

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Between Performance and Community - Sales Professionals' Experience and Navigation of Neoliberal Governmentality

Please do not circulate or cite without permission from the authors

Alwin Baumhöver & Linda Hintsteiner

alwin.baumhoever@uibk.ac.at

linda.hintsteiner@uibk.ac.at

University of Innsbruck

Universitätsstraße 15

6020 Innsbruck, Austria

The economisation of society, as much as the neo-liberal telos of productivity and wealth maximisation appears to penetrate all matters of life (e.g., Çalışkan & Callon, 2009; Vollmer, 2003). Following neoliberal ideologies, organisations prioritise productivity and wealth maximisation, redefining their approaches to management accordingly (Cooper, 2015). Typically, this involves conceptualising their employees as human capital (Brown, 2015) and urging employees towards continuous self-enhancement so that they act as “entrepreneurs of the self” in pursuit of personal and subsequently, collective wealth maximisation (Bröckling, 2016). According to Foucault (2010), the entrepreneur of the self in neo-liberalism is defined as: “being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (p. 226).

A neoliberal orientation becomes a means of governance when organising individuals through employing biopower technologies (Foucault, 2007) aiming to navigate the individual's choices within a predefined economic framework (McNay, 2009). Biopower, distinct from disciplinary power, functions through mechanisms that engage the entire existence of workers as economic agents (Cooper, 2015), integrating their life and lifestyle into the productive apparatus (Fleming, 2014; Weiskopf & Munro, 2012).

Accounting's devices like metrics and rankings, as well as practices of social governance, such as community mobilisation (i.e. award ceremonies), play an essential role in producing and shaping the governable self in that they facilitate a culture of comparison and competition in line with neoliberal ideals (see e.g., Cooper, 2015). Indeed, they generate a specific kind of knowledge that produces governable beings (Foucault, 2007). These devices and practices can, therefore, be considered as “governmental technologies” (Miller & Rose, 1990) that mutually reinforce themselves (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). On the one hand, accounting devices guide and govern employees through numbers and methods of quantification, trying to control their behaviour by shaping and influencing who they are, or who they try to become (Kurunmäki, Mennicken & Miller, 2016). On the other hand, “community mobilisation” (Rose, 2000; Rose & Miller, 2008, as cited in Moislander et al., 2018, p. 377) allows invoking the community as an antidote to the depredations of the competitive logic that technologies of performance bring about (Moisander et al., 2018).

However, rejecting a deterministic perspective, we argue that human beings always inherently maintain the ability to position themselves differently than prescribed by neo-liberal thinking. We further claim that further research is needed to elucidate how the interplay between technologies of governance (re)shape employees' processes of self-governance (e.g., Catlaw & Sandberg, 2018), whereby individuals undertake reflective judgments to determine how to respond behaviourally. With

that, it is important to explore in-depth the interplays between technologies of governance to better understand how they collectively shape the conditions and mechanisms by which activities are carried out. Thus, we propose to inquire the following research question: “how does the interplay between government technologies influence employees’ practices of self-governance, (re)producing themselves as entrepreneurs of the self?”. To answer this question, we draw on Foucauldian (1977; 1978; 1980) perspectives on power and knowledge, focusing our analytical attention on neoliberal governmentality and biopolitics (Foucault, 2010).

Through adopting a single case study method (Yin, 2018), we inquire about an internationally operating insurance company based in Europe. Thereby, we focus our analysis on the sales environment given the pivotal role of performance metrics and rankings in evaluating and controlling mostly independently working sales professionals. This provides a fruitful empirical setting to examine practices of self-governance. Our study draws on a diverse data set, including semi-structured interviews with sales professionals, the company's website content, as well as content from social media platforms such as LinkedIn, YouTube, and Facebook. This approach enables a thorough exploration of how sales agents perceive and engage with practices of self-governance within their professional activities.

The interpretation of our findings is supported by the industry-specific knowledge that one of the authors has gained while working as a sales professional in the insurance sector prior to starting a PhD. This assisted us with understanding context-specific terms and sentiments voiced by our interview partners and it allowed us further lines of explanation regarding the perception of neoliberal governmentality by sales individuals. To cover a broad range of perspectives and job profiles, our study covers interviews with salespeople in various employment arrangements within the insurance sales of the mentioned firm. Our interview partners therefore include directly employed product specialists, agency owners who act as self-employed contractors, and sales agents working under these owners, each subject to distinct performance evaluation and performance targets.

Our preliminary findings suggest a complex spectrum of self-governance among sales professionals within the neoliberal dynamics of their organisation. Although many sales representatives adopt the role of "entrepreneurs of the self," there are notable inconsistencies in their self-governance behaviours that do not always align with neoliberal ideals. Here, we observe diverse approaches to both conforming to and deviating from neoliberal ideologies. Through contrasting the interviews of different sales individuals, we, therefore, aim to distil the elements according to which actors episodically navigate and adopt or reject neo-liberal thinking.

References

- Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2004). Interfaces of control. Technocratic and socio-ideological control in a global management consultancy firm. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 29(3-4), 423-444.
- Bröckling, U., (2016). *The entrepreneurial self: Fabricating a new type of subject*. SAGE Publications Ltd, London
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Çalışkan, K., Callon, M., (2009). Economization, part 1: shifting attention from the economy towards processes of economization. *Economy and Society* 38 (3), 369–398.
- Catlaw, T. J., & Sandberg, B. (2018). The Quantified Self and the Evolution of Neoliberal Self-Government: An Exploratory Qualitative Study. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 40(1), 3–22.
- Cooper, C., (2015). Entrepreneurs of the self: The development of management control since 1976. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 47, 14–24.
- Fleming, P. (2014). When ‘life itself’ goes to work: Reviewing shifts in organizational life through the lens of biopower. *Human Relations*, 67(7), 875-901.
- Foucault, M. (1977), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1978), *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980), ‘Truth and power,’ in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. C. Gordon et al., New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 109–133.
- Foucault, M., (2007). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Foucault, M. (2010). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France*, Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kurunmäki, L., Mennicken, A., & Miller, P. (2016). Quantifying, economising, and marketising: democratising the social sphere?. *Sociologie du travail*, 58(4), 390-402.
- McNay, L., (2009). Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault’s The Birth of Biopolitics. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (6), 55–77.
- Miller, P., Rose, N., (1990). Governing economic life. *Economy and Society* 19 (1), 1–31.
- Moisander, J., Groß, C., & Eräranta, K. (2018). Mechanisms of biopower and neoliberal governmentality in precarious work: Mobilizing the dependent self-employed as independent business owners. *Human Relations*, 71(3), 375-398.
- Rose, N. & Miller, P. (2008). *Governing the present: Administering economic, social and personal life*. Polity.

Rose, N., (2000). Community, Citizenship, and the third Way. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (9), 1395–1411.

Vollmer, H., (2003). Bookkeeping, accounting, calculative practice: the sociological suspense of calculation. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 14 (3), 353-381.

Weiskopf, R., & Munro, I. (2012). Management of human capital: Discipline, security and controlled circulation in HRM. *Organization*, 19(6), 685-702.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications*, (6th ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.