution that pivoted from real estate management app for coworking spaces to a "smart workplace management solution focused on people" (*FolderSpace*'s website). As part of its offering, it elaborates on the new Welcome Manager role it has created:

> "*Welcome Managers are creators of social ties between different groups in the same building. By capitalizing on collective events, they can lead to new ties developing among the residents. To enrich office life, it is thus fundamental also to create bonds between colleagues or employees of different companies. Participating in collective activities can help reveal aspects of one's personality that can then be put in the service of a professional mission, but also lead to personal fulfillment. (épanouissement)..It's also about attracting new employees, creating a demand for activities and services, and offering them a work environment that is qualitatively favorable to help retain employees.*" (FolderSpace, White paper)

The accumulative nature of strengthening the links between firms that share the same office building is visible through the use of notions connotating an additive meaning: "capitalize," "enrich office life," "personal growth," "attracting new employees."

Holism as democratic balancing. Many of the HappyAppy startups and discussions emphasized participation as a value and a source of happiness. We termed "democratic balancing" a kind of holistic vision in which inclusivity, participation, and voice are emphasized as parts of a "whole" organization (see Figure 5 below). Differently than a totalizing or synthesizing vision, democratic

Figure 5. Visual example of democratic balancing (Feelight, Sales brochure).

balancing kept to the concept of a plurality within a team or organizational context and focused on addressing asymmetries of participation or voice within the plurality. Generally limited to a small group (e.g. a work team), such balancing was often achieved technologically through some kind of coordinating application or input service through a smart device.

Democratic balancing tended to assume a core value of participation within the group, with the goal of enabling or motivating participation. The desired result would be to achieve a harmonious or happy group with increased cohesion. For instance, to address the lack of individual employee recognition, *Empathyy* developed an application allowing each employee to distribute a number of digital "accolades" to their colleagues. Its founder, Felicia, details the initiative, saying "*It's about managerial innovation, we distribute the power of recognition among everyone in the firm*" (observation from notes taken during the Welltech Summit organized by HappyAppy). The idea of balance and plurality, along with the mutual dependence of people for each other's approval, is seen as a way of creating well-being through "democratic" design.

Democratic balancing also tended to highlight the medium of participation as equivalent to "giving voice" and focused on opportunities to participate. Applications that provided feedback, for example, were considered to promote participation regardless of their use or the content of participation. Several of these created opportunities for employees to express feedback through small questionnaires, with the goal of increasing motivation through a feeling of voice. (e.g. *Pollink*). Others were more geared toward balancing participation in specific instances such as meetings (e.g. *Meetingo*). Antony, the CEO and founder of *Meetingo*, shared the following anecdote during an interview:

> "*Putting oneself in a position of active listening is to make a first step toward well-being. I spoke earlier about communication channels, that means a bottom-up channel, from that one all the way down at the bottom of the pyramid, toward the managerial levels that are a bit higher, has an effect that is hyper positive.*"

As Antony notes, top-down listening to the "bottom of the pyramid" creates a sense of well-being that is "hyper positive," and while it preserves the structure of the organizational hierarchy, this is made more supple through "active listening." The metaphor of a "bottom-up" channel conveys the

essence of democratic balancing concept, where communication between those at the top and those at the bottom are harmonized.

Democratic balancing as a fantasy of pluralistic engagement. Democratic balancing tended to frame a lack of workplace democracy as a consequence of lack of adequate tools for open self-expression and engagement. For instance, Jeffrey, (co)Founder & CEO at *Conciergg*, expressed his discomfort toward unfair situations as a driver for his own business. He developed an online concierge service where requests can be automated through the use of a chatbot, to lower the cost of concierge services and contribute to accessibility. He noted:

> "*at the end, we launch a product called* Conciergg, *and a solution directed at all organizational members, so we're looking for volume, so we don't propose solutions for the elites, for the Parisians, or for those who live in the crown of the west of Paris.*"

Invoking an image of the masses ("volume") as going beyond the "Parisian" elites, the application was imagined as fulfilling an idea of participation that resonates with a democratic ethos. The fact that the service was directed at "all members of the organization"—not just a selected elite living in globalized capital cities—shows that unfair situations can be solved with appropriate technological means.

In short, democratic balancing constructed a holistic vision of collective participation, that was relatively power-free, enabled by technology, and involving the seamless flow of individual inputs into a group form whose goal was to have an engaged, pluralistic, and committed work group.
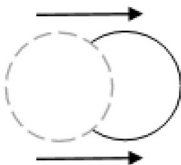
Overall, holism appeared in varied forms through HappyAppy, with each form composing a distinct fantasy around the unity or relationality of wholeness. Table 4 represents our attempt to visualize these different positions, in terms of the nature of otherness within the fantasy and the way that otherness is imagined in terms of integration or immersion (autarkic holism) or participation or accumulation (relational holism). Each of these positions represents a distinct fantasy, with implications for its relation to capital, as suggested above. Yet, these positions were also deployed in distinct ways by the organization, and this has implications for the critical and political possibilities of such fantasies. We turn to this aspect below.

Discussion: Holistic discourses and critical possibilities

From the above discussion and initial theorization, we can see how technologically mediated fantasies of wholeness take heterogeneous forms depending on their focus on a single integrated individual (autarkic) versus an interactive and mutually engaged plurality (relational). While these categories are not mutually exclusive and should be seen as dynamic and overlapping, by examining each of these ways of constructing holism, different fantasy elements can be seen to operate around the technological applications on offer.

This conceptualization allowed us to address the second part of the research question, involving conceptions of holism and their relation to the critical possibilities of digital technologies. This aspect was crucial to understand the complex ideological situation of subjective participation in *holistic fantasies, in which, as* Dean (2009) *notes, notions of "emancipation" are fraught and subject to processes of cooptation and appropriation.* Wrestling with the more difficult question of critical possibilities, we turned to the data to characterize the verbatim in terms of their ostensible goals, with a focus on generating productive value for individuals and organizations, on the one hand (which we termed "productivist" discourses) or allowing personal or collective change or well-being, on the other (which we termed "emancipatory" discourses). Because HappyAppy's

Table 4. Technological visions of holism.

Holistic vision		Fantasy object of holistic vision	Constitution of wholeness	Form of value claimed
Autarkic holism	Synthesis	Integration: A unified and cohesive subject is constituted through the unification of different elements of work and life	Disparate aspects of subject brought together	Consistent and coherent self, integration of different life spheres.
	Totalization	Immersion: The subject feels at one with the world, society, or nature. Frictions between self and other disappear.	Negation/overcoming of disparate aspects of subject	Link between self and world, overcoming of alienation, or isolation.
Relational holism	Connection	Accumulation: An expanding sense of connection is built through tools enabling social contact and exchange	Establishment of relational connections/networks	Expansion of social world, increase of sense of support, and recognition.
	Democratic balancing	Participation: An ideal of egalitarian participation is promoted through platforms for expressing opinions or sentiments.	Promotion of participation or inclusion in collective	Sense of equality and group recognition, dialogic self-other relation.

	Autarkic Holism	Relational Holism
Productivist	*-Stress-Free Work* *-Increased Job Resilience* *-Self-confidence* *-Self-control/organization*	*-Team Coordination* *-Reduced Group Conflict* *-Smoother Information Flow* *-Increased Social Resources*
Emancipatory	*-Sense of Escape* *-Oneness with Nature* *-Realization of desire* *-Sense of Peace*	*-Collective Solidarity?* *-Social Mobilization?* *-Challenging Organizational Norms?* *- Social Transformation?*

Figure 6. Productivist and emancipatory aspects of digital holism.

stated mission involved well-being related workplace applications, we expected discourses that attempted to combine productivist and emancipatory discourses; this was indeed the case, with, much of HappyAppy's discourse spanning across these categories. Yet our interest was to see how the different ways of conceiving holism related to these overall goals, and on this question a somewhat different picture emerges.

We illustrate in Figure 6 the discourses around relational and autarkic holism in relation to productivist and emancipatory claims. Not surprisingly, productivist discourses ran across both forms of holism, as the start-ups claimed personal and organizational performance enhancements through the technological supports. Yet, emancipatory claims centered around autarkic holism specifically, in which claims of personal fulfillment, connection with nature, and self-world unity were the focus of emancipatory claims. In contrast, the more "social" technologies were largely productivist in orientation, focusing on team productivity, enhanced communication, or coordination.

Put differently, the notable absence of relational, emancipatory discourses, that is, "4th corner," was surprising, given the focus of critical theorizing on the social nature of emancipatory or collective movements. HappyAppy's emancipatory focus centered on autarky, while relational visions were channeled into productivism (e.g. such as productive teamwork). This perplexing asymmetry has important implications for the role of technology in communicative capitalism, because it is exactly the relational, emancipatory aspect of holism that might underwrite visions of solidarity and collective organization (with important caveats, see Dean, 2012, 2016). It thus points to the limits of current *technê-*zen conceptions of holism, while also suggesting how technology could be framed in ways that more actively target collective change, such as promoting autonomy through cooperation rather than in isolation, or less instrumental conceptions of teamwork.

Theoretical contributions

Our study examined the interface of digital culture and new age management by examining the concept of digital holism. We build on views of contemporary capitalism as promoting a *technê-*zen (Williams, 2011) approach that integrates digital technology into an ideology of connection that usurps counter-cultural tendencies (Lusoli and Turner, 2021; Turner, 2006). Linking these

views with an emerging critical literature on new age management (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Endrissat et al., 2015; Przegalinska, 2019), we identified a common denominator in holistic fantasies in which the self, group, or society are integrated, seamless, and connected. As an understudied aspect of new age, holism mobilizes ideologies of connection to shape subjective desire (Dean, 2009, 2015), making it theoretically interesting for understanding the interface of connective technologies and well-being. Problematizing these fantasies by drawing on Dean's notion of communicative capitalism, we examined diverse fantasies within digital holism to understand their ideological implications. We identified two broad forms of holism, autarkic (synthesizing and totalizing) and relational (connecting and democratic balancing), where the first imagines a self-contained individual absorbing otherness, and the second imagines a seamless relation with others in an idealized group dynamic. Notably, while the former, more individualistic view is pervaded by a discourse of emancipation and freedom, the latter tends to be more business-focused and claims to support team performance.

Seen against the broader project of understanding the role of the digital within the ideological apparatus of contemporary management, our study offers contributions to two ongoing discussions. The first, around new age management, asks how discourses of well-being and personal-development—of which digital holism is an example—shape ideologies in and around organizations, while the second, around digital organizing, asks how critical perspectives can take account of digital tools as they relate to organizing. Situated at the crux of these two discussions, we discuss our contributions to each of these in turn.

Contributions to new age management

The current study contributes to an emerging literature around critical aspects of new age organizing (e.g. Endrissat et al., 2015; Land and Taylor, 2010). This literature has examined the ambivalences and tensions in contemporary work's promises of authenticity, happiness, or self-expression. It has noted how such promises become instrumentalized and leveraged as normative control mechanisms (e.g. Fleming, 2009; Toraldo et al., 2019). While often implicit, promises of wholeness run throughout the empirical sites characterizing this literature, and some have noted the sometimes-violent consequences of questioning such promises (e.g. Picard and Islam, 2020). While some previous work has noted links between new age management and digital technology (e.g. Przegalinska, 2019), how digital culture empirically mobilizes new age fantasies remains in need of analysis. By drawing on communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005, 2010) as a theoretical frame, we highlight the ways that an emergent "happy" sector can leverage technological infrastructures to mediate promises of wholeness.

Specifically, we find that a plethora of holistic discourses around digital products support fantasies of autonomy and relationality, where the former frames an "integrated" mind-body subject linked to nature and the latter imagines smooth teamwork and mutual understanding. While autarkic holism invokes fantasies of freedom and fulfillment, more relational holistic visions tend to be performance-related. Put differently, it is precisely at the point where collective action and relation are foregrounded that this is most framed in productivist terms, while fantasies of freedom are woven around individualist themes. Rather than claiming that positive management forecloses on emancipatory imaginaries, therefore, it may be more apt to claim that it distracts from *relational* visions of freedom, while promoting visions of freedom at the level of individuals. The suggestion is that one can have collectivity, or freedom—but not both. As an ideological aspect of new age management, this orthogonal positioning of fantasies of freedom and imaginaries of collectivity constitute a powerful ideological tool against what Dean (2012) calls "the communist desire."

The previous point, however, begs the question of whether such socialized emancipatory discourses would themselves be subject to Dean's (2009)critique of communicative capitalism, even if they do not fall into the individualizing tendencies of neoliberal fantasies (Dean, 2010). The problematization of "emancipation" in Lacanian analysis (upon which Dean draws extensively) raises doubts about whether such socialized fantasies would be emancipatory in any "true" sense or simply another form of ideology. As Dean (2012) notes, however, to the extent that ideologies of collectivity are reconceptualized not as "wholes" but as "horizons"—that is, projects for action based on difference that cannot be imagined away—there is a possibility for alternative organizing that does not require disavowal (cf., Zanoni, 2020). In this sense, the emancipatory potential of relational forms of holism would depend on the kinds of closure or openness of the "whole" that they allowed, a point which is somewhat moot in the current site given the lack of relational holism observed. That important bridge may need to be crossed at some point in the "horizon," although it is beyond the horizon of the current analysis.

Regarding digital holism, linking emergent critiques of digital well-being with communicative capitalism traces a path by which social value in digital culture is converted into economic value (Mumby, 2016). The practices supported by digital holism create a bridge between individual motivation and the digital business models created to harness, amplify and extract value from those motivations. While a core aspect of the recent critical perspectives on wellness has been an over-focus on individual vis-à-vis social and structural processes (e.g. Cederström and Spicer, 2015), digital holism is one of the mechanisms by which individual fantasies and technological infrastructures are entwined to simultaneously imagine new kinds of subjects and new forms of value capture (Dean, 2009). Communicative capitalism, as a theoretical frame, is uniquely positioned to explore this interface because of its double-facing focus on desire and fantasy, on the one hand, and structures of extraction on the other. By no means limited to digitally mediated communication, the latter provides a striking case to highlight the co-constitution of digital technology and subjective fantasy.

Contributions to digital organizing

The above contribution connects to a growing critical literature on digital organizing, in which the forms of connectivity enabled by digital tools are understood both as material infrastructures of organizing and as social imaginaries (e.g. Beverungen et al., 2019; Hensmans, 2021). Recent works have emphasized the extractive capabilities of digital tools, in which desires and communicative processes become raw materials for capitalization (Beverungen et al., 2015; Zuboff, 2019); these approaches are consistent with communicative capitalism in their emphasis on the material extraction underlying the "virtual" layer of digital technologies. Given this extractive dynamic, the ideological function of holism may be to form integrated subjectivities who are affectively invested in such extraction, as Dean (2009, p.56) notes, "neoliberalism affirms technology's fantasy of wholeness to tell us who "we" are in a global sense." The value-extraction logic of communicative capitalism would thus be complemented by the ideological force of *technê*-zen (Williams, 2011), the fantasies of self-fulfillment and social connection that drive users to seek well-being through engagement with digital applications.

In this way, the communicative capitalism approach combines a material critique with an exploration of the collective desires embodied in such fantasies; this duality, in our case, led us to explore the visions of holism and well-being that were woven around the technology and its discourses. By describing and theorizing the different forms of digital holism promoted at HappyAppy, we take a first step toward understanding the ways in which people lean on such technologies to discover themselves and others, and the detours involved.

In sum, an important interface between new age management and critical technology literatures is traced by the concept of digital holism. Digital organizing literature has explored the subject-constituting effects of technological artifacts, and how these can support new forms of control (cf., Beverungen et al., 2019). Yet, the materiality of technology has always been supplemented by ideological discourses, which offer technology as a panacea for the fullness of the self or of the community (Turner, 2006). *Technê*-zen is a paradoxical combination of the ephemeral and the mechanical, the fantasy of virtual connection supplementing the mechanical and control-oriented engineering of employee selves. By examining this convergence of the technological and the new age, we contribute to understanding how subjective desires are shaped in the context of digital technologies.

Future research directions and conclusion

While the current study examined how digital holism is expressed through diverse visions of self and others, more research is needed about how different ways of imagining wholeness relate to each other and to wider organizational structures. For instance, what would be the conditions under which relational fantasies of wholeness are articulated together with visions of nature or the cosmos, a combination largely missing from our site? Such articulations may face constraints from wider cultural imaginaries or the interests of firms or clients of digital applications. Future research should examine how the diverse "promises" of digital holism are produced and distributed, based on whose interests, and how technological fantasies can be shaped, transformed, or subverted.

Relatedly, digital holism may work in ways that are distinct from (and perhaps potentiate) the "romantic" utopias of most new age management. While the latter focus on vintage, artistic, or communitarian ideologies (e.g. Toraldo et al., 2019), *digital holism* combines communitarian thinking with technological progress (Turner, 2006), to create futuristic utopias that hold out "promises." These promises support fantasies in distinct ways from the "nostalgic" fantasies of romantic utopias (Heelas, 2008). For one, the future-oriented imaginings of *digital holism* may be powerful motivators that increase worker adherence to neo-normative controls, especially where these require releasing personal data or other risky prospects. By contrast, backward-looking authenticity discourses may be more conservative and less likely to spur risk-embracing leaps into the future. Empirical research should examine how traditional forms of spirituality or community are remade in the mold of digital media technologies.

Theoretically, invoking Dean's communicative capitalism raises myriad questions around the Marxist-Lacanian heritage of this work, around the possibility and nature of emancipatory politics in this tradition (cf., Laclau, 1996). Dean's (2009) work tends to regard traditionally emancipatory notions such as participation and communication as subsumed under capital accumulation, although her subsequent work (e.g. Dean, 2012) allows, if not a criterion for emancipation, a "horizon" against which progressive organizing is possible. As we explained, we remained cautious in our exploration of this horizon, although our goal of critically evaluating digital holism does reveal our own emancipatory interest in such research. Future research building on this interest would involve examining digital cultures, holistic, or otherwise, which contest or go beyond the commodification of well-being as presented here. Whether such cultures would emphasize the relational-emancipatory aspects of holism lacking in the current context, or go beyond holistic discourses altogether, is a discussion worth having. Examining technologies-in-use, including implementation and alternative uses, could provide insights both into the extent to which users internalize such fantasies, or alternatively, their strategies of resistance, resignification, or reengineering of technological solutions. Given the prevalence of DIY, user-communities and open software, the construction of digital visions of the social are likely to be sites of struggle (Cavanagh, 2013).

Finally, looking to the current historical moment raises the question of how digital culture will shift in a post-Covid-19 world where digital work may become increasingly ubiquitous and precarious (e.g. Fuchs, 2020). It is too soon to speculate on whether the techno-culture exemplified by digital holism will survive the normalization and massification of digital technologies across virtually all spheres of social life (e.g. Zuboff, 2019). Future research should remain aware of the time-sensitivity of research around digital culture and interpret the current findings in light of their historical moment.

In sum, bringing a communicative capitalism lens to bear on the material and economic critique of technology allowed us to explore the urge to connect, to work on oneself, and to search for happiness through the looking glass of the digital screen. Providing a powerful tool for capital accumulation, holistic fantasies may seem more complete, coherent, and desirable than the fragmented realities on the other side of the screen; the desires they foment powerfully shape digital culture and those within it.

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ORCID iD

Gazi Islam   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6503-6018

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Author biographies

Gazi Islam is Professor of People, Organizations and Society at Grenoble Ecole de Management, and member of the research laboratory IREGE (Research Institute for Management and Economics). He has served as faculty at Insper, Tulane University, and the University of New Orleans. His current research interests revolve around the contemporary meanings of work, and the relations between identity, group dynamics and the production of group and organizational cultures.

Dr. Jean-Charles Pillet is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Information Systems (DESI) of HEC Lausanne, Switzerland. He holds a PhD in Business Administration from Grenoble Management School (France) and has prior consulting experience at a large IT firm. His research interests cover the adoption and use of emerging technologies, the digital transformation of business organizations, and scale development theories, issues, and methods. His work has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as the International Journal of Information Management, Research in the Sociology of Organizations, and Système d'Information et Management.

Dr. Kseniya Navazhylava's serves as Assistant Professor at Business Research group of Ecole de Management Leonard de Vinci (EMLV). After completing her PhD at HEC Paris, she opted for a postdoc position at Grenoble Ecole de Management. Her current research explores future of work with a particular emphasis on technology, identity and occupational dynamics within workplace.

Marcos Barros is Professor at Grenoble École de Management (France). His research interests include alternative forms of organization, institutional dynamics, technology and social media and critical perspectives on change, identity and resistance. His research has been published in Organization Studies, Organization Science and Journal of Management Inquiry.
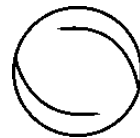
Enchanting Work: New Spirits of Service Work in an Organic Supermarket

Nada Endrissat
Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

Gazi Islam
Grenoble Ecole de Management, France and Insper

Claus Noppeney
Bern University of the Arts and Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

Abstract
Drawing from a qualitative, empirical study of work experiences in a North American organic supermarket, we introduce the notion of 'enchanting work', a polyvalent concept referring to the aura found in certain forms of service work in contrast to the disenchantment commonly associated with it. Enchanting work, because of its unique stance vis-a-vis workplace critique and commitment, can inform the study of work by moving beyond the dichotomy of meaningful versus alienated work. Our findings show how enchanting work can be found on three different levels to (1) infuse otherwise mundane work processes with meaning, (2) obscure organizational control mechanisms and divert attention from precarious work conditions, and (3) recruit the participation of workers for creating an enchanted workplace. We discuss the implications of our results for understanding contemporary worlds of work and explore both the emancipatory and ideological ramifications of enchanting work.

Keywords
alienation, authenticity, creativity, critical management studies, enchantment, retail, services, supermarket, work

Supermarkets, in their standardization and monotonization of work practices, seem to epitomize the modern 'disenchantment of the world' (Weber, 1922, p. 30). Products and labour are commodified, work is employer-controlled, and spontaneity is minimized, leaving room only for standardized

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Corresponding author:
Claus Noppeney, Bern University of Applied Sciences, Brückenstrasse 73, 3005 Bern, Switzerland.
Email: claus.noppeney@hkb.bfh.ch

interactions in an efficiency-focused work system (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Fineman, 2012; Korczynski & Ott, 2006; van Maanen, 1991; Warhurst, Thompson, & Nickson, 2009). Bagging groceries, stocking shelves or serving customers seem to provide little room for self-expression, autonomy and creativity, making supermarket work appear an unlikely candidate for 'enchanting a disenchanted world' (Ritzer, 2005). Such enchantment, increasingly invoked to describe the spectral nature of post-modern consumer culture, is largely absent from the study of work (Gellner, 1975; Korczynski, 2005; Ritzer, 2005). As we argue, however, changes in worlds of work draw together experiences of enchantment with formerly mundane work practices, a development whose consequences for understanding neo-normative control at work, among other things, are double-edged and complex (e.g. Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Exploring these changes in a US-based organic supermarket chain, a setting replete with shopfloor enchantment, gave rise to the current reflection on service work and contemporary workplaces more generally.

The evolving relationship between disenchantment and new forms of enchantment has been attracting scholarly attention (e.g. Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Gellner, 1975; Landy & Saler, 2009; Ritzer, 2005). On the one hand, blurring work and non-work spheres (e.g. Ritzer, 2005) confers new meanings on work as a space for self-expression and enchantment. Additionally, critiques of traditional organizations as cold, mechanical systems (Ritzer, 2005, p. 89), and an emphasis on post-industrial forms of organizing as ideological control mechanisms (e.g. Fleming, 2009) open up workplaces as potentially 'enchanted' spaces (Boje & Baskin, 2011; see also Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015, on 'technologies of enchantment'). Finally, because service work involves relational, emotional and aesthetic labour (e.g. Hochschild, 2011; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a), it may be difficult to separate consumer enchantment from that of service workers. Each of these aspects of service work link labour to the reproduction of social and symbolic, as well as material realities, and consequently to the potential for the (re)enchantment of the workplace (e.g. Graeber, 2004; Sallaz, 2010).

Linking these workplace changes to enchantment involves recognizing their ambivalent nature. Enchantment has been defined as an aura of authentic presence, resisting rationalization and promoting creative social connection (Boje & Baskin, 2011). Yet, enchanting customers and employees can also represent a form of symbolic manipulation, similar to seductive visions or branding, or the spiritual elevation of work (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Bell & Taylor, 2003), constituting an 'illusion of worker autonomy' (MacDonald & Sirianni, 1996, p. 10). On the one hand, the techniques of enchantment evoke the personal, the socially meaningful, and even the sublime. On the other hand, enchantment comes with the double meaning of being 'duped' or fooled (Ladkin, 2006). These critical readings of enchantment suggest that its role is ideological rather than emancipatory, obscuring the realities of routinized service work. In short, understanding workplace enchantment requires examining the multiple layers of meaning within the concept, from the aesthetic and sublime to the ideological.

Below, we empirically explore the various layers of meaning by which enchantment works within the service sector. Enchanting work provides a framework that takes advantage of a word-play where the actors, actions and targets shift in empirically and theoretically important ways. Focusing on the enchanted *nature* of a particular job or workspace, enchanting as an adjective invokes the meaningful and seductive elements of a job or organization (work *is* enchanting). Focusing on the action *done* to a job, enchanting as a verb invokes organizational and managerial attempts to cast a 'spell' over otherwise mundane, low-prestige service work (work *is being* enchanted). Focusing on the work *practices*, enchanting in its gerund form describes what the work itself involves, i.e. the participative act of enchanting oneself, colleagues and customers (enchantment is the *objective* of the work). Each of these empirically grounded forms involves distinct visions of actors, conceptions of work, and critical possibilities regarding the workplace. The polysemic concept of 'enchanting work' can thus

account for the multiple interpretations of work, holding together different readings without reducing one interpretation to the others (Bourdieu, 1990).

The paper's contribution is threefold. (1) The concept of 'enchanting work', in its polyvalence, juxtaposes naturalistic, critical and performative readings of enchantment in service work. We show how, beyond the duality of enchantment/disenchantment, organizational members work constructively to co-create spaces of enchantment within organizational constraints. (2) We theorize, based on these findings, the role of service work as a form of social reproduction, where meanings and values are embedded in, and produced by, work practices. Seeing enchantment as part of the work role goes beyond contrasting enchanted worlds of consumption against disenchanted worlds of production and work. (3) We discuss enchantment's implications for understanding work more generally, focusing on enchanting work as representing the ambivalent nature of contemporary organizational settings. Enchanting work allows increased space for worker autonomy and creative expression, yet also entrenches such expression within efficiency logics, foreclosing opportunities for systemic workplace critique.

Our argument begins by tracing the evolution of contemporary service work from standardized efficiency approaches ('McDonaldization') to those stressing fantasy experience and emotional involvement ('Disneyfication') to enchantment within work, a theme reflecting the limits of strict administrative controls in the context of the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). We define our research problem in terms of the contours of this new spirit, where workplace enchantment facilitates rich work experiences on the one hand and new forms of exploitation and normative control on the other hand. Outlining our empirical setting and analytical strategy, we focus on three progressive levels of reflexivity that form the basis of our analysis. Constructing the enchanting work notion across these three levels, we empirically illustrate how enchantment is presupposed, critiqued and enacted. Finally, we discuss the implications of enchanting work for understanding workplace changes, above all within the service industries.

The Commodification of Service Work

Service work has become a flashpoint for labour debates, especially around the question of whether services would 'free workers from the tyranny of industry' (Braverman, 1974, p. 373). The transformation of work in developed economies toward services, some argue (e.g. Bowen & Schneider, 1988), fundamentally changes the meanings of work. Service-industry logics confound product and producer, employee and customer. Services are relatively intangible and demand active customer participation, and are produced and consumed simultaneously, blurring the distinction between worker and work output (Bowen & Schneider, 1988). Employees are in close relationships with customers, other employees and management. Finally, made-to-order services and customer input further integrate customers into the production process. These factors make it crucial to produce work environments where creativity and interaction create value in often unpredictable ways. According to Bowen and Schneider (1988), they also support employee role-making and autonomy.

Yet, as Braverman (1974) argued, the shift to services does not fundamentally undo the monotony and standardization of work (see also Warhurst et al., 2009). Many service jobs rival manufacturing in their repetitiveness and lack of autonomy (Braverman, 1974). Such jobs, particularly in retail, are low-paid, labour intensive and highly constraining (e.g. MacDonald & Sirianni, 1996). Labour process theorists note that, because it 'cannot take shape in an object' (Braverman, 1974, p. 248), service work is not based on the production of an object, but is itself an object, a commodity 'like every other commodity' (Marx, 1861).

To the extent that services themselves are commodities, they may take on the charmed or enchanting aspects formerly reserved for commodities (Marx, 1906; see also Gellner, 1975; Ritzer,

2005). While work as disenchanted clashes with the enchanted aura of consumer products (Ritzer, 2005), the relational aspect of service enactments, simultaneously produced and consumed, create potential spaces for enchantment within the work role itself.

Although services retain many aspects of manufacturing labor processes, scholars have noted attempts to graft onto service work an air of authenticity (Fleming, 2009), aesthetics (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a) and emotional connection (Hochschild, 1983), implying that new notions of value are at least *ostensibly* conferred upon service work, creating an appearance of enchantment.

Disenchanted Production and Enchanted Consumption

Disenchantment, as the loss of a deeply meaningful relation with one's surroundings, has characterized workplace theorizing since Weber's (1922) 'disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world' thesis, with enchantment slowly squeezed out by the lock-step advance of modern rationalization. Marx (1906) critiqued the loss of meaning associated with work and production, but retained the notion of enchantment as *delusion*, recognizing its persistence in commodities, which took on a quasi-mystical fetish quality. Contemporary theorists in the critical tradition note how 'modern attempts to disenchant nature inevitably re-create a new kind of enchantment' (Stone, 2006, p. 232), with rationalization and enchantment coexisting in an uneasy, dialectical relationship (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002).

Rather than describing modern rationalization as a story of disenchantment per se, it is more precise to view disenchantment as characterizing modernist views of *production*, with enchantment allocated to the sphere of *consumption* (e.g. Ritzer, 2005). This thesis resonates with Bell (1972), who notes a cultural incoherence between the rationalized nature of modern production methods and the consumerist demand for self-expression through consumption.

Descriptions of the standardization, monotony and lack of autonomy of workers (Braverman, 1974; Gortz, 1999) are juxtaposed against the fetishism of products, which take on quasi-mystical properties, representing object-substitutes for the social relations, which henceforth remain alienated (Marx, 1906). In this process, work is disenchanted while the products of work are enchanted. The enchantment of products rather than workers coincides with devaluing work as compared to consumption (Bauman, 1998). In line with this diagnosis, critical labour research has critiqued the monotonization and alienation of labour (e.g. Braverman, 1974), while illustrating how organizations attempt to make work meaningful without changing the underlying structural conditions of work (Applebaum, 1992). At once an expression of human self-realization and meaning and a system-reinforcing, instrumental, materially constrained practice (Grant, Morales, & Sallaz, 2009), it is no accident that critiques of modernity historically revolved around the question of labour, begging the question of the conditions under which work can be re-enchanted.

Thus, while most treatments concur in regarding work as disenchanted and consumption as enchanted, the 'rise of new forms of enchantment' edges the enchantment notion back towards work, rethinking the distribution of enchantment across social spheres (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 293). For instance, Boje and Rosile (2008) claim that organizations actively manage 'specters' as part of their strategies and discourses. Ritzer (2005) describes department stores are 'both highly rationalized and enchanted "fantasy" worlds', with enchantment covering employees and products alike. Taussig (2010, p. 21) notes the tight relationship between the 'phantom objectivity' of commodities and the meaning of work, claiming that 'the magic of production and the production of magic are inseparable'. These emerging perspectives posit the tight relations between work and consumption as characterizing all social systems, including contemporary ones (e.g. Graeber, 2004).

In this way, critical scholars have veered away from simplistic characterizations of enchantment versus disenchantment, exploring how enchantment is dispersed along social relations, objects and

spheres. They note the contemporary fluidity of the production/consumption distinction, with service work taking on aspects of consumption (e.g. Gellner, 1975; Ritzer, 2005). Going further, we argue that service work often involves a hybrid of consumer and producer elements, with implications for the experience of work. While critical social theory has targeted both workplace alienation and consumerism, these critiques may lie at cross-terms, the former focused on the disenchantment of hyper-rationalization and the latter on the fantasy of consumer enchantment. Integrating production and consumption thus requires rethinking critical perspectives at work. In particular, should critique be directed at the illusory nature of enchantment as ideology, or precisely at the *disenchantment* characterizing rationalization and managerialist efficiency, or is some combination of these critiques possible? We argue that service work, and a certain type of service work inspired by the new spirit of capitalism in particular, provides an ideal site for studying the fusion of rationalization and enchantment. Doing so lays the groundwork for exploring new modes of the production, negotiation and distribution of enchantment across different social spaces.

The Enchantment of Service Work

To deal with the relational and product ambiguity characterizing services, organizations may experiment with novel forms of normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Warhurst et al., 2009). Perhaps the most obvious managerial strategy is to use forms of de-skilling or standardization (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; MacDonald & Sirianni 1996), resisting or flattening the relational aspect of services into predictable and disenchanted routines (Frenkel, 2006). A second strategy involves imbuing service settings with pre-approved forms of fun or enchanting experience, through highly controlled organizational spectacles or images (Islam, Zyphur, & Boje, 2008; Sallaz, 2011) that create a simulacrum of relationality. Ritzer (2000) calls the first of these processes, which falls back upon industrial understandings of work, 'McDonaldization', while the second, focusing on fantasy and spectacle, is termed 'Disneyfication' (e.g. Boje & Baskin, 2011).

We believe that a third strategy is emerging in some organizations. This involves the recognition that avoidance of enchantment (McDonaldization) or fantastic dream-like enchantment (Disneyfication) misses the key aspect of enchantment, which is its ability to generate an authentic sense of presence while at the same time creating an aura of meaning (Boje & Baskin, 2011). This third strategy involves using cultural, interpersonal and artistic means to create the sense of reality and authenticity, while avoiding the 'brute reality' of low-paid service work.

We call this attempt 'enchanting work': to at once mystify and be real, to promote meaningful work relations that foster creativity and participation, and put customers, workers and wider community members in less formalized relationships with each other. Yet, we must keep in mind the material realities of the workplace, the long hours, low pay and precarious status that coexist with the enchantment strategy, and may be occluded so as to foreclose resistance and promote normative control. Holding together these very different workplace visions led us to search for a concept that itself allowed a series of interpretations on different levels, so that this versatility may be achieved without losing clarity.

Empirical Case

Our research site, a high-end supermarket we refer to as Genuine Groceries,[1] is interesting because counter-intuitive as an enchanted world of work. As a retail context, our setting represents the understudied 'new generic form of mass employment in the post-industrial socio-economic landscape' accounting for approximately 10 percent of the total workforce in developed economies (Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011, p. 2). Where the new spirit of capitalism emphasizes expression, creativity and authenticity (Boltanksi & Chiapello, 2005) it has focused on skilled and

professional labour, such as IT professionals (e.g. Ross, 2004), and care workers (Grant et al., 2009), with the notable exception of studying call centre workers (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2014). Retail work, different than high-end knowledge work, has been critiqued for exploitation and precarity, and for lacking opportunities for self-expression and creativity (Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011; Warhurst et al., 2009). A supermarket chain that seemingly turns this business model on its head, claiming opportunities for creative and artistic expression, begs further exploration.

Genuine Groceries began in the early 1980s as an alternative food market, growing to over 100 stores at the turn of the century, and currently operating several hundred outlets internationally promoting local, natural and organic food. The supermarket chain is currently among the ten largest public food and drug retailers in the US, and a Fortune 500 company, spending over a decade on the '100 Best Companies to Work for in America' list. Among other things, the supermarket chain employs store artists and sign makers who decorate the stores and produce artworks to evoke a unique store atmosphere.

Data Collection

The data collection took place over four rounds beginning in June 2010, spanning over 41 Genuine Groceries stores in the United States and Canada, mostly on the east coast (New York, Washington DC, Boston and Toronto) and the west coast (Los Angeles metropolitan area) and three stores in London, UK.[2] We employed a range of qualitative methods, including unobtrusive observations, semi-structured interviews with employees, including team members and store artists, as well as supervisors, and naturally occurring talk with customers. We took photographs of the store's general look and atmosphere, collected public information about or by the company and artifacts (e.g. flyers, job descriptions, monthly/weekly newsletters, sales offers and promotions, internet blogs, and Genuine Groceries' homepage). We visited numerous conventional grocery stores and two of Genuine Groceries' main competitors and informally spoke to managers and employees to get a background sense of the field.

The present paper builds primarily on data from our extensive field notes and 47 semi-structured interviews, including 10 managers, 24 store artists and 13 team members from diverse areas such as meat department, customer service, or coffee bar (see Table 1 for summary of sample characteristics). Interviews lasted between 10 and 90 minutes. They were digitally recorded and transcribed. If recording was not permitted, we took notes during and/or after the conversation took place. Our original research focus was on career paths of creative and artistic workers, focusing on store artists. However, we broadened this focus to store employees generally, as we subsequently became interested in broader questions of workplaces as sites for self-expression and creativity, with a particular emphasis on meaning, value and exploitation in the realm of the new spirit of service work. As shown in Table 1, we differentiate among three groups: store artists (STA) who are hired to create in-store artistic works ('make the store look beautiful', etc.); team members (TM) who engage in more traditional store activities (cutting cheese, stocking shelves, etc.); and supervisor/managers (M).

Data Analysis

As an analytical strategy, we used an iterative approach, moving between observation and theoretical constructs, which emerged and developed over the course of our analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The exploratory nature of the study meant that our main objective was to look for concepts and relations that could inform the literature, without claiming generalization to all settings. First,

Table 1. Sample information.

Pseudonym	Storea	Positionb	Data type
Agnes	London	Prepared foods (TM)	Notes
Aiden	Area 1	Cashier (TM)	Interview transcript
Alexander	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Ali	Area 1	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Amber	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Andrew	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Ariane	Area 1	Meat, cheese and wine, later cosmetics (TM)	Interview transcript
Brandon	Area 1	Supervisor customer service & cashiers (M)	Interview transcript
Brian	Area 2	Meat department (TM)	Interview transcript
Cai	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Carey	London	Store artist (STA)	Notes
Carlos	Area 1	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Christopher	Area 1	Store manager (M)	Notes
Daniel	Area 1	Store artist (STA)	Notes
Deborah	Area 2	Assistant store artist (STA)	Notes
Diana	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Elizabeth	Area 2	Marketing team leader (M)	Interview transcript
Elizabeth	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Emily	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Emma	Area 2	Marketing team leader (M)	Notes
George	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Gregory	Area 2	Prepared foods (TM)	Notes
Jack	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Notes
Jacob	Area 1	Store manager (M)	Interview transcript
Jill	Area 1	Cheese department (TM)	Interview transcript
Jim	Area 2	Senior manager from headquarter (M)	Notes
Joanne	Area 1	Customer service (TM)	Interview transcript
John	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Julian	Area 1	Prepared foods (TM)	Interview transcript
Liam	Area 1	Store manager (M)	Notes
Lois	Area 1	Assistant store artist (STA)	Notes
Mark	Area 1	Team leader (M)	Interview transcript
Markus	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Mason	Area 1	Wine and cheese (TM)	Interview transcript
Nils	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Noah	Area 1	Wine specialist (TM)	Interview transcript
Paul	Area 1	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Peggy	London	Sign maker (STA)	Notes
Rico	Area 2	Cashier (TM)	Interview transcript
Susan	Area 1	Sign maker (STA)	Interview transcript
Tamara	Area 1	Bakery (TM)	Notes
Timothy	Area 2	Store artist (STA)	Interview transcript
Tom	Area 1	Store artist (STA)	Notes
Tom	Area 1	Store manager (M)	Notes
William	Area 1	Store manager (M)	Notes
Yao	Area 1	Store Disc Jockey (STA)	Interview transcript
Zac	Area 2	Coffee bar (TM)	Notes

aTo protect anonymity, we report stores according to general area, including Los Angeles metropolitan area (area 1) New York tri-state area (area 2, including Washington D.C., Boston, Toronto) and London, UK.
bWe provide the position and link them to one of three groups: store artists (STA) who are hired to create in-store artistic works; team members (TM) who engage in more traditional store activities; and members of the management team (M) who have a supervisor/management role.

we manually coded the interviews, using the software Atlas.ti, into work-related themes. In a second step, we linked these concepts to the literature on service work, particularly in the light of labour process perspectives (e.g. Braverman, 1974) and work around labour processes in service jobs (e.g. Grant et al., 2009; Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011).This initial coding resulted in a series of categories describing content features of the work, such as creativity, authenticity, self-expression, or artisanal work forms.

At this point, however, we revised our coding approach, attentive to capturing nuances regarding the reflexive *standpoints* taken vis-a-vis the work experience, a central interest in our study. Specifically, because we were interested in how workers *reflected upon* work features rather than simply describing these features, we shifted attention to the reflexive positions members took, including their critical positions. In brief, studying enchantment involves not only objective work features but also *modes of reflexivity*; merely descriptive coding of data categories could not disclose these diverse critical formations. Such codes would result in a workplace characterized by previously described phenomena such as emotional, creative or aesthetic labour (e.g. Hochschild, 2011; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007b), where labour enters new domains, but where the dialectic between rationalization and enchantment is essentially flattened into a naturalistic description of job characteristics.

To capture the element of reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1990) beyond a list of ostensive job descriptions, we coded for the modes of relating to work itself. This coding involved three levels: a naturalistic description of work in terms of qualities (enchanting as positive, satisfying); a critical description of ideological action done to work (enchanting as a spell cast upon the work space); and a description of practices of mystification involved in the work role (enchanting as the goal or object of the work itself). Coding according to this tripartite vision of enchanting work allowed moving from empirically derived descriptive categories of work features to modes of reflexivity regarding these categories.

We thereby developed the *enchanting work* concept based on the tension we ran across involving these three moments of reflexivity. This tension then serves to characterize the ambivalent status of enchantment, as both a false, illusory social relation and as a meaning-giving, self-realizing process, the loss of which (disenchantment) is associated with alienation and oppression.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the data analysis and Table 2 summarizes the resulting concept of 'enchanting work' with illustrative examples.

Simply Enchanting – Enchanting Work as Positive Job Experience

> This place is magical. This place gives you entertainment …We are one big family … One day, I realized that I had to work here … I just went in. (Gregory, team member, Area 2 store)

At the most naturalistic level, enchanting work provides a sense of meaning and fulfilment, seen as inhering in aspects of the job or organization itself. While some reflexivity is necessary to recognize work aspects, the mission and values of the organization are read at face value, and the enchanting aspects of work are seen as signs of enlightened managerial practice and assumed to be in good faith.

At Genuine Groceries, enchanting work occurs in a context widely alluding to a pre-industrial world of work (e.g. manual work, nostalgic atmosphere). Store managers explained to us that the stores were inspired by traditional farmers' markets, a vision directing store design and food preparation. Accordingly, fruits and vegetables are carefully unpacked and manually piled in pyramids or other appealing arrangements, and meat is promoted as 'Cut by hand, right here
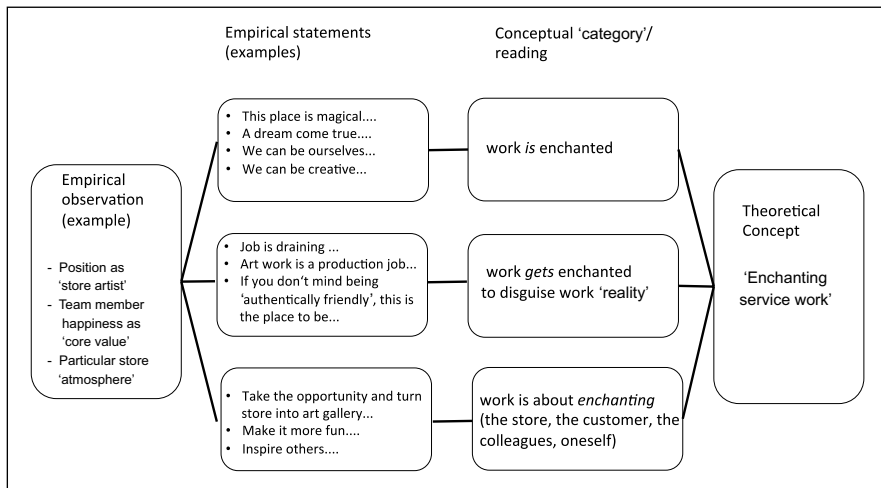
Figure 1. Overview of data analysis.

daily', with no sophisticated food processing technologies displayed and continuous manual demonstrations of food preparation in the stores. Enchanting work emerges in a 'world of making', builds on 'manual competences' and unfolds as a 'mastery of real things' (Crawford, 2009). Daniel points out: 'A lot of this stuff, I mean, we do make ourselves.' This ethic of handicraft emphasizes an aesthetic and participatory focus, embodied in the store artist's role and also distributed around diverse functions. For example Ali, a store artist in Los Angeles, claims that 'my job is to make the store look beautiful'. Yet similar sentiments are also expressed by Mason, in the cheese and wine department: 'It's like art in a way, pairing things like that … I think it's the most artist thing to do … To pair wines and cheeses and beer, because it's on the finer side of someone's palate.'

In the case of store artists, standardization gives way to a unique style or signature. This includes making hand-written signs, promoting specific products by installations and exhibiting artworks, giving rise to a romantic farmers-market feeling. The allusions to a pre-modern age of crafts and trades contrast starkly with the general 'cold' corporate atmospheres that employees associate with conventional retail environments:

> The aesthetic of the store, the environment is so different than going into a [conventional supermarket], because they all have those white, slick floors, the lighting is a certain type, the shelving is a certain type. [GG] does this whole thing where they bring in coloured tile, and there's warm tones, and in the [cosmetics] department, all the shelves are wood. And, it's like all these natural elements to it, I think that creates a feeling of warmth. It feels so sterile sometimes going into the other types of grocery stores, and I think that that would affect my mood personally. (Ariane, team member, Area 1 store)

The interest and personal commitment further relates to a widespread emphasis on community and strong interpersonal bonds, replacing transactional with relational forms of sociality. Mark, who worked his way from a cashier to a management position, feels that GG is 'more than just a grocery store. We're here for the community and you see the community, you know.' Elaborating, he explains how the store is an important source of unconditional cameraderie and service that touches 'his nature':

Table 2. Enchanting work concept with illustrative data examples.

	When work *is* enchanting	When work *gets* enchanted	The practices of *enchanting work*
Characteristic of this notion of enchanting work	• Work provides meaning and opportunity for self-expression (freedom, authenticity) and creativity; they are seen as inhering aspect of the work or organization itself • Mission and values are taken at 'face value' • 'enlightened' managerial practices are carried out in 'good faith'	• Emphasis on enchanting as being something that 'disguises', producing 'dupes' on the side of the employees • Enchanting work as ideological control • Values such as creativity and self-expression are seen as a way to benefit the organization, as a 'marketing tool'	• Employees co-construct enchantment • Enchanting work as an opportunity for 'making it work' • Enchanting work as seizing the opportunity to make work more meaningful, fun, creative • Reinterpretation/hybridization as a strategy for finding creative space
Reflexivity	• 'Things are as they seem to be' • Need to be able to recognize important work aspects	• Distance in order to be able to recognize 'contradictions' between espoused values and 'lived' values	• Distance to recognize 'contradictions' (e.g. efficiency and self-expression) • Ability to identify 'room for manoeuvre'/latitude • Insistence on personal action/agency in the face of organizational constraints
Data focus and source	Expression of 'values' and work characteristics • Interviews with employees (team members and store artists) and managers • Field notes based on observations (store visits) • Publicly available data (corporate information, such as website, job adds, etc.)	Material that runs counter to espoused values • Interviews with employees (team members and store artists) and managers • Internet blogs (consumer and ex-employees) • Publicly available data (employer ranking, etc.) • Field notes based on observations (store visits)	Expression of personal ownership, attempt to improvise around constraints • Interviews with employees and managers • Field notes based on observations (store visits)
Prevalence per employee type*	Team members app. 50%; store artists app. 30%	Team members app. 15%; store artists app. 10%	Team members app. 35%; store artists app. 60%
Illustrative data example	I love this store. This is one of the best stores … people here, they have a lot of personality, they're very friendly and… Our store team leader, he's a very friendly guy. He's a great guy. All the management staff here is great. So I mean, it's a great store, I love working here. (Julian)	What they have, it's free and easy and cheap to have big signs and have exercise programmes and have big ra ra meetings and hand out free water bottles, and yes, team, yes. That doesn't cost anything, meanwhile the actual money, where the rubber hits the road, and gets real… And the team members, they recognize that factor more than the happy talk. (Jill)	We had a big art show as a fundraiser, to auction the pieces and all the money went to charity, so I did a painting and then I also did a shopping, one of those little… canvas bags, I decorated … so did many other workers, and we had a little art show back in the wine department, we put little gallery walls up… A few thousand bucks, they made from selling, I mean, people didn't pay a lot for it, but it was a cool thing, because everyone got to see everyone's art and we changed the store a little bit, a more human touch, you know, me being an artist, it was enjoyable. (Yao)

Table 2. (Continued)

| Illustrative data examples (cont'd) | So to me, those are the things that are magic because it's someone taking a stand that is so important but that, as a culture, on the massive, we can't get everyone into that because not everyone's on the same wave or the same way of thinking around it. (Ariane)

Right now, the World Cup, everybody on their break is in the break room, watching the World Cup. The soccer, we're cheering. There is a TV right there ... customers and workers were all gathered around and everybody was one unit. There might have been some rivalry between the two teams, but everybody's in the same spirit and, you know, it's fun. I don't know any other place that has a TV there for everybody to watch, while you're working. (Mark)

There's a good vibe, it's an up environment. I'm comfortable with the product, it's good quality, so I feel like I'm a part of something that's positive in the world. (Yao)

We have to promote certain things but at the same time I have the option to have room to express myself too. (Carlos) | So it's just a day-to-day artistic production type job, just producing everything from signs this size to signs that size ... sometimes you have to just get it done because it's a retail environment so you have to be flexible. Like I said the job might encompass other stuff as well; it's not necessarily an artist job, you know, it's the production. (Paul)

Your happiness really matters to them because it shows in the sales. (Mason)

Labour costs are the obsession of the higher-ups in the chain. Labour costs are, that's all you hear about, squeezing squeezing down. Less labour, less employees, you know, even full-time people who have worked there for a long time, there will be periods where they're not getting their full 40 hours, they're only getting 32 hours, and they're having to use up their vacation time to pay their bills, because labour costs are being squeezed, squeezed. (Rico)

There's always, somebody always needs something, whereas if I'm going outside of the store, and I'm doing work for, you know, another company outside of [GG], they'll give me a task and I can focus on that one task. You know, I can focus on one thing at a time. Here, I'm constantly multitasking. I always have a list of things that I need to do, and there's always somebody asking me to do something. (Nils) | When I first started this, you know, I wasn't quite sure how to get the local community involved so I just put a poster up and I said, you know, calling all local artists, if you want to have your work featured just email me or call me. (Alexander)

To really make this my store and when you look at the art on these walls you'll see [Ali], you'll feel my art. The same thing as you do when you walk into [other neighbourhood], so we haven't been open enough for me to really completely transform this place, it's a work in progress I look for it to be consistent and that's my major thing, you know, so long as you can walk in and really get a feel for what I was trying to get across, that's my ultimate goal. (Ali)

Um, so part of my job is working the tasting bar, and I like doing those because I run events and what I really like actually, my favourite thing is when I suggest a wine to someone and they have no idea what it is ... But like this is a Grüner Veltliner (GV) and they have no idea, they come in for a Sauvignon Blanc, right; I'm like why don't you try something different, like something new and I give them like a GV or something. ... So I can talk about it with them and they're so excited that they learned something new and then they come back and tell me how much they loved it. That's, like, my favourite part of it. Then they try that and love it, and now they're, like, now I'm kind of teaching them and they're expanding their knowledge, you know. I love that. Like, I'm kind of teaching people what I know, which I think is kind of cool. (Noah) |

*Reflecting the approximate prevalence of each enchantment level (number of quotes in each 'category') adding up to 100 per employee type (team member vs. store artists).

I just fell in love with the culture. Everybody's very easy-going, we're all friends here. It doesn't matter who you are, or what part of the store you're working in, we all help each other out and I just enjoy that, that's my nature. I like to help whenever I can. And that's what this company is about. (Mark, management, Area 1 store)

The enchanting aspect of work is seen in the store's liberal body and appearance policy, and employees emphasize the team's diverse clothing styles. In contrast to the standardization norms of traditional retail work (Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011), employees are able to wear their normal street clothes, and allowed to show their tattoos, piercings and dyed hair in order to 'be themselves' and feel 'comfortable' while being at work.

Commenting on the flexibility of personal style permitted at GG as compared to his previous retail employer, Jim, a senior manager, notes: 'Here, we are looking for individuals. Nobody is a number. Everybody is an individual.'

The focus around individuality and community is also conveyed by official HR brochures and core values that emphasize, among others, team member happiness. An advertisement for a position as shopfloor employee reads:

At [GG] you're part of something special. Something that will take you as far as your skills and hard work allow. And something that gives you the opportunity to enjoy all that you deserve. Here you're celebrated for who you are and what you bring to the table… (HR brochure, distributed in a New York store)

The job advertisement highlights the opportunity for meaningful work and leaving room for self-expression and authenticity. The focus on employee preferences and enjoyment of the work experiences reinforces the link between work and consumption, as work becomes an entertaining way to spend time. Noah, a team member, concludes: 'working here feels more like a 'hobby''.

The focus on healthy and natural products, both as producers and consumers, leads employees to frame themselves as agents of cultural change and vanguardship that contrasts starkly with the 'average' retail corporation. Inevitably, however, periodic conflicts between preferences and work roles arise; according to the first reading of enchanting work, these become dismissed as inevitable, or in the process of being worked out. Here, the work remains enchanted, but because people are realists, they understand that 'nobody is perfect' and that the exception does not alter the general positive atmosphere. Limitations are seen as incidental, rather than as fundamental contradictions or signs of the falseness of the enchantment. 'We work in a business context but have freedom to be creative. It's a good place' (Ali, store artist, Area 1 store).

When Work *Gets* Enchanted: Enchanting Work as Ideology

I fully expected this to be a diatribe against the free market. I was very pleasantly surprised to be wrong. There was nothing anti-free market here at all, quite the contrary. (Audience blog comment, referring to a media appearance by a GG executive)

While GG's core values depart from a narrow, profit-driven vision of business, how much it departs from conventional labour processes is questionable. As some critical scholarship has suggested, the symbolic manipulation of enchantment may work as a form of neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011), whereby the material expropriation of value from workers and society is glossed over with a patina of corporate goodwill. Suspicious of naive readings of enchantment as the *opposite* of rationalization, the second reading sees it as an ideological cover for rationalization (Landy & Saler, 2009).

Treating enchantment critically involves questioning the face value of meaningful positive experiences, looking for points at which the ostensive ideals of the organization are distanced from daily practices, distances which produce the opportunity for critique (Boltanski, 2011). This can involve (1) showing where work aspects or practices seem inconsistent with purported values, and (2) finding moments in which organizational members *themselves* voice critiques or demonstrate ambivalence.

Despite the enthusiasm voiced by many, several interviewees were sceptical of enchantment, characterizing it as 'hype'. The deliberate, and even forced, nature of organizational enthusiasm draws ambivalent reactions, noted by Brandon:

> We have quarterly meetings and it's almost like a pep rally…they get really energetic and give away prizes, and gifts, and it's like going before a sporting event, trying to pump everybody up and boost their morale, so they try in a sense, but I feel like sometimes it works for a little bit, then everybody goes back to normal.

Similarly, the artistic ethos promoted across the stores is often in conflict with the profit-driven objectives of the store. Yao, an employee in charge of the store's music describes the ambivalent relation between enchantment and sales promotion: I had one woman actually tell me, 'I like this music so much, I'm staying in the store and spending more money because I don't want to leave…' While artistic expression and creativity are encouraged by the store, the 'space' designed for this expression is reduced (or even closed down) once sales slow down.

> Yesterday, [my supervisor] comes to me and he says, we're not selling enough, they're starting to put pressure on me … don't know what happened in-between there, but that's retail, that's corporate America I guess … someone up the chain from him is saying, you're not selling enough to justify the use of that space. You know, in retail … how much could that square footage generate in income, that's what they think. Well, [this product] is not selling enough in terms of a can of beans would or whatever. So they're putting pressure. (Jill, team member, Area 1 store)

During interviews, the tenuous and ambivalent nature of the positive atmosphere began to come to light, particularly its relation to profit as a priority. As a cashier wrote in an online blog about the store, 'If you're friendly and not fake, and realize that it's easier to do a good job than be surly, this is the place for you.' Authenticity is valued, yet only around being 'friendly' and 'not surly', calling into question what could be meant here by authenticity (Fleming, 2009). Further, the motivation for authenticity is productivity – it is *easier* to do a good job. Such statements hint at resignation rather than genuine belief. Put less subtly by another cashier on the same blog, 'If you're going to do menial labor, this is the best place.'

Others address their critique more directly. One team member from the meat department describes how work takes away his energy. Different from his colleagues who were quoted above, he experiences his work as anything but enchanted.

> It drains me completely. Drains my spirit. Takes away from my time playing shows, sharing it … By the time you are done, working under fluorescent light, pulled by customers, you don't have energy left to put it into something creative … If you put all your energy in an 8-hour workday. It doesn't help your creative process … I work like crazy and get 10 [USD] an hour, doesn't feel right. In my body, it doesn't feel right. (Brian, team member, Area 2 store)

He explains that while management stresses flexible working hours, in reality, flexibility is hard to achieve because, hired for the mid-shift from 11 am to 7 pm, he has little opportunity to get a

morning shift. He notes also that health benefits are good, but are limited to full-time workers. These examples suggest that despite the claim to freedom and flexibility, such flexibility is often used by management to allocate work according to a logic of efficiency.

Further, enchantment does not necessarily imply higher salaries or benefits compared to other low-wage retail work. Although we did not collect salary data from our respondents, publicly available aggregate data suggest that some positions are compensated slightly lower than at other prominent retail stores. While average salaries are above the minimum wage, they remain for most staff below the 'living wage' (livingwage.mit.edu). Yet, according to the 2012 annual report, staff turnover was 10 percent, a figure notably low for this type of retail work (Frenkel, 2006). Although salary is distinct from positive working conditions, the persistence of below-living wage salaries in the presence of a rhetoric of progressivism and community spirit could signify that such rhetoric might have an ideological aspect. Among our respondents, we encountered complaints that increasingly fewer employees were being employed full-time and were being 'squeezed'. Despite the physical requirements of some of the positions, people come in starting at USD 10–11, which, according to one supervisor is 'nothing'.

In addition, critical stories are common from former employees, whose prolific contributions to post-employment perspectives can be found on job and career sites, consumer blogs and other internet platforms. Among those is a resignation letter by an ex-employee who claims that GG is more of a 'faux hippy Wal-Mart than an earth-and-body-friendly organic food paradise'. In his resignation letter, he identifies several of the 'fakeries' of the store. Among them are, for example, work practices that flout the organization's environmental responsibilities and management practices that mistreat and underpay employees, contradicting one of the organization's core values of supporting 'team member happiness at work'.

> Oh, you sometimes intentionally order too much just to guarantee a full shelf, knowing full well the product will most likely be thrown out … you push employees into greater responsibilities without compensation … Often having them essentially do all the work of a higher position without the pay.

Within the store, however, such discontent was generally occluded by the pervasive air of positivity. Several interviewees, however, under the guarantee of anonymity, talked about a 'darker side' of the store's atmosphere:

> Um, I guess I could be honest here, right? For the most part it depends on what department but, the front end and prepared foods there's a lot of people that are, um, in the back and stuff there's a lot of cheap labour. (Noah, team member, Area 1 store)

Sceptical about the possibility to 'express yourself' at work, an employee reflects upon the role of creative people who are able to provide service encounters that are enchanting for the customer. The store's policy of hiring artists is useful in this regard:

> If they want someone to sell something they know they're going to get someone who's personable and like an actor who's used to delivering lines and being in people's faces. (Paul, store artist, Area 1 store)

Reflecting on the work itself as store artist, it becomes clear that store artists are not only there for self-expression and creativity but also for doing service work:

> Oh, we need you on register four, we need you to talk to customers, we need you to do salad greens on the shelves. So they are always telling you in all directions. Working there as an artist has its merits but it also has its downside. (Diana, store artist, Area 2 store)

Doing store art turns out to be a 'day-to-day artistic production type job', a job that needs to get done, with time pressure, paid by the hour, and market-driven. Enchantment takes on a standardized, rationalized form.

The Practices of *Enchanting Work*

Above, we presented internal critiques to the effect that work was the target of organizational enchantment, as in a managerial 'spell' to delude workers into ignoring the material facts of their work situation. However, following Weber and Dacin (2011) members are not only able to escape being 'cultural dupes' by launching critique from within, but they are also active in casting their own spells, taking an agentic role in the co-construction of enchantment. 'The concept of enchantment is a useful one for it implies active agency on the part of the enchanted' (Korczynski & Ott, 2006, p. 912). The active practice of enchantment is ambivalent, as co-construction has been described as a form of normative control (Barker, 1999) and yet it provides (indeed constitutes) agency on the part of members. It is thus, in a sense, 'post-critical', enacting a social re-enchantment, not because members are under a deceptive spell, but because they choose to take ownership of the meanings created in the store.

The principle of enacting enchantment is that employees sense the opportunity to enchant a space that is ambiguously poised in between an unfeeling industrial logic and a lifeworld of meaning that could be animated by their actions. Thus, differently than the first reading of enchantment, members do not automatically buy into enchantment, but see their work as one of establishing it, often with the sense that the alternative is to reduce the organization to industrial monotony. The proactive nature of this aspect of enchantment is noted by Brandon 'the energy that you bring in is the energy that you give out, so just bring in a good energy.' Alexander, a New York store artist, explains:

> I think it's the amount of liberties you take with what you're doing. Let's say I was making a sign for a pork chop that we have on sale, I could just write the text and just say, sale—pork chops … Where, what if I said it's a pork chop, so I'm going to draw a pig and he's dressed in a karate outfit and he's doing a karate chop, you know, I think when you take more liberties and you get a little bit more creative with it … to me that's more artistic then if I just had done text, so it's just limited by your imagination and the amount of time you have.

Team members recognize the store artists as contributing to a difficult-to-articulate sense of worth linked with personal effort and creativity. However, improvisation via small creative touches was not limited to store artists, but occurred in many mundane yet personally satisfying acts that seemed to locate personal agency within standardized routines. Being a team member of the specialty department, Ariane recounts:

> We had the whole cheese case, and so you would slice the cheese on a cheese wire, and … there was something from my experience about, like, doing things well. Or getting them so they looked really nice, so there was something aesthetic about it for me … I think a lot of it was aesthetic actually. That's how I work … another example of that would be in the line section. It's, like, turning all the bottles so that the artwork is facing out. Or pulling them forward, you know, it's like pulling the stocks forward.

Beyond artistically stocking shelves, service encounters serve as opportunities to express individuality while showing individualized attention to customers:

> I meet a lot of people here too, people that are regulars, they would literally wait in my line, even though the person in front of them has a lot of stuff, and they would wait for me, so they can chat. Like, that guy just passing, and we just fist-bumped, he's been coming in for three years, and I know the certain value of a relationship in a way. (Aiden, team member, Area 1 store)

In other examples, organizational members attempt to cross social value spheres, creating links between work and life. For example, in one store we saw an exhibition featuring local artists. The store artist recounts how he came up with the idea to turn the store into a gallery space:

> I have several friends who are artists in the community and throughout [the local area] and I just thought, we have this space, why don't we put some beautiful art up and reach out to the community and let's educate our customers about different artists that live in the community and work and give artists a place to exhibit their work for free. (Daniel, store artist, Area 1 store)

Despite the management's emphasis on sales per square, we found many similar cases, both among store artists and non-artists, of creative uses of store space. In one example, Brian commented 'There's musicians that work here that actually, on certain Sundays, they can actually bring their pianos here and play.' Similarly, Tamara noted that she had met colleagues from other stores via musical connections. 'He brought his tuba in one time, so then he played it. I said, let me hear it. So, you know, it's all good.'

These activities not only give employees space to display their outside creative talent, the organization also actively implements forms of recognition with prizes that are valued by employees, many of whom have artistic aspirations despite not working as store artists (for example, team members who participated in the music contest among employees).

The encouragement of everyday creative activities involves complicating, hybridizing or even subverting straightforward meanings through creative appropriations. The effect of rethinking store actions in employee-driven ways is to create an aura or distance between the 'naive' reading of, for example, a display or service interaction and its recontextualized meaning (e.g. Gellner, 1975). The effect of such enchantment does not have to be subversive, but can be consistent with organizational values; it highlights the polysemy of the work, and thereby creates both a sense of the complexity of the object and the authorship of the artist.

Similarly, the complexity and aura of authored works can arise as employees' ways to use limits on creativity productively, as ways to test new forms of expression and to frame their creativity.

> I'm making things I wouldn't normally make in my own studio. I'm not going to build a carousel for the heck of it. I paint jellyfish outside of work, so … I wouldn't normally be doing this type of work but it's exciting to push the boundaries and see, hey, if I have all the options in the world, what would I do to make this one wine display exciting? Or yams? You know, we have, I can't even say it, but, I want to hold your yam, it has, like, the Beatles, but as yams … so you can get kind of quirky and fun with that kind of stuff. (Amber, store artist, Area 2 store)

Amber is simultaneously finding a space for expression, conforming to organizational limits, and creating a charming store environment. Store limits on creativity are ambivalent in cases like these, both constraining and facilitating creative events. Workers may be not only complicit, but authors of their own enchantment. As Tamara put it, 'In a normal supermarket you have to be a robot – here we can be our own robots.'

This astounding turn of phrase encapsulates the difficulty of theorizing alienation when work is both enchanted by and for workers. This team member was presumably not aware that the 'robots' usage had been previously used in organization theory, first in Hochschild's (1983) study of

emotional labour, and later in van Maanen's (1991) study of Disney. Both studies, crucially, frame 'going robot' as something *imposed upon* workers, reflecting traditional critiques of rationalization. A critical theory of emancipation at work would have to deal with difficult questions – 'emancipation from whom, for what?' – when workers take pride in being their *own* robots.

Discussion

Emergent forms of service work can be understood as using enchantment, a polyvalent concept that both promises the restitution of meaningful work and yet begs a critique perspective. To maintain the dialectic quality of enchantment, rather than treating the multiple interpretations of the empirical material as competing theories, we juxtaposed them in a multi-layered reading, allowing their coexistence in the composite notion of enchanting work. This resulting concept thus reflects, as some have noted (e.g. Gellner, 1975), both a form of critique against a disenchanted modern workplace, and as a buttress that organizations build against such critique.

By locating enchantment in the work domain, as an aspect of production in addition to consumption, we distinguish three related moments of enchantment, influencing workers' meaning-making, enabling management control, and co-opting workers into producing enchantment for themselves and their customers.[3] These three levels, while analytically and theoretically distinct, interpenetrate each other in complex and nuanced ways. The notion of 'enchanting work' thus operates at distinct levels of agency, allowing us to describe the workplace accordingly at three levels, namely, that of meaning, ideology and co-constitution.

Enchanting work is characterized by the juxtaposition of what appears natural (i.e. meaning), what has been done to make it appear that way (i.e. ideology), and what performative actions reproduce this naturalized state (i.e. co-constitution). Social theorists have struggled with the question of whether to critique the illusion of enchantment versus taking seriously the magic often felt by participants themselves. For instance, while Gell (1999) adopts a 'methodological atheism', remaining disenchanted so as to launch critique, Taussig (2010) takes seriously enchanting processes without thereby claiming their authenticity. Our approach, following the latter, addresses enchanting work naturalistically, as fun work (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2014), as a form of ideological control veiling the brutal reality of mass retail (Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011), and as a collaborative attempt by team members to weave meaning out of the ambiguities left in-between the first two standpoints. Thus, similarly to enchantment processes themselves, our concept of enchanting work operates at the levels of material object (the job), reflexive distance (the critique) and symbolic practice (the enactment of the work).

The enchanting work perspective offers interlinked contributions to the organizational literature on work. First, we offer a new construct that addresses seemingly incompatible readings of work situations, reflecting the ambivalence of felt experiences that characterize new 'worlds of work'. Second, we link work and consumption cultures, an interface whose neglect has made it difficult to tie work to the foundational social theoretic concept of enchantment. Finally, extending this last point, we address the extent to which, through contemporary work, notions of (dis)enchantment are *produced* from within contemporary organizations as forms of the marketization of social relations.

First, while recent literature has signaled a new era of capitalism based on knowledge, creativity, and self-expression (e.g. Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), critical scholarship calls into doubt whether service work, mundane and efficiency-oriented, is really so distinct from industrial labour processes (e.g. Fleming, 2009; Warhurst et al., 2009), begging further research as to the nature of service work, beyond current approaches. For instance, emotional and aesthetic labour have been characterized as exploitation and inauthenticity (Hochschild, 1983, 2011), but also as potential

sources for genuine positive affect (Elfenbein, 2007), two very different interpretations. Alternatively, enchanting work holds out the possibility of coexisting positive and critical interpretations of work, highlighting the ambivalence of workplace mystification.

Enchanting work differs from emotional and aesthetic labour by focusing not on simply portraying images, but creating a holistic ethos that gestures toward subverting efficiency logics for relational and expressive values. As such, enchanting work elaborates, at the micro level, global changes in work ethics described by Florida (2002) as the 'creative ethos' or Lloyd (2010) as 'neo-bohemian culture'. Further, enchantment relates to the ambivalence of critique by showing how adhesion to organizational norms takes place through an ethic of performative proactivity, despite the presence of critique. Thus, moving from whether work offers 'true' self-expression, we explore how workers come to see, reflect upon, and performatively enact enchanted spaces. Work can be experienced, in the words of one worker, as 'a magical place' yet not be incompatible with exploitation, *even if* the worker is aware of this exploitation. Such is the irony of ideology that functions despite disbelief in the underlying truth of its claims (Zizek, 1983).

Second, we describe how enchantment, associated with consumption practices (Gellner, 1975; Ritzer, 2005) becomes transferred into the work sphere, affecting work experiences. The free interchange between consumption and work stands in contrast to views of service where management struggles to standardize work practices despite the 'social' nature of services (Bowen & Schneider, 1988). To deal with the ambiguity and potential autonomy of service roles, organizations impose standardized uniforms, distribute standardized interaction scripts, or select employees based on particular aesthetic looks. The standardization logic (the McDonaldization strategy) demands that employees act according to formalized patterns (Islam & Zyphur, 2007), rather than expressively or spontaneously. In the extreme, service aspects of work may be denied altogether, and work defined as purely mechanical (Sallaz, 2010). In such 'closed' strategies, deviations from a set image are discouraged, promoting conformity. In more sophisticated models, the standardization logic takes on spectacular or fantastic properties, where enchantment is directed at the customer, but the cold mechanistic reality remains for workers (van Maanen, 1991), left to conjure pre-established fantasies in ordered ways.

Some organizations, however, wager on opening up, rather than standardizing, behavioural and aesthetic norms for workers. The organization makes a bona fide attempt to create authentic, expressive forms of community, where identity and meaning are intrinsic to value creation (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001), and the business charges a premium for 'real' food and human interaction. In this way, *enchantment is the business model*. In such cases, smooth social relations are not only paths to efficiency; rather, a positive social atmosphere, a local sense of community and connection, are the products themselves, and this requires allowing the barrier between producers and consumers to become fluid. Seen this way, once consumption and production are considered as moments in the wider *social reproduction* (Graeber, 2004), it is difficult to uphold a strict dichotomy between the two. Enchanting work is precisely the attempt to use the fact of social reproduction itself as a source of value, monetizing the experience of authentic community. Putting the question as such reveals the paradoxical situation of trying to overcome an alienated workplace through, in effect, *selling non-alienation*.

Third, while focusing on a single organization, some recent work (e.g. Boltanksi & Chiapello, 2005; Du Gay& Morgan, 2013; Fleming, 2009) points to wider social theoretic debates touched upon by the above point. Following Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), we suggest that, rather than challenging market logics, enchanting work extends markets into community spaces of mutual recognition and value. Enchantment may reflect firms' attempts to appropriate socially prestigious symbols and values, but because these may be valued precisely because of their non-market aspects, the organization must find ways to internalize these aspects. Acknowledging that such

attempts constitute new forms of control, it is conceivable that new forms of work may yet hold emancipatory potential for employees.

This dual aspect of enchantment lays bare ambivalences within contemporary labour scholarship. Critical management scholars argue that claims of authenticity and expression entrench managerial control (e.g. Fleming, 2009), leading to exploitation beyond traditional labour. Yet, Zelizer (2005) notes that marketizing social relations can signal social recognition and value, rather than alienation and estrangement, and can have both liberating and alienating effects. Some have claimed that immaterial labour holds emancipatory potential because workers embody the productive forces of labour directly, rather than being mediated by objects/commodities (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Enchanting work echoes this ambivalence in invoking critical perspectives while allowing that workers may find genuine self-expression in enchanting work.

Limitations and Future Research

Enchanting work, however, involves conceptual and practical difficulties. First, our choice of examining levels of reflexivity in interpretation means that we attribute degrees of critical distance to employees themselves, important for combining critical perspectives with empirical research (Boltanski, 2011), and reflexivity among study participants is central to the new spirit of capitalism informing our study (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Yet, the role of sensitivity to participant reflexivity in data analysis deserves more treatment than we are able to provide here. Specifically, we have described the three levels as *moments* in reflexivity, invoking the term from critical theory to avoid framing the levels as either (1) independent readings with no relation to each other, or (2) competing counter-theories referring to an underlying 'true' reading. By referring to 'moments', we suggest a (perhaps dialectical) relation between the levels by which straightforward experience of meaning gives way to ideological critique, which in turn gives way to a kind of 'post-critical' approach where employees, not naive to the sources of enchantment, enact enchantment anyway. The notion of reflexive levels contributes to understanding reflexivity by showing how varieties of critical postures are possible within a given situation. Yet, developing these levels into a full-blown theory of the moments of critical consciousness at work is beyond the current paper, and demands further work to show how critique works 'on the ground' in its diverse embodiments (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; see also Boltanski, 2011).

Second, we focus on enchantment within a supermarket because of the radical change in this setting as compared to traditional supermarkets, whose business models are based on mass standardization, efficient logistics and tight management of low-wage, part-time workers (e.g. Frenkel, 2006). This contrast makes the current setting a salient and surprising example, yet begs extension into high-end professional areas (e.g. Yu, Kim, & Restubog, 2015), like medicine, law and cultural production. Indeed, the current case mixed store artists with mundane jobs, such that the boundaries between high- and low-end service work may be particularly blurred in our setting. We do not claim that enchanting work is *unique* to new organizational models such as Genuine Groceries, but that it represents an attempt to expand or redistribute enchantment *into new spheres of work relations*.

Relatedly, we also leave aside 'macro' differences regarding transformations of the service sector as a whole, focusing instead on an exemplary organization so as to illustrate the 'enchanting work' construct. Our introduction may suggest emerging views of services moving along an historical trajectory, from more traditional forms of control to symbolic forms, such as enchanting work. This trajectory seems consistent with some literatures, from the McDonaldization to Disneyfication concepts (Ritzer, 2000), to the renewed focus on normative control in services (e.g. Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Yet whether elements of enchanting work have been ubiquitous across the history of services, or the extent to which they cross-cut other, non-retail

service sectors, remains open for empirical exploration. Here, we present enchanting work as one instance of a qualitative shift in the emerging spirit of work.

Third, focusing on service work per se, we did not dwell on the sources of individual or group-based differences in reactions to organizational policies. Doubtless, some employees took more naturalistic views while others were more critical, and among the more critical, reactions differed between the despondent and cynical versus the more playfully ironic or improvisational. These differences are interesting, and deserve follow-up regarding the paths these individuals took in their responses to organizational enchantment. Further, it is likely that such differences depend on work specialization and occupational background, with some groups more quick to critique than others. While theorizing such differences is beyond our scope, we believe such work is important to theory-building around workplace enchantment.

More generally, we acknowledge the complexity of enchanting work across roles and functions, where the focus on multiple meanings creates opportunities to link service work to larger questions around the nature of enchantment and disenchantment in contemporary market societies. As discussion proliferates around the future of work, our wager is that forms of enchantment will play an increasing role in shaping our understanding of what work is, and whose purposes it serves.

Notes

The authors' names appear in alphabetical order, reflecting equal contribution.

1. Genuine Groceries is a pseudonym as are all respondents' names.
2. To protect anonymity, we report stores according to general area, including Los Angeles metropolitan area, New York tri-state area (Washington DC, Boston and Toronto) and London, UK.
3. We thank an anonymous reviewer for help in clarifying the current framing in these terms.

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Author biographies

Nada Endrissat is Senior Lecturer at Bern Business School, Bern University of Applied Sciences. Her current research interests include questions of entrepreneurship, identity, and aesthetic practice in post-industrial cultural economies. Her research has been published in *Leadership, European Management Journal* and is forthcoming in the *Journal of Business Research* special issue on creative industries.

Gazi Islam is Associate Professor of People, Organizations and Society at Grenoble Ecole de Management. He has served as faculty at Insper, Tulane University, and the University of New Orleans. His current research interests include the organizational antecedents and consequences of identity, and the relations between identity, group dynamics and the production of group and organizational cultures. His work been published in journals including *Organization Studies, Leadership Quarterly, Organization, Human Relations, American Journal of Public Health, Journal of Business Ethics*, and *American Psychologist.*

Claus Noppeney works as a professor at Bern University of the Arts and the Business Department at Bern University of Applied Sciences. Capitalizing on the two affiliations, he is interested in creative talents and their worlds of work.