

Reflection and reflexivity as valuable tools for critical Work and Organizational Psychology (Commentary on Hornung et al.)

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In their very prudent article „Social transitions of work and health from the perspective of subjectivity: Critical synthesis of selected studies from applied psychology“, Hornung et al. deal with paradoxes of the modern world of work and exemplify why and how a critical perspective on one’s own research is important and necessary to face pressing issues and challenges often overlooked, such as the neoliberal transformation of work, power relations, externalized and introjected harms of work to health and wellbeing, and social as well as environmental crises. The article is very well-structured and the arguments are set up with tact, which is especially important since the concepts presented (subjectification of work as intensification, internalization, individualization) are not common for traditional work and organizational psychology (WOP), and neither are critical perspectives.

The contribution is outstanding for at least three reasons. First, the authors selected seven of their own research studies published earlier and dared to take an in-depth look by critically reflecting on them. For their critical reflection, they drew on and integrated interdisciplinary work, borrowing the sociological concept of „subjectification of work“ (Weiskopf & Loacker, 2006), referring to processes of intensification, internalization, and individualization. The introduction and incorporation of concepts which are not familiar in applied psychology (i.e., subjectification of work) has been accomplished thoughtfully and shows how concepts from other disciplines can be harnessed for WOP. Critical reflection on research projects (before, during or after) is not common in WOP. The premise is to be „objective“, research should be „value-free“ but critical reflection undermines this required „objectivity“ and „neutrality“, as it is seen as subjective and value-laden (Lefkowitz, 2008). However, in fact, research can never be neutral, objective, or value-free (Kurtines, Alvarez & Azmitia, 1990), which is why researchers should accept and be aware of their own values, belief systems, contexts etc., as these are likely

to influence own research activities (Seubert, McWha-Hermann & Seubert, 2022). This in-depth look therefore is notable as it shows a way how to engage in reflection of one’s own research. Second, Hornung et al. applied a qualitative methodology – a narrative and hermeneutic approach – for their meta-study, which is hardly ever used in WOP because of the dominance of the positivist tradition and quantitative methodology in WOP (Gerard, 2016). Deviating from mainstream WOP, this article clearly shows the potential of qualitative research by making visible tendencies of intensification, internalization, and individualization in published, quantitative studies that could have been only disclosed in a qualitative analysis. The methodology may also inspire researchers in critical WOP on how to use qualitative research methodology for their own purposes as this is often neglected in university curricula (Mey & Mruck, 2020). Third, to analyze the studies with very different foci and topics, the authors developed a framework, relying on the so-called organization-task / activity-individual (OTI) approach by Büssing (1992). Although the framework seems to appear complex at first glance, it impressively illustrates the importance of contexts and their interrelatedness, which is often overlooked in (especially quantitative) research (Johns, 2006). The framework offers guidance for other researchers to engage in critical analysis of their own research but is open for further development and may guide researchers to start reflection on their own. Indeed, stimulation of critical perspectives in applied research is one of the main aims of this valuable paper and the authors have succeeded on that very well.

I would like to echo this call for critical thinking by emphasizing reflection and reflexivity as suitable tools towards critical WOP (Seubert et al., 2022). While the terms reflection and reflexivity are interrelated and thus are often used interchangeably, there are important differences (Mann, 2016). According to Bolton and Delderfield (2018, p. 9),

reflection is in-depth review of events It is to bring experiences into focus from as many angles as possible Seemingly innocent details might prove to be key; seemingly vital details may be irrelevant. Reflection might prove something thought to be vital to be insignificant, or lead to insight about something unnoticed at the time, pinpointing perhaps when the seemingly innocent detail was missed.

In Hornung et al.'s meta-study, one can see in a striking way how such a process of reflection from a different perspective, namely from the viewpoint of subjectification of work, reveals previously seemingly irrelevant or subordinate processes of intensification, internalization, and individualization that were not in the foreground in the original studies. This is important as it offers new perspectives on existing research, shedding light, for example, on unintended impacts of research studies in practice (e.g., effects of processes of subjectification on working people), which may lead to the inclusion of a broader range of perspectives in everyday practice and thus contribute to a better world over time (Ng, Wright & Kuper, 2019).

Reflexivity, on the other hand, goes further, back to oneself, referring to a narrower focus on self-awareness (Mann, 2016). According to Bolton and Delderfield (2018, p. 10),

reflexivity is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, theories-in-use, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions; to understand our complex roles in relation to others. ... To be reflexive is to examine, for example, the limits of our knowledge, of how our own behaviour plays into organisational structures counter to our personal and professional values, and why such practices might marginalize groups or exclude individuals.

Although not explicitly elaborated in Hornung et al.'s article, a reflexive component can be inferred (at least) with regard to the collaborative work by the first author (e.g., Hornung, Höge & Unterrainer, 2021), even if such a perspective still seems rare in the field of WOP as a whole. By tracking research foci and study aims of this researcher's publications in the reference list over time, a clear change (or evolution) from more traditional to critical WOP can be observed, which plausibly may mirror a reflexive process of the author challenging his own attitudes, (personnel and professional) values, assumptions, and belief systems. Engaging in processes of reflexivity is challenging, a „near-impossible adventure of making aspects of the self strange“ (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018, p. 10). However, the potential of reflexivity lies in the recognition of one's own position in the world and a readjustment

in alignment with one's own values. By standing up for this position in society, a long-term change of societal structure, norms, and values is promoted, leading to better everyday practice over time (Ng et al., 2019).

Even though researchers in the field of WOP are rarely trained in processes of reflection and reflexivity, I warmly recommend daring the adventure of engaging in reflection and reflexivity to face pressing global issues (e.g., social and environmental crises), not only professionally as researchers but also privately as citizens. A first step towards critical reflection and reflexivity in WOP could be a confrontation with relevant literature (some of which are cited here) and to look for good examples that can be used to guide own efforts. The article by Hornung et al. could be a helpful starting point in this regard.

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