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Ideology in work and organizational psychology: the responsibility of the researcher

Edina Dóci[a] and P. Matthijs Bal[b]

[a]Department of Management & Organization, VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; [b]Lincoln International Business School, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

ABSTRACT

This is a rejoinder to the commentaries on our paper on neoliberalism in work and organizational psychology. In this rejoinder, we provide a summarized response to the commentaries, thereby highlighting three main points: (1) when, where and how does neoliberalism manifest in society and our work as Work and Organizational Psychologists, (2) what is our duty as work and organizational psychologists towards society and our own work, and (3) what do we recommend on the basis of the exchange with the commentators on our paper?

This article serves as a rejoinder to the commentaries (Carter, in press; Anseel, Van Lysebetten, Van Es, & Rosseel, in press; Guest & Grote, in press; Rudolph & Zacher, in press) on our paper around neoliberal ideology in work and organizational psychology (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Our original paper assessed the impact of neoliberalism on discourses within work and organizational psychology, and in particular how scholars' perceive the workplace and how they project their beliefs and fantasies upon the workplace and integrate these in academic research. We are very grateful to have received the commentaries from the various authors (and the many responses we received informally), as this provides a (rare) opportunity to engage in a written debate published in a WOP-journal in which views can be shared and different positions can be explained to enrich understanding of the phenomena under study. We do value each of these commentaries, which provided many crucial points. Our intention is not to discuss every issue raised by the commentaries, but rather provide a summarized response to the general concerns, and to take a look ahead towards future research possibilities. Some issues raised fell beyond the scope of our initial contribution, and despite being highly relevant, could not initially be discussed by us due to the space constraints and our deliberate choice for an in-depth focus on the logics underpinning neoliberal ideology. Therefore, we will address some of the issues raised by the authors of commentaries, and provide insights for further discussion and research on the impact of ideology on our field.

Where, when, and how does ideology manifest in relation to WOP?

Whilst our contribution did not specifically aim to present a historical overview of the rise of neoliberalism in WOP and to explain how WOP has slowly changed as a field due to the dominance of neoliberalism in society, there are some general observations which can be made on the basis of the responses

to our paper. First, we fully embrace the notion of neoliberalism as "hybrid" (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017), indicating that the meaning of neoliberalism may differ substantially across contexts, such as across countries and over time. Therefore, while the US and the UK may be "more" neoliberal than Europe (in their absence of a societal safety net), at the same time similar tendencies can be observed across contexts, such as deregulation, financialization and commodification (Harvey, 2005). However, more fundamentally, ideology *by definition* manifests itself in hybrid ways, as terminology within ideology (such as the notion of freedom) can be often interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the specific ideological lens. It is precisely in this ambiguity of meanings that ideology operates in order to produce agreement among people by offering simplistic understandings of contested terms (Žižek, 1989). These simplifications of reality have also enabled ideology to penetrate various domains across society and the workplace, and not just the private sector, but also the public sector and government. Hence, while Guest and Grote (in press) argued that neoliberalism has not affected the public sector, there is wide evidence and debate around the role of neoliberalism in the public sector (e.g., debates around *New Public Management*; e.g., Connell, Fawcett, & Meagher, 2009; Lorenz, 2012), as similar tendencies are observed in health care, government, education, housing and the utility sector. It is in particular in these sectors that we can observe the infiltration of neoliberalism through incorporating managerialism (e.g., an emphasis on organizational performance, the business case, and high-performance work systems) into what traditionally used to be organized in a more Keynesian way, and based on different governance models (e.g., with much stricter regulation). Thus, we would be cautious with strictly separating the private from the public sector in this regards, as suggested by Guest and Grote (in press), or distinguishing between neoliberal countries and European welfare states and thus creating artificial boundaries between systems, and

would argue instead for acknowledging local differences while ascertaining shared trends and tendencies.

Another issue that was raised concerned the measurability of ideology in WOP (Rudolph & Zacher, in press). Can ideology and its influence be "objectively" measured? While this question is highly relevant, we warn against a traditional WOP-approach towards this issue. Ideology is not something that can be merely measured with variables using positivistic methods to ascertain the "impact of ideology" on work (Freeden, 2003). As ideology is something that is both explicit and implicit and hidden (Žižek, 1989), direct measurement using variables may not suffice to identify the "real" impact of ideology. Ideology scholars have traditionally argued for discourse analysis as a primary way to identify the influence of ideology (Freeden, 2003). An interesting example is Roper, Ganesh, and Inkson (2010) who used discourse analysis to identify neoliberal ideology in the boundaryless careers literature. For instance, the authors identified how certain normative beliefs in boundaryless careers become "normalized", and thus taken for granted. Workers are therefore portrayed in the literature as by definition having preferences for boundaryless careers while being agentic in their behaviour to realize this. Roper et al. (2010) show how this is often *not* the case, and therefore scientific literature may misrepresent the workplace by introducing normative views as reality.

Hence, an explicit discussion of whether reality corresponds to our own work is often missing. Given the implicit and "taken-for-granted" nature of hegemonic ideology, discourse analysis may be the research method that is most fit to reveal some of those hidden and less visible aspects of how ideology permeates WOP research and practice. In this, we wholeheartedly agree with Carter's (in press) plea for a reflective stance and critical awareness of power relationships in what we do. Moreover, it also calls for more fine-grained analysis of our own work and writing and of the ideological dimensions within our work and thinking.

What is our duty as work and organizational psychologists?

The commentaries on our paper revealed an important issue concerning the role of the WOP scholar in the world. While a constructive-critical perspective on our field can be interpreted as hostile, it is imperative that we continuously reflect on what WOP means in the world, and how we can contribute to better understanding of workplaces, and in particular of people in the workplace.

From the commentaries, the question arose whether WOP can be expected to take into account structural, societal conditions, given that psychology as a scientific field has the individual in its focus (Anseel et al., in press). We agree that several subfields of psychology – for example personality psychology – shall not be expected to take societal, structural and political influences into account. However, we believe that there are a number of reasons why the same claim cannot be made for WOP. WOP refers to the psychology of the individual within the social context of the *workplace*, a fundamental institution of contemporary society. One's access to work, the kind of work one has access to, one's position in the

workplace hierarchy and one's access to resources in the workplace result from, reflect and shape one's position and status in society. Organizations are structured predominantly in a hierarchical manner, reflecting general societal structures in their demographic composition and infusing organizational relations with power differences. One's position in social and organizational structures largely define one's future perspectives, one's access to power and agency (i.e. the chance to shape circumstances so that they satisfy one's needs), and informs one's beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. The individual's psychological experiences in the workplace, their access to organizational and psychological resources and their behaviours are largely shaped by the organizational power relations the individual is part of.

Power differences being at the heart of organizational relations makes the workplace an inherently political institution, and thus one of the most political areas in public life (Johnson & Roberto, 2018). As organizations are not isolated entities but are deeply embedded in society and in the economy and are interrelated with other societal, political and economic actors and institutions, workplaces are not only political in the sense of being internally characterized by power relations, but they are also political in the sense that their organizing principles and processes reflect wider political trends, beliefs, values and ideologies. The principles at the heart of hegemonic political ideologies become the organizing principles of workplaces, dictating and legitimizing the distribution of power, resources, opportunities etc. among organizational actors, shaping employees' organizational trajectories, psychological experiences and behaviour. Given the social and political nature of organizations, taking a purely individual-focused perspective on workplace psychology – without taking socio-structural, political and ideological influences into account – can only lead to a partial understanding of organizational behaviour.

Furthermore, as we suggested in our original analysis, we as researchers need to reflect on how we ourselves are influenced by the very same widespread societal beliefs and ideologies. The analysis of Anseel et al. (in press) shows that at least half of our work (and even more so in the US than in Europe) focuses on explaining individual performance at work. A plea for workplace dignity as a potential alternative for the dominance of performance as outcome in our field, as presented in the discussion of our paper (Bal, 2017) also results from the realization that much of our efforts and publications are devoted to a primarily neoliberal agenda. We postulate that if we become aware of our own ideological beliefs and fantasies (e.g., that our work as WOP scholars should ultimately benefit organizations above and beyond the individual), we may make more deliberate choices regarding the goals of our research, focusing on outcomes that really matter – not only for organizations but also for individuals – in the workplace. This is also our duty as psychologists, as also advocated by Carter (in press); the APA Ethics code describes that among the responsibilities of psychologists, they should "respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals" (APA, 2017, Principle E). We do agree that responsible research (Anseel et al., in press) may be an important anchoring point through which WOP as a discipline can engage in meaningful debates around the future of the field. Yet at the same time,

we also need to be aware that the term responsible research can also be used in an ideological way to maintain status quo and decontest critical perspectives on our work (Žižek, 1989).

Recommendations

In closing, on the basis of the exchange of ideas with the commentators on our paper we offer a number of recommendations for future research and practice. While there were points of divergence between us and some of the authors, we in particular want to focus on the points of convergence for future work in our field.

First, the dominance of research emphasizing individual agency and the related neglect of macrostructural factors, such as political ideology does not advance our research and does not contribute to sustainable futures. Instead, a more specific integration of political-ideological, economic and macro-structural factors influencing our topics of research would allow us the space to also integrate values that transcend the individual, such as the value of cohesion, community and solidarity. For instance, while it is important to study how individual employability can be enhanced for individuals, we as WOP scholars should also be aware of and study whether and how communities are sustainable and offer enough jobs for people, as these may be a greater factor in determining whether people actually acquire jobs and meaningful work.

Second, we therefore need interdisciplinary approaches to be able to understand these issues in their full context. For instance, to understand the impact of ideology at work, we borrowed both from political sciences (Freeden, 2003; Glynos & Howarth, 2007) and philosophy (Žižek, 1989, 2014). Interdisciplinary approaches not only allow us to integrate theories and thinking across fields, but also contribute to pluralism in terms of our methodological toolbox. While WOP research typically departs from positivistic ontologies and uses reductionist models to investigate the workplace, the study of ideology in WOP needs a much broader basis to be studied, including more interpretivist and radical ontologies, and embracing methods such as discourse analysis to understand the more implicit and hidden dynamics underlying the topics of our research.

Third and finally, the initial paper discussed very briefly the potential alternatives to neoliberalism in WOP. It would be useful to continue this by further investigating, theorizing and debating how alternatives can flourish in our field. We share with Guest and Grote (in press) an interest in Kantian perspectives on people at work, and it is needed to further establish how such perspectives create the space to challenge neoliberal ideology in favour of a view of human beings in the workplace that is not merely instrumental, but centred around the empowerment of each human being in the workplace. We call for researchers in the domain of WOP to contribute actively to these debates and keep these debates alive, for instance at the EAWOP conferences and Small Group Meetings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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