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## Neoliberal ideology in work and organizational psychology

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of neoliberal ideology in workplace practices and in work and organizational psychology (WOP) research. It analyses how neoliberal ideology manifests in these two domains by using a prominent framework from the field of political theory to understand ideology through three different logics: political, social and fantasmatic logics. We explore the main neoliberal assumptions underlying existing practices in the workplace as well as in WOP research, how individuals are gripped by such practices, and how the status quo is maintained. The paper analyses how individuals in the contemporary workplace are henceforth influenced by neoliberalism, and how this is reflected in the practices and dominant paradigms within WOP. In particular, we focus on three ways neoliberalism affects workplaces and individual experiences of the workplace: through instrumentality, individualism and competition. The paper finishes with practical recommendations for researchers and practitioners alike on how to devote more attention to the, often implicit, role of neoliberal ideology in their work and research. The discussion elaborates on how alternative paradigms in the workplace can be developed which address the downsides of neoliberalism.

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Ideology; neo-liberalism; work and organizational psychology; individualism; instrumentality

The global economic crisis that started in 2007 continues to affect societies and economies worldwide (IMF, 2016). Many Western countries experience a sharp rise of income inequality, underemployment and unemployment (Galbraith, 2012; Heyes, Tomlinson, & Whitworth, 2017; Piketty, 2014), and thus continue to face concerns regarding social justice, income equality and sustaining enough employment for the people (IMF, 2016). Several authors have argued that the causes of the crisis can be attributed to a dominance of a neoliberal ideology in society (Harvey, 2005; Morgan, 2015; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009). Neoliberalism is a political-economic ideology which postulates that to enhance human well-being, it is necessary to maximize individual economic freedom in society (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017; Harvey, 2005). Despite the academic work that has shown how neoliberal ideology has contributed to the onset of the economic crisis (e.g., Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2015; Kotz, 2009; Wigger & Buch-Hansen, 2012), there is yet little understanding of how this ideology has affected people at work (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Harvey, 2005).

Moreover, it is striking how thus far the literature in the field of work and organizational psychology (WOP) has neglected the role of neoliberal ideology. This is important as it has been argued that scientific research is profoundly influenced by ideologies underpinning research questions and theoretical framing (e.g., Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017). Despite the calls for more research on ideology in management (George, 2014; Grote, 2017), there is still little understanding of the role of ideology in

WOP. As it has been claimed that neoliberalism is currently the dominant ideology in Western societies and beyond (Curran & Hill, 2017; Harvey, 2005; Morgan, 2015; Van Apeldoorn & Overbeek, 2012), it is important to analyse how neoliberal ideology has affected WOP as a discipline, and in particular the assumptions underlying research. On the one hand, neoliberalism has affected the workplace and how people behave in the workplace, while on the other hand, WOP as a discipline is also affected by neoliberalism through incorporating neoliberal assumptions in its research practices. There are several problems resulting from a lack of understanding concerning the role of neoliberal ideology in WOP. First, neoliberalism shapes main assumptions within the field, and a lack of awareness causes researchers to make choices in their research which are ideologically informed and may not be aligned with the values of the researcher. Second, neoliberalism has been argued to have profound negative effects on social justice and equality (Harvey, 2005), and lack of awareness of neoliberal ideology may legitimize rather than contest neoliberal ideology in WOP. Finally, pluralism of science is threatened when scholars implicitly adhere to a particular ideology without being aware of doing so.

This paper will analyse the logics underpinning neoliberal ideology in the workplace and in the practices and research of WOP. We will explain how neoliberalism has permeated the workplace and WOP. In so doing, assumptions underpinning WOP-research remain within neoliberal ideology, thereby limiting pluralism of scientific research and narrowing the available discourse in which research can be conducted and

debated. Subsequently, the paper offers ways through which neoliberal ideology can be better acknowledged in research such that alternative paradigms can be introduced and defended.

### Ideology and work and organizational psychology

The concept of ideology is used in different ways in WOP, but primarily in relation to how ideological beliefs drive workplace behaviours. For instance, ideology has been defined as “a valued cause or principle (not limited to self-interest) that are implicitly exchanged at the nexus of the individual-organization relationship” (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003, p.574). This definition is strongly tied to the purpose and values of organizations (Bal & Vink, 2011; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Moreover, this perspective on ideology implies a strong alignment with organizational purpose and how this is communicated to employees and other stakeholders. Using ideology in this sense, however, runs the risk of becoming the “painting of a positive and appealing picture, legitimizing certain interests and a specific social order” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016, p.140). More fundamentally, ideology constitutes not only the explicit, intentional attempts within the social order to create an image of society and the workplace as it should be, but also the lesser known, invisible understandings of the social order itself (Glynos, 2008; Žižek, 1989, 2001).

Hence, it is needed not only to understand the role of ideology at the level of intended purposes of organizations, but also at the level of the social order itself. We therefore need to study dominant practices in the workplace, as well as how research and practice in WOP adopt norms about the workplace. To do so, we will use recent work in the field of political theory to explore the three logics of ideology, and to analyse how these appear in the workplace and WOP (Glynos, 2001, 2008). Glynos (2008, 2011) differentiates three logics through which ideology permeates the workplace: political, social and fantasmatic logic (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). These three jointly explain how ideology affects the workplace and WOP and since neoliberalism is currently the dominant paradigm in the Western world and organizations we apply these logics to neoliberalism.

Political logic refers to the political dimension of social relations, and describes an ideology’s core rules, norms and understandings. Political logic explains how political discourse influences people’s beliefs, how certain phenomena becomes politicized or de-politicized (and thus non-challengeable), and how political frontiers are constructed, contested, challenged and transformed (Glynos, 2008). The final result of this process of contestation and de-contestation is that some rules become so axiomatic that they become invisible. For instance, individualism as underpinning contemporary Western society is presented not as something that is externally imposed upon people, but is believed to constitute an inherent aspect of contemporary society, or something that is intrinsically “good” (Bauman, 2000; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Hence, in Western society, there are implicit rules and norms that pertain to the individual responsibility of human beings to be self-reliant and to ensure one’s own success in

life. This has also been described as the need to become an “entrepreneur of the self” (Bauman, 2000; Žižek, 2014). In other words, people must design and develop their own lives, in order to be functional and successful in contemporary society. This neglects the fact that not all people may have similar possibilities to enact their individualized responsibilities, which thus may accentuate existing inequalities in society and the workplace (Cobb, 2016; Littler, 2013).

Social logic is the actual manifestation of politicized relations in concrete practices, referring to how the political dimensions are enacted and performed (Glynos, 2008). Political logic informs social logic, and explains how and why social practices appear or disappear, become dominant, and how they are questioned and contested. Social logic thus explains which practices are dominant in the workplace and in WOP-research. For instance, the individualization of society (Bauman, 2000; Curran & Hill, 2017) has caused employees to become self-reliant, forcing them to negotiate their own contract terms at work (Rousseau, 2005), and to be proactive at work and “employable” (Parker & Bindl, 2017). In contrast, those individuals who are less capable to do so, are not protected anymore through regulation, through which they are more likely to be forced into suboptimal, insecure jobs and working conditions. Hence, dominant norms of individualization and self-reliance in society are sustained and translated into workplace practices, and individuals experience the effects of individualism through the need to individually negotiate contract terms which used to be covered by labour law, collective agreements and HR policies.

Finally, fantasmatic logic explains why ideologically informed social practices and political understandings appeal to people. In other words, it explains how and why ideology grips people, and thus, why its notions and practices come to exist, become hegemonic and continue to exist (Glynos, 2008, 2011). It is argued that to sustain a dominant ideology in society, fantasy supports the resistance to change of social practices (Glynos, 2008). It does so by offering a gratifying narrative to people that prevents the contestation of social norms and the politicization of workplace practices, thus making power relations less visible or even desirable (Glynos, 2008). Fantasy offers a way through which people can escape into ideology (Žižek, 2014), thereby not having to recognize the contradictions within the system and its practices through means of disavowal. It is through such fantasies that people are able to remain within a flawed system, and despite being aware to some extent of its inherent contradictions, disavow individual responsibility for sustaining current practices. We now turn to the analysis of the dominant ideology of neoliberalism (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017), and analyse its impact on the workplace and WOP on the political, social and fantasmatic level.

### Neoliberalism as ideology

Neoliberalism is a political-economic theory about the advancement of human well-being (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017; Harvey, 2005; Lazzarato, 2009). Moreover, neoliberalism also constitutes an ideology, as it defines not only the implicit understandings in society, but has also “penetrated

common-sense understandings" (Harvey, 2005, p.41), which means that across the world, neoliberalism is widely perceived as the natural state of affairs. Due to the hybrid nature of neoliberalism (Peck et al., 2009), it is not surprising that equivalent terms are used which essentially refer to the same ideology, such as American corporate capitalism (George, 2014), managerialism (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Clegg, 2014; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010) and corporatism (Suarez-Villa, 2012). In the remainder of this paper, neoliberalism is used as it concerns the most widely used term (Harvey, 2005; Van Apeldoorn & Overbeek, 2012). The core principle of neoliberalism is that human welfare will be maximized when individuals have ultimate economic freedom to act. In contrast to more traditional notions of liberalism, neoliberal ideology does not postulate that freedom is bounded by morality, but that morality follows from economic freedom (Harvey, 2005).

The philosophy of unlimited economic freedom as part of neoliberalism is based on the notion of the "invisible hand" which determines in a free market the distribution of resources (Sedlacek, 2011). Neoliberalism therefore argues that it is needed to ensure government withdrawal from the market, such that the invisible hand can do its work in establishing a system where those who work hard are rewarded (*cf.* the notion of meritocracy). Within the neoliberal perspective, every human being is seen as a *homo economicus*, or a rational agent, who acts strategically and out of self-interest and is focused on utility maximization (George, 2014; Sedlacek, 2011). As every individual is supposed to make rational and strategic decisions in social life, the unregulated, free market will ensure that those with the highest quality for the best price will prevail. In line with this theory, the government should not interfere with the free market, and thus needs to withdraw itself from the public sphere as much as possible. Hence, the government needs to deregulate, privatize the public sector, and withdraw itself from social provisions, such as unemployment and healthcare benefits and social housing (Peck et al., 2009).

Neoliberalism also involves explicit attempts at reducing the power of trade unions, increasing the number of temporary workers rather than offering permanent employment, and the use of market principles in organizations (Bidwell, Briscoe, Fernandez-Mateo, & Sterling, 2013; Kotz, 2009). The rise of pay for performance, and the reduced role of employers in providing benefits to employees (such as retirement or health care benefits) have all been seen as neoliberal practices at work (Bidwell et al., 2013; Morgan, 2015). The hypothesized end result of these activities is a completely free market, where organizations can openly compete with each other, and where people can freely consume against the best price for the highest quality (Harvey, 2005).

Another aspect of neoliberalism is the "commodification of everything" (Harvey, 2005, p.165). This entails the notion that every aspect of human life should be exchangeable on the market, as the market operates as an "ethic" in itself. On the free market, not only goods and services are exchanged for money, but also labour itself. Work in neoliberalism is nothing more than another commodity. People sell their labour to an organization in return for a salary, and thus, labour becomes a commodity that can be freely exchanged on the labour

market. This constitutes a transactional perspective on the employment relationship (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993), and in particular the notion that all employees have to individually negotiate their own contract with an employer (Harvey, 2005). Hence, in neoliberalism the meaning of work is reduced to a mere transaction between two parties, thereby neglecting the intrinsic meaning of work and employment relationships for people.

### **Effects of Neoliberal ideology**

Neoliberalism has had various effects. First, deregulation, privatization and governmental withdrawal from social provisions have caused power to shift from governments towards (multinational) corporations (George, 2014). As the free market focuses on competition among organizations, shareholder value and profit maximization (Lazonick, 2014; Porter & Kramer, 2011), a distinction is created between the winners and the losers in the free market. Consequently, a small number of organizations and individuals have been able to control a substantial share of the (global) market (Vitali, Glattfelder, & Battiston, 2011). This growing gap between powerful corporations and individuals has led to greater income inequality (Bidwell et al., 2013; Cobb, 2016; Galbraith, 2012), which is indicative of the contrast between neoliberal ideology with the experienced reality of people. As free markets favour the strongest, and without the protection of governmental regulation (e.g., healthcare, unemployment and housing benefits), it is the vulnerable people who are most likely to suffer from the implications of increased self-reliance (Bauman, 2000). Hence, growing inequality shows how ideology and the experiences of people are increasingly dissonant (Stiglitz, 2012; Wisman, 2013).

### **An analysis of Neoliberal impact on the workplace and WOP**

Our main argument is that neoliberal ideology has profoundly impacted the workplace and WOP as a discipline. Ideology is largely implicit, and about what is "not said" (Glynos, 2008; Žižek, 1989). Hence, it is often difficult to directly assess the influence of ideology on the workplace and scholarly articles, as its impact can be rather implicit and hidden. Moreover, many scholars in WOP may be unlikely to identify fully with neoliberal ideology. However, as scholars (including the authors of the current article) are also part of a system that is permeated by neoliberal ideology, they are both pushed to focus on the neoliberal elements within WOP, and pulled towards neoliberal ideology, through the fantasies explained below (Glynos, 2001, 2008). The (original) intentions of a researcher, and the ways research is interpreted and used to prescribe practices dictated by neoliberal ideology may be disconnected (see for instance research on employability; Chertkovskaya, Watt, Tramer, & Spoelstra, 2013). Table 1 presents an overview of the three logics used to understand the precise impact of neoliberal ideology on both the workplace and WOP. This model describes a somewhat generalized reflection of how neoliberalism permeates the workplace, while reality is more nuanced and featured by contradictions.

**Table 1.** Logics of neoliberal ideology in the workplace and WOP.

	Neoliberal ideology	
	Workplace	Work and organizational psychology (WOP)
Political logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Instrumentality</li> <li>● Individualism</li> <li>● Competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Instrumentality</li> <li>● Individualism</li> <li>● Competition</li> </ul>
Social logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Business case</li> <li>● Individualization</li> <li>● Decline of labour agreements</li> <li>● Contracts</li> <li>● Quantitative assessment</li> <li>● Control and monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Instrumentality of employees goals in scientific models, and topics of research</li> <li>● Growing interest in individualized topics</li> <li>● Practical recommendations to improve organizational performance</li> <li>● Use of theory, models and concepts to explain contribution of individual employees to organizational performance</li> </ul>
Fantasmatic logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Freedom</li> <li>● Meritocracy &amp; social Darwinism</li> <li>● Growth &amp; progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Harmonious employment relationship</li> <li>● Social engineering</li> </ul>

### Political logic of the workplace

The political logic of neoliberalism in the workplace is three-fold. First, *instrumentality* refers to how people and resources are valued, and is closely aligned with the principle of commodification (Harvey, 2005). In neoliberalism, everything becomes instrumental to generate profitability, including labour and people in organizations. At the same time, people are supposed to be rational utility maximizers (Harvey, 2005), who are likely to perceive any other party in the market equally instrumental towards the achievement of one's own goals. Under neoliberalism, organizations are alike in their focus on profit maximization and shareholder value (Porter & Kramer, 2011), and therefore treat everything as a commodity that can be used to generate profit. People are merely instrumental to the achievement of organizational goals, and vice versa, people are likely to approach the relationship with an employer solely with instrumental goals in mind. Thus, the employment relationship is nothing more than an instrumental exchange between two parties, which does not have any value beyond an instrumental one. For the organization, there is no need to invest in the employee, unless it contributes to organizational goals. When profitability or shareholder value can be increased by laying off people, there is essentially no argument against it (Gilbert, 2000). Hence, political logic determines the workplace to be *instrumental*, and driven by transactional agreements between employee and organization.

A second political logic in relation to the workplace is the focus on individualism (see Table 1). Neoliberalism is inherently an individualistic ideology (Harvey, 2005), through positioning the utility for the individual as central to the structures of society. Each individual is expected to be self-interested, and to pursue maximization of one's own outcomes. Individualism refers not only to the opportunity for individuals to pursue their individual goals and desires, but also to the individual responsibility and accountability for one's actions

and well-being (Bauman, 2000; Harvey, 2005). Hence, in neoliberalism, people are expected to be self-reliant, and to ensure their own well-being, education, employability, wealth, societal success and so on (Oyserman et al., 2002).

In consequence, the contemporary worker has become his or her own mini-capitalist, an entrepreneur of the self, investing in his/her own future, including one's education and health (Bauman, 2000; Žižek, 2014). Whereas education, health and unemployment benefits used to be rights in the welfare states, this is increasingly replaced by a system where one has to individually invest in one's own future and employability (e.g., through paying high university fees, health care and unemployment insurance, and personalized pension plans; Žižek, 2014). The rationale for this is through the rhetoric of opportunity and free choice. The contemporary worker has the opportunity to invent her/himself (Bauman, 2000), and has a free choice over how to design her/his life and career. Freedom of choice implies that people are truly free, however, their freedom is limited to the extent that they are free to make the *right* choices, which are externally determined through ideology (Žižek, 1989). If one makes the wrong choice, one loses the "freedom to choose" itself. In other words, the contemporary human being has a free choice to be an entrepreneur, but by making the "wrong" choice, loses the right to do so, which leads to either unemployment or precarious work (Bauman, Bauman, Kociatkiewicz, & Kostera, 2015).

Competition represents the third political logic. At the organizational level, competition has co-aligned with the neoliberal doctrine of privatization (e.g., of health care, education, energy and public transport). Organizations are postulated to compete with each other on the market, and accordingly organizations need to be managed such that they are competitive (e.g., through creating sustained competitive advantage; Barney, 1991). However, employees also have to become competitive on the labour market, where existing organizational practices such as selective hiring and talent management support a system of competition among employees for the best careers, jobs and positions (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010). The result is that employees are no longer focused on being skilled in a job or developing themselves to fulfil intrinsic needs for development (Bal, 2017), but to outcompete others for the best jobs and careers. This leads to an extrinsic motivation where individuals should be competitive, educate themselves, engage in "organizational citizenship behavior", and build up competitive CV's to be more employable and desirable than others (Lazzarato, 2009). In sum, neoliberal political logic dictates about the instrumental, the individualized and the competitive nature of the contemporary workplace. The next question, however, is how these manifest in concrete workplace practices.

### Social logic of the workplace

The social logic pertains to how ideology manifests in concrete practices in the workplace, and how people enact these norms (Harvey, 2005; Morgan, 2015). In particular, there are several aspects of the workplace in which neoliberal ideology manifests: the prevalence of the business case,

individualization as a process and the decline of collective labour agreements, the contractualization of employment, and the rising impact of quantitative assessment, control and monitoring. Jointly, they explain how neoliberalism has pervaded the very nature of how the workplace is constructed.

The emphasis on instrumentality and competition in the workplace has manifested through the use of the “business case” in the management of organizations: every action and investment of the organization and the people working for the organization should contribute to the competitiveness of the organization (Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017; Harvey, 2005). The use of the business case aligns with the idea of organizations being primarily instrumentally managed: all that takes place in the organization should be contributing to organizational performance, profit and shareholder value, and all employee activity is subject to these goals. Moreover, the business case also aligns with the idea of competition: as every organization is competing with other organizations in the free market, organizations need to justify every investment and expenditure in line with the business case. Employees themselves are integral part of this, where their value is purely instrumental to the organization, and therefore they must continuously prove their worth in competition with other employees or applicants.

For organizations and neoliberal governments to realize this potential of the “business case organization”, where everything and everyone is instrumental and competitive, it has been well-documented how the power of trade unions has systematically been reduced since the 1980s (Harvey, 2005; Morgan, 2015). Consequently, the decline of collective representation and labour agreements co-aligned with the *process* of individualization of society and workplaces. Individualization differs from individualism, as the latter is defined by the independence of people from each other (Oyserman et al., 2002), while the former refers to the process of change within societies where individuals increasingly perceive themselves as individuals rather than part of collectives, and where societal structures are gradually adapting to a more individualized nature of its structures and norms (Bal, 2017). Inherent to the process of individualization, are changes such as individual employees increasingly having to arrange their own work conditions, and becoming less reliant on existing (protective) regulation. For instance, the rise of temporary work and self-employed contractors provide organizations with the desired flexibility to hire and fire workers at will without the necessity to provide lifetime employment and benefits such as development, job security and work-life balance (Bal & Jansen, 2016). Consequently, the employment relationship can increasingly be described as transactional (Bal, 2017; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993), whereby the value of long-term commitment to organizations has lost its meaning.

Instrumentality, individualism and competition have also led to a focus on quantitative assessment, control and monitoring within organizational life. To ensure that organizations become and remain competitive, organizations need to become efficient (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). To implement comparable ways to establish the “efficient organization”, managers need quantitative measures to compare employee

performance. While these provide ways of comparison, they do not necessarily carry validity and reliability of what they intend to measure. Moreover, while the desire to be competitive meant that all processes, activities and people in organizations needed to be comparable using quantitative measures, the resulting bureaucracy has led to the contradiction of the hyperflexible, yet bureaucratic organization, where people are closely monitored in their daily activities (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). In other words, for organizations to be competitive, it is needed that comparisons can be made between organizations and within organizations. The use of strict monitoring and control has therefore become a central aspect of the contemporary workplace (Vallas, 1999), strongly affecting employees’ work experience.

### ***Fantasmatic logic of the workplace***

Fantasmatic logic explains why the practices discussed above continue to exist, by revealing the underlying motives through which such practices appeal to and grip people (Glynos, 2008, 2011), and thus are actively maintained by them. We identify three elements within neoliberal ideology which pertain to the “fantasy-level”: the freedom fantasy, the logic of meritocracy and social Darwinism, and the belief in growth and progress.

Individual freedom as a fundamental value has always been at the centre of neoliberal thought (Freeden, 2003; Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal ideology appeals to people by emphasizing the importance of people’s freedom to choose, and their ability to make decisions for themselves (Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2015; Bauman, 2000). Individual freedom (and well-being) is ensured by the freedom of the market, the “deregulation of everything”, and the liberation of the individual as entrepreneur (Bauman, 2000; Harvey, 2005). At the heart of neo-liberalism’s *freedom fantasy* is the notion that neoliberalism is the exclusive guardian of freedom, defending it from the interventionist and regulating state, paternalistic forms of organizing and oppressive collectives. Thus, the role of the state shall be limited to ensuring freedom and a well-functioning market (Harvey, 2005).

In the domain of work, (individual) freedom in the neoliberal organization refers to the individual’s freedom to choose (and leave) their employer, the freedom to negotiate for oneself, the freedom to design one’s time arrangements, and the freedom to manage and design one’s career and development at work (Harvey, 2005; Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2008). As opposed to the rigid and bureaucratic burdens of collective action and state intervention, neoliberalism offers the freedom of flexible labour relations and flexible time arrangements. The deal that the paternalistic organization used to offer to employees was “a power for patronage” bargain (Schwalbe et al., 2000): the employee accepted their subordination to organizational authorities and interests and in return offered loyalty to the organization. The organization offered life-long employment and benefits in exchange for the work and commitment of the employee (Sims, 1994).

Neoliberal ideology offers freedom to the individual, which replaces patronage. In the centre of the freedom fantasy is the agentic and free individual who can take care of her/himself, who is in no need of the state’s, the organization’s or any

authority's protection. The price the individual must pay for this freedom is to accept responsibility for their own employment and well-being (Bal & Jansen, 2016). If the individual fails to succeed, it is their personal failure as "entrepreneur of the self" (Harvey, 2005; Kalleberg, 2009). The freedom fantasy implies that neoliberalism has emancipated the individual from the heavy burdens of the bureaucratic, rigid relations of the paternalistic organization, trade unions and collective organizing, and instead, offers the individual the freedom to assert oneself on the market, compete with others and realize one's interests. Through this fantasy, neoliberalism "grips" the individual, and makes individualization, competition and instrumentality seem appealing and desirable as it offers freedom to the people.

The freedom fantasy is closely related to the second fantasmatic logic that neoliberalism offers, the *fantasy of meritocracy*. Meritocracy has been described as the notion that merit and talent should be the basis for how people are rewarded in society and the workplace (Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2015; Castilla & Benard, 2010). Success is primarily the result of willpower, hard work and an enterprising mind (and not of one's largely inherited social, cultural and economic capital, Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, the fantasy of meritocracy refers to the belief that all people get what they deserve (Littler, 2013). Meritocracy is important in the context of neoliberalism, as its principle of fairness in the distribution of talents and success in life legitimizes the status quo and the position of existing elites, as they have deserved their position due to their innate talents and hard work.

While research shows that actual meritocracy is largely absent in contemporary society (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017; Littler, 2013), the ideal of meritocracy remains a powerful force in sustaining hegemonic, neoliberal ideology in society, thereby underpinning the viability of current practices (Glynos, 2008). Hence, the ideas underlying meritocracy constitute a fantasy, because at present resources are *not* distributed in line with each individual's talents and efforts as applied through their daily labour (Littler, 2013), but are increasingly clustered at the top. Innate differences and structural power differences are often de-emphasized in neoliberal ideology (Burke, 2013). By emphasizing the relationships between effort and merit, neoliberal ideology ignores structural differences among people due to privilege, including one's social class, ethnicity or gender (Burke, 2013; Littler, 2013).

The logic of meritocracy is closely related to Social Darwinism (Tienken, 2013). Social Darwinism departs from the point of view of natural selection, and that the fittest will survive, or those who are best able to adapt to changing circumstances in the environment (Tienken, 2013). The fantasmatic logic of neoliberalism pertains to the natural selection between those who are able to survive and thrive in the contemporary workplace and those who are unable to do so. The latter group will be forced into suboptimal work conditions, such as temporary work, job insecurity, low pay, few opportunities for developments and so forth. The evolutionary logic of social Darwinism complemented with the idea of meritocracy offers a compelling rationale for the neoliberal organizing of society. Similar to how successful human evolution depended on the survival of the fittest, for the sake of

progress of human society and for the sake of well-functioning organizations, the strong and capable *must* succeed. Competition is thus seen as indispensable and fair, given that everyone has the same chances to succeed in it (Harvey, 2005). Moreover, this fantasmatic logic does not only legitimize individualization and instrumentalization, but makes these processes seem desirable. In a competitive – but fair – setting, where the legitimate end goal is outperforming others and winning, everyone *should* be individualistic and instrumentally orientated. Within this logic, where individual success is the guarantee of societal success, it is fair that other people become individualistic and instrumental in the journey towards one's self-realization.

Besides people internalizing the drive to compete with others (and individualize and instrumentalize themselves and others in the process), the above mentioned neoliberal fantasies have yet another function. They legitimize the notion that in a society organized around competition, there will always be "losers". Because the losers of neoliberal competition are the feeble who did not make use of their freedom and opportunities, it is legitimate that they do not receive support and protection from poverty and isolation (Harvey, 2005). They are the unfortunate but inevitable by-products of fair competition. These fantasies therefore serve the purpose of soothing people's conscious in the face of social injustice and exploitation. In so doing, they prevent the contestation of power relations and collective mobilization, and ultimately, ensure sustaining work practices (Glynos, 2008).

In neoliberalism, there is another set of underlying beliefs, one that we identify as the fantasy of *growth and progress*. This fantasy is twofold: it concerns a belief that when people exert effort and become more "productive", they will grow both in status and as a person, but it also involves a belief that this growth is inherently good. The notion that an individual stops growing (in status or personally), or a society not making progress anymore, falls beyond the scope of the fantasy. The explanation of this resides in the meaning of fantasy itself; a fantasy always involves a desire for more, for accumulation of possession, status, or fulfilment (Žižek, 1989).

On the societal level, this fantasy has been institutionalized through the growth-economy; whenever a country stops having economic growth, it immediately enters a recession, with all associated negative consequences, such as mass layoffs and unemployment (Sedlacek, 2011). At the individual level, people depend on their market value for survival and success in a society organized around competition, where traditional welfare state structures, labour unions and social support systems are being dismantled (Harvey, 2005). In such a setting the individual is susceptible to the fantasy of personal growth and becomes overly focused on their individual progress and development, which is identical to continuously maintaining and enhancing one's own market value. This way, the individual instrumentalizes, commodifies and exploits her/himself. This is the mechanism through which fantasmatic logic preserves hegemonic ideology: being gripped by the fantasy, the individual internalizes the ideology to the extent that it becomes integral part of the individual's identity and aspirations. This way, there is no need for exercising coercive power for the ideology to maintain its hegemonic position in



organizations and society (Glynos, 2008). Furthermore, the belief in growth and progress is yet another fantasmatic device that smoothens out the ambiguities of neoliberalism. If the ultimate goal is to grow and progress, then the growth and progress of a few is not only fair, but ultimately beneficial for society as a whole (Harvey, 2005). The growth and progress fantasy thus makes a competitive, individualistic and instrumental stance in society look reasonable and even inevitable: if it is the individual's striving for personal growth and progress that makes society as a whole well-functioning, then it is entirely legitimate and desirable that individuals care primarily about their own interests, strive to outcompete others and regard others instrumental in this process.

### **Political logic of work and organizational psychology**

The political logic of WOP can be understood in similar ways to political logics underpinning the workplace. An implicit assumption underlying the field of WOP pertains to positivism, with a specific intention to study the workplace *as it is*, or in objective ways (Bal, 2015; Keenoy & Delbridge, 2010). However, a positivistic stance already implies a political logic, as it depoliticizes WOP-research claiming that it is non-ideological (Žižek, 1989). Within the positivist paradigm, research is meant to convey the truth and thus, its axioms, constructs, theories, methods and findings are not to be challenged (at least not on a political basis). Yet, every scientific discipline has an ideological dimension, even if holders of hegemonic ideologies often claim that their beliefs are not ideological but reflect how things really are (Freeden, 2003). Therefore it is important to take into account the ideological beliefs underpinning WOP. Even though there is some attention in WOP for themes resulting from "experienced neoliberal ideology" such as inequality (Cobb, 2016) and insecurity (Vander Elst, Näswall, Bernhard-Oettel, De Witte, & Sverke, 2016), the influence of instrumentality, individualism and competition are deeply integrated into the implicit assumptions underlying WOP research. While few WOP-researchers may identify themselves as being neoliberal scholars, we are operating in a system that pressures us to adhere to neoliberal principles, even though personally we may not agree with them. It is therefore of utmost importance to assess our assumptions and to critically evaluate these.

First, the instrumental perspective underpins WOP theory and research as much as it underpins the contemporary employment relationship (Baruch, 2015). This means that WOP research primarily approaches the employment relationship in instrumental, transactional terms (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993); that is, the employee delivers a performance which is of interest to the employer as it contributes to organizational productivity (e.g., profitability or shareholder value; Walsh, 2007). This assumption guiding WOP research reflects neoliberal instrumentality: research takes interest in the employee as a resource that can be harnessed for organizational interests, instead of taking interest in her/him as a human being.

Within this perspective, work in itself is not considered to have an intrinsic value, and employee experiences and well-being are not relevant outcomes as such, as long as they do

not contribute to organizationally-relevant outcomes. For instance, in retirement research (e.g., Bal, De Jong, Jansen, & Bakker, 2012; Zacher, 2015), arguments usually do not revolve around the intrinsic value of work in later stages of life, but are primarily based on the extrinsic value of older workers for organizations. In the employee training and development literature (e.g., Lepak & Snell, 1999), investment of organizations in employee training is usually presented as a paradox, as training may on the one hand enhance employee commitment and thus their intention to remain with the organization, while on the other hand, it increases employability, through which employees may be more likely to obtain a better job elsewhere. This apparent paradox resides within the instrumental logic, and neglects the more general intrinsic value of development for people and society. The instrumental logic also reveals itself through the absence of the acknowledgment of the organization's responsibility for workers' development *regardless* of whether they intend to stay or not, as development (and education) may be considered an intrinsic societal value. The underlying concern here is that researchers usually do not acknowledge the assumptions or ideological basis on which their research is founded, while implicitly adhering to a neoliberal logic.

Moreover, individualism is also present as political logic underpinning WOP. There is an inherent relationship between individualism and WOP, as the field has been built on the centrality of the individual employee and her/his work experiences. While this is not necessarily neoliberal, WOP research tends to ignore the structural factors underpinning employee behaviours, thereby attributing a personal and individualized responsibility for how individuals behave in the workplace. The focus on the individual employee indicates the implicit assumption that the individual is primarily responsible and accountable for ensuring employability, high quality jobs and engagement at work. For instance, the review of Grant and Parker (2009) on work design theory explicitly discusses how the classic job characteristics theory of Hackman and Oldham (1975), which principally focused on how organizations should design meaningful jobs for workers, has been exchanged for relational and proactive theories, which emphasize the role of individual workers in crafting their jobs. While it is not explicitly argued that employees *should* be proactive, and thus are individually responsible and accountable, the attention to these individualistic notions of work design carry significant, implicit meaning, as it draws away the attention from the responsibility of the organization towards the responsibility of individual employees to design their own jobs and careers.

Finally, competition is also central in the political logic underlying WOP, as research in the field assumes the workplace to be a competitive domain where employees are competing with each other for scarce resources (Call, Nyberg, & Thatcher, 2015). In other words, employees in WOP-research are assumed to be self-interested, rational actors who are utility maximizers (Harvey, 2005). Employees in WOP-research are claimed to be interested in performance, innovation, career success, salary increases and promotions, as it fulfils the need for growth and development. To do so, employees are competing with each other for the best jobs and positions. It is notable how within WOP, there is a tendency to focus on

those employees who are proactive, successfully develop careers, while somewhat neglecting the employees who are not proactive, or who for reasons of inability or unwillingness do not engage in proactive behaviours or career development (Grant & Parker, 2009; Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999).

### **Social logic of WOP**

It also needs to be analysed *how* political logic permeates the research that is conducted in the field. While WOP is not necessarily neoliberal (Bal, 2015), neoliberal influences can be traced in how WOP research is being practiced and used. The practice of research concerns the choice to study particular phenomena, but also concerns the ways through which researchers in WOP make claims, underpin their research, and remain silent on particular choices that have been made explicitly or implicitly.

Hence, neoliberalism can be traced in WOP by showing how the principles of instrumentality, individualism and competition inform research practices. On the one hand, instrumentality can be observed in the explicit integration of organizationally-relevant outcomes in models of individual work behaviours. An example concerns the model of Messersmith and colleagues (Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011) which tested employee attitudes as mediator and as indicator of the “black box” explaining why HRM affects performance. In these types of studies, employees are merely instrumental to organizational goals, which expresses the symbolic, implicit, meaning of WOP research: while there is attention for the individual’s experience of a job, this is important as it contributes to organizational outcomes (see e.g., Dalal, 2005, which article begins by arguing that performance is *the* criterion of organizational psychology). On the other hand, instrumentality is also observed in how research on particular topics is legitimized. For instance, the review of Call et al. (2015) on “star employees” (*cf.* research on high potentials) represents not only an overt interest in those employees who do well, but also in those employees who do better than others, thereby also representing the workplace as a competitive domain where the primary interest of workers is to outperform others. The instrumental reason is overt, as the first sentence of their paper reads: “Stars are assumed to be unique and add disproportionate organizational value compared to nonstars” (Call et al., 2015, p. 623).

Furthermore, adherence to individualism is also present in an increasing interest in individually-focused research topics, such as individual deals (Bal et al., 2012; Hornung et al., 2008), employability (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004), job crafting (Kooij, Van Woerkom, Wilkenloh, Dorenbosch, & Denissen, 2017) and proactivity (Parker & Bindl, 2017). While these concepts are not inherently neoliberal, they are indicative of individualism, in its conceptualization and use in practice. For instance, research on job crafting (Kooij et al., 2017) may carry implicit understandings of individual employee responsibility to create and maintain interesting and meaningful jobs. This is subsequently translated into practice through (further) reduction of organizational responsibility to provide meaningful work, and a pressure to reduce collective representation (e.g., through labour unions) in negotiating meaningful jobs

for all employees, regardless of their individual capabilities for negotiation.

It can also be observed how these concepts are used in a competitive way. It is not surprising that concepts such as proactivity, job crafting, employability, performance and creativity are popular topics of research in WOP. As they are employee behaviours that are determined to be crucial in the labour market (e.g., George, 2014; Seibert et al., 1999), they are also indicative of the rise of competition underpinning employee behaviours. More specifically, studies on topics such as proactivity do not investigate whether people are proactive in relation to a certain objective standard of what can be considered to be proactive behaviour, but by definition ascertain proactivity in a competitive way, through comparing proactive behaviour of one employee vis-à-vis other employees (Bal, 2017). This is also notable in research on employability, which tends to ignore distinctions of class, gender or ethnicity in its appeal to workers to become employable, notwithstanding the potential exclusion of people on the basis of these distinctions (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). Moreover, another consequence of scientific interest and research on employability is that it projects norms on people in the workplace to portray themselves in the most “desirable” way towards employers. As a result, characteristics that do not contribute to employability (e.g., neuroticism) are concealed, thereby reducing the possibility for people to “be themselves” in the workplace, and act upon their dignity (Bal, 2017). Hence, the meaning of employability moves beyond what is explicitly stated in research into practice, where it also includes the more implicit understandings around the rhetoric of employability. Therefore, a scientific definition of employability as “the likelihood of easily finding a new job” becomes competitive in neoliberal discourse, as it implies that people make themselves as desirable as possible, thereby potentially concealing their non-employable characteristics. In so doing, they compare vis-à-vis other people, or more generally, an imagined version of the ideal employable employee as portrayed in scientific publications.

Furthermore, practical recommendations are often presented to showcase the instrumental nature of WOP-topics (e.g., proactivity is good for organizational performance) as well as the individualized responsibility of these topics (e.g., employees should become more proactive). Yet, this may also create a paradoxical situation, in which organizations are recommended to invest in employees and to create meaningful jobs, as this may enhance organizational outcomes (Messersmith et al., 2011), but at the same time holding individuals responsible to ensure they develop themselves and remain employable (Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017). This paradox is usually resolved through positioning investments in employees as contributing to competitive advantage for organizations (and thus instrumental to the organization), but nonetheless refraining from linking this to an explicit organizational responsibility or employee entitlement. Hence, instrumentality is influential in how WOP-research is translated into practice; yet, it has also influenced research itself.

Instrumentality has had a profound impact on the development of theories and models. Conceptual models are generally defined in terms of how they contribute to

organizational outcomes, such as performance, absence or innovation (Messersmith et al., 2011). Moreover, it is also easier for researchers to publish research that establishes a link between employee attitudes and “objective” organizational outcomes, such as financial profit or return-on-investment, than it is to publish research focused on explaining “soft” outcomes, such as well-being (Paauwe, 2004). The ultimate goal of much WOP research tends to be to explain relationships of subjective employee experiences with objective organizational outcomes, thereby adhering to an instrumental logic which turns all subjectivity into the logic of the business case. A notable example is the conceptual model of altruism by Clarkson (2014), in which altruism in organizations is not valued as such, but, according to the model, obtains its legitimacy through its potential effects on organizational success. Altruism therefore does not have an intrinsic value, but only extrinsic in the potential for objective success. The omitted question is whether organizations should refrain from valuing altruism when it does not enhance organizational outcomes (or what to do when altruism goes against organizational goals).

The instrumental logic also manifests in the use of theories and concepts in WOP. One of the major theories in WOP is the *Social Exchange Theory* (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). Notwithstanding the explicit incorporation of differences between economic, social and ideological exchange by Blau (1964), the theory has been primarily used with an instrumental focus, postulating that employees and organizations engage in an exchange relationship in which both parties monitor how well the other party is fulfilling its obligations in order to establish one’s own contributions. Moreover, it is argued that for the organization, the exchange relationship is rather instrumental, and has value only when it contributes to organizational outcomes. For instance, while it is generally perceived that trust is essential in exchange relationships (Blau, 1964), it is notable to see how trust research heavily orientates towards explaining a relationship between trust and performance outcomes (De Jong, Dirks, & Gillespie, 2016; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Hence, trust (and in extension many WOP concepts) seems to have a value only when it contributes to organizationally-relevant outcomes.

A potential counterargument against the dominance of the instrumental logic in WOP is that there is much research which does focus on intrinsic outcomes, such as employee well-being, satisfaction, engagement and work-life balance. Notwithstanding the validity of this critique, the more fundamental question underlying it, is whether these concepts are used in such a way that they require an extrinsic logic to defend their use. The concern is that intrinsic outcomes are increasingly attributed to have extrinsic properties in their relationships with outcomes which are not directly relevant to the employee her/himself (e.g., commitment is only important as it positively predicts performance). This raises the question concerning the prioritization of outcomes for individuals, groups, organizations or society. For instance, when shareholder value is prioritized over employment (Porter & Kramer, 2011), organizations may engage in layoffs to enhance shareholder value notwithstanding the negative consequences for employees and society. The alternative, however,

is lacking; there is not yet an established discourse which counteracts the instrumental logic in WOP to defend the inherent worth of concepts such as commitment, well-being and work-life balance.

Individualism is also present in the choice and use of theories and models. The notion that employees are individually responsible for their well-being and career development is widespread in WOP. This had led to the rise of individualistic concepts, and a positioning of self-reliance being central to formulating theories and models. For employees to survive in the workplace, these concepts become conditional, as they are necessary to have a job and be successful in the workplace. It is striking that there is hardly any research on the people who are either unwilling or unable to engage in those activities, as well as whose responsibility it is to manage and stimulate employee proactivity and employability (Bal, 2017). If there is attention to vulnerable groups, it is not to show the limitations of concepts such as employability, but it is often focused on how to increase the employability of this particular group, such as older workers (Oostrom, Pennings, & Bal, 2016). It thereby does not challenge neoliberal rhetoric, but fully embraces it, and the aim of such research is to show how these vulnerable groups can be made more useful for neoliberal society. Hence, the structural conditions of exclusion and privilege do not have to be assessed and critiqued, whilst maintaining beliefs in the hegemony of neoliberal ideology. As a consequence, there remains a void concerning the role of collectives and shared responsibilities in a field which has become individualized in its approach towards theorizing and conducting research. In sum, the social logic of contemporary WOP research dictates that choice and use of theories, models and concepts are influenced by instrumental, individualistic and competition-focused perspectives, leading to a narrow view on how the employment relationship unfolds.

### ***Fantasmatic logic of WOP***

At the core of explaining dominant practices in WOP are the fantasy constructions of researchers and the discipline itself, which can be traced towards two main fantasies: the fantasy of the harmonious employment relationship, and at the heart of WOP, the notion of social engineering. It is important to assess the fantasies that exist within the discipline itself, as they motivate individual researchers, direct attention to specific research streams and discourses which become dominant in the field. Thereby they potentially undermine other streams of research and pluralism within a discipline. In other words, the relationship between WOP research and society is not just unidirectional, in that WOP research reflects the dominant ideology in society, but WOP research itself also contributes to the maintenance of societal ideologies (Glynos, 2008, 2011).

At the most visible level of fantasy, we can discern the harmonious employment relationship. This entails a belief in the possibility of a harmonious relationship between employees and organizations, where through consensus and negotiation mutual agreement can be reached in terms of shared needs, interests, and power balance between the two parties. This belief is dominant in WOP, where an implicit assumption pertains to the possibility of employees and organizations to

be connected and aligned in their goals. For instance, a popular concept such as the psychological contract (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993) assumes the relationship between employee and organization to be reciprocal and equal. It is not surprising that power differences between organizations and employees are hardly taken into account in the psychological contract literature. Meanwhile, WOP-research often presents the contemporary employee as proactive and able to negotiate, and therefore equal in power to the organization. It thereby neglects the organization's fundamentally instrumental approach to labour and the employee, and thus the unfairness in the structural positions of employee and organization. Consequently, there is little reference to the employment relationship as being formed through pluralism (Geare, Edgar, & McAndrew, 2009; Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017), and as such driven by divergent interests of employees and organizations.

Beliefs in fairness and reciprocity may result in fantasies of harmonious employment relationships, as they picture a world where mutual obligations are genuinely felt and met by the various parties in the organization. Systematically unacknowledged is the more structural exploitation in neoliberalism which makes fairness and reciprocity effectively a fantasy which in reality does not take place (Harvey, 2005). Moreover, this can also be seen in the use of theories within WOP, as social exchange theory remains one of the most popular theoretical frameworks to understand phenomena at work (Cropanzano et al., 2017). While other exchange frameworks exist and have been investigated, such as communal sharing or authority ranking (see e.g., Fiske, 1992), WOP researchers have persisted in using social exchange theory being able to explain almost *any* action in the workplace.

The question, however, remains *why* WOP continues to believe in the harmonious employment relationship as underpinning the workplace, and why it fails to acknowledge the variety of power relations and processes influencing the workplace. This may be explained on the basis of the persistent belief within WOP that the world is ultimately fair, and that people will be rewarded for meeting their social obligations or punished when they fail to reciprocate and adhere to social exchange norms. However, in the reality of the contemporary workplace, fairness is more often absent than not, and burn-out, dignity violations, layoffs, abusive leadership and so on, persist (e.g., Bal, 2017). In response to this unfair reality, we suggest that the ultimate fantasy of WOP pertains to engagement in "social engineering". Social engineering entails the notion that reality and societal relations can be changed through interventions (e.g., Kooij et al., 2017; Strauss & Parker, 2018), and that in the absence of fairness, the WOP researcher should engage in research and collaborative activity with practitioners and consultants to change reality to actively construct fairer and more harmonious workplaces.

It is therefore not surprising that in WOP (just as in other scientific disciplines), a preoccupation has grown with the impact of research on practice (Grote, 2017), and that generally experimental intervention studies are perceived as the best example of scientific research. It is now desirable that research transforms organizational reality, and makes organizations operate in a smoother way, thereby both enhancing

organizational performance and sustaining employee well-being (Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). Hence, on the basis of positivistic, "objective" research, it is possible to formulate technical, evidence-based solutions towards realizing the high performance organization that meets the needs of both organizations and employees. This constitutes a recipe or even a panacea for the high-performing organization where both managers and employees are productive and happy (Taris & Schreurs, 2009). The problem with this, however, is that it overestimates the capacity of WOP (and science in general) to influence (experienced) reality of the workplace, while it underestimates the impact of structural forces, political ideologies, and random error, over which researchers have no control.

Moreover, social engineering fantasies are also inconsistent with researchers' proclaimed "objective" stance towards reality, where they claim to study the workplace as it is. In contrast, social engineering implies a proactive attitude to be willing to intervene in reality and to implement changes that correspond to the underlying principles of scholars. Hence, this process of social engineering (e.g., through various collaborative efforts between research and practice) may cause neoliberalism not only to be sustained in the workplace, but to even be further legitimized. When WOP-scholars emphasize the importance of organizational outcomes (e.g., performance and profits) and the individualized and competitive nature of work, they are actively contributing to an ideological underpinning of the contemporary workplace, thereby ignoring potential alternatives and frameworks that do not correspond to neoliberal ideology (see e.g., Fiske, 1992; Kostera, 2014).

## Discussion

In the current paper, we have analysed the ways through which neoliberal ideology has influenced the workplace as well as research within WOP. Using the framework of ideology analysed through political, social, and fantasmatic logics (Glynos, 2008, 2011), we explored the impact of neoliberalism, and in particular the emphasis on instrumentality, individualism and competition on experiences of the contemporary workplace, as well as in WOP research. Our main argument is that the effects of neoliberalism on the workplace and WOP research has been neglected. The effect of this is that research on the one hand remains vague and ambiguous concerning its ideological and ethical assumptions, while on the other hand, pluralism of research is stifled through a dominance of hegemonic ideology within the discipline (e.g., through implicitly enforcing organizational interests to be accounted for in research). Our analysis on the basis of Glynos' (Glynos, 2008) framework of the three logics describing ideology offered a way of analysing the relationships between the level of shared norms and understandings in both the workplace and WOP (political logic), and the level of visible practices through which norms are enacted (social logic). This, however, is insufficient to fully capture the dynamics of ideology at work, as at the deepest level, it is the shared, collective fantasies of people that sustain ideology and its impact on the workplace. neoliberal ideology sustains itself through penetrating the fantasies of people about their own lives and how they

function in the workplace (Žižek, 2014). Fantasies are not often discussed in relation to the workplace, while they may explain why behaviour is persistent over time, and why changes at the level of assumptions are not readily achieved.

This raises the question what type of solutions can be offered for the study of WOP. The answer to this is not straightforward, as the replacement of one ideology is likely to produce another ideology, which may become as hegemonic as the previous ideology (Žižek, 2001, 2014). This has been referred to as the double blackmail, which entails the idea that existing alternatives to neoliberal capitalism reside in a return to social-democracy (or Marxism), which also has been shown to have important limitations. In WOP context, this would imply that an alternative to the current neoliberal dominance would be a return to historical world views, with its focus on permanent contracts, job security, lifelong employment at the same firm, stable employment relationships and broad collective representation via trade unions (Sims, 1994). Moreover, historical attempts to counteract neoliberal ideology, such as social-democracy, critical psychology (Holzkamp, 1992), or collective approaches to WOP (Stephenson & Brotherton, 1979), have yet been unsuccessful in counteracting neoliberal ideology. One explanation could be that while addressing the symptoms of ideology, they did not yet engage with the fantasies that sustain neoliberal ideology. Hence, to develop viable alternatives, it is needed to formulate these at the level of the individual and collective fantasies that sustain ideologies despite potential inherent contradictions and tensions.

We postulate a number of implications and recommendations for future research. First, it is important that within the field of WOP, researchers become more aware of the underlying (ideological) assumptions driving their research. Discourse analysis could be informative in further elucidating the ideological underpinnings of our research and how researchers justify their research in neoliberal terminology (e.g., instrumentality and business case). Only through explicit awareness and acknowledgement of fundamental assumptions of research, these can be debated, defended or changed. As “objective” research concerns an impossibility in a social science (Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017), research is by definition driven by interpretations of what is happening in the workplace, and ideological choices regarding what type of constructs are studied, what theories and models are designed, and how outcomes are legitimized. We advocate pluralism in relation to our field, where we can openly debate the basic assumptions underlying our research (i.e., *why* and *for whom* we are conducting our research) and how we can create more pluralism in the actual research that we do (i.e., the topics, methods, techniques and analyses). This may also help researchers to make more explicit choices regarding what can be regarded as important in the context of WOP to study.<sup>1</sup>

One way of achieving this is to engage in research using more interdisciplinary perspectives, as perspectives from other fields may inform the validity and legitimacy of choices being made in WOP research. Because scientific disciplines such as sociology, political economy and geography explicitly debate the role of neoliberalism in contemporary society (Harvey, 2005; Morgan, 2015; Peck et al., 2009), a stronger integration of various

disciplines could not only enrich understanding of particular phenomena (such as the experience of individuals in the contemporary workplace), but could also allow for broader frameworks to be included in research. For instance, more interdisciplinary approaches could offer important perspectives on how structural forces (e.g., power relations, economic circumstances and ideology) influence individual employee behaviour. The goal, therefore, is not to ban neoliberal perspectives on the workplace, but to shape the space where multiple frameworks can be debated in relation to each other, and where a playing field is created where multiple ideological frameworks can co-exist. For instance, while research stressing the importance of organizational and individual performance will continue to exist and even flourish, there should also be the possibility for counter-narratives, such as research emphasizing alternative outcomes, for example dignity (Bal, 2017), integrity (Amann & Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2013) or societal value.

However, it is also important to address the problematic issues of neoliberal ideology at the systemic level, and the need to postulate alternatives at the system-level. It is notable how “fixes” or initiatives to challenge the effects of neoliberalism easily become incorporated by neoliberal ideology, through which the system is essentially maintained. For instance, a focus on the “victims” of neoliberalism is important but not sufficient, as it may lead to negligence of the underlying structures in society that causes people to become victims. Hence, it is not surprising to see WOP researchers to empathize with the victims, but at the same time, postulating solutions *within* the system, or in other words, to prescribe victims to become more neoliberal. Hence, “victims” are taught how to become more self-managing, employable and so on, and therefore, the underlying structures that cause systematic exclusion of groups of people (e.g., women, ethnic minorities and older people) are not addressed. Therefore, a dignity-paradigm may transform the presuppositions of the workplace and WOP research through postulating the dignity of the individual, and consequently asks the question how dignity can be respected and promoted in the workplace (Bal, 2015, 2017). A theory of workplace dignity postulates that everything in the workplace, including people, animals and resources have their intrinsic worth, and should be treated as such (Bal, 2017). The theory offers an alternative to the neoliberal logic of organizing and studying the workplace, as it deviates from the dominant instrumental logic in formulating the structures of the dignified organization.

In sum, this paper has introduced neoliberal ideology to WOP discourse and has explored the ways through which neoliberalism has influenced the workplace and our research. Future research may further explore neoliberal as well as other ideologies and discourses in WOP. This may advance understanding of workplace dynamics and how they influence individuals at work, as well as contribute to greater relevance and impact of the research within the discipline.

## Note

1. One such an initiative to debate the underpinnings of WOP research and develop possible futures for WOP concerns the EAWOP Small Group Meeting organized around the Future of Work and

Organizational Psychology in the Netherlands in 2018. See also the EAWOP website.

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