

Our invisible cage

The illusion of choice

The eyes see only what the mind is prepared to comprehend. The story goes that when asked by an avid devotee “who are you?”, the Buddha replied, “*I am awake*”! This does not mean the Buddha suffered from insomnia, but that he was alert to the dangers of being “*entangled in the tangle*”, or possessing a narrow attentional spotlight as opposed to seeing the bigger picture. There is a lot of talk currently about unconscious bias and woke culture, which are ideas or movements that seek to draw attention to those things, often out of awareness that influence how we live and the decisions we make. Our *lifeworld* stands behind each of us who participate in life, and is ordinarily so unproblematic that we are incapable of making ourselves aware of it. In terms of biases, our memory, for example, cannot truly be relied on because it tends to order events not by time but by their importance to us, which changes across our lifespan. Relying on experience is also a risky strategy. It often takes someone from *outside* a given discipline to facilitate a leap forwards because such people are unconstrained by the “common sense” or dogmatic notions associated with a given profession. Organisations that consider themselves bastions of certainty in an uncertain world prize confident projections about the future over the reality of uncertainty and ambiguity. Delusions of infallibility and narcissism at the top of our organisations leads to tokenism around consultation with its members. *Hypernormalisation* is as much a part of modern life as it was in the time of the Buddha. We create a more acceptable version of reality because we cannot tolerate the precarious foundations of our social world. People accept as normal those situations that they know are not right, either because they think there is no alternative, or because of a cynical denial of personal responsibility (Bal, 2017).

Our *lifeworld* includes the culture into which we are born; it confers on us all kinds of subtle and not-so-subtle conditions, rules, expectations, and demands. It is easy to accept these rules unquestioningly as the only way to arrange our lives. Powerful influencers such as religions, political parties, the media, the social

class to which we belong or aspire to, and of course friends, teachers, peers, and colleagues, envelop us, shape our beliefs, and our attitudes to life. As we grow and develop we accept as obvious and unchallengeable evaluations (often called introjects) taken in from such external sources. My white, Eurocentric worldview became painfully apparent on my first trip to east Africa, where it was pointed out that a zebra is in fact a black animal with white stripes, and not the other way around. We inherit our worldview through systems of thinking and perceiving, typically unaware that our relationships are shaped and limited by hypernormal assumptions that act like the bars of some invisible cage. It need not be this way. Increasing our awareness of the background consensus in our everyday lives, and the structural inequalities embedded in how we organise ourselves is the first step towards changing things for the better.

False consciousness and the Iron Law. Much of what is hypernormal about contemporary working life began to emerge towards the end of the nineteenth century. In seeking to understand our social evolution, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels pessimistically suggested that it was not the consciousness of people that determines our being but, on the contrary, our social being that determines our consciousness. We are seduced, they argued, by legal, economic, bureaucratic, and political superstructures into a false consciousness that sees us toiling towards goals that are not necessarily in our interest (Marx & Engels, 1977). The arbitrary power relations in our society continue to hold sway over us precisely because “they have not been seen through”. The old conundrum of whether our agency as individuals can resist the alienating repression of the systems in which we live has exercised humanists for decades (Chapter 3). “Matter or mind, *no matter*; mind or matter, *never mind*” captures the essence of the worn-out dilemma of living between necessity and freedom (Merquior, 1986).

Robert Michels (1876–1936) introduced his somewhat pessimistic *Iron Law* a little later describing how, despite our best intentions, all worker democracies ultimately degenerate into oligarchic bureaucracies dominated by a closed managerial caste. Although this does indeed happen a lot, it is also a form of false consciousness because it is not inevitable, and it need not be this way (Diefenbach, 2019). The so-called *Iron Law* introduces numerous unsavoury and familiar hypernormal assumptions about how we organise the workplace, including the necessity for workers to undergo comprehensive specialisation and separation of tasks. This prepares the way for the creation of an expert leadership class who are thought – as a matter of faith – to possess skills and abilities impossible to find in the rank-and-file. Ideas such as job rotation, particularly for tasks requiring specialist “leadership expertise”, makes no sense at all if you believe that management is a specialism. Yet this is how power becomes concentrated amongst organisational elites, paving the way for a male-dominated management professional caste (more about gender later).

This manager caste, begotten and not made remember, can only exist if there is some social stratification, or a separation of the workforce into two groups – the great apathetic, compliant, untalented masses, and a few socially dominant peacocks. It appears self-evidently the best way to organise ourselves. Indeed, dominant hierarchies are quite common in the natural world for organising birds (especially chickens with their *pecking order*), baboons, and wolves; but in the case of contemporary human beings it is a model applied to the wrong species.

Hypernormalisation appears to be a useful tactic to help us survive and take part in society, but it also limits our potential and forces us to conform to an impoverished notion of what it is to be human. In swallowing-whole ideas that seem to be obvious and apparently true, we unwittingly undermine our own capacity to live well. It was in despair that the sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) coined the term *Iron Cage* to describe what he saw as the inexorable disappearance of our will and autonomy to the blind career of the machine (Figure 2.1). The highly influential and, I feel, more optimistic philosopher Jürgen Habermas sees our modern condition as a kind of painful tug-of-war between our *lifeworld* and the unyielding, alienating elements of our capitalist system, conditioned by money and market power, both of which are tied to bureaucracy and hierarchy (Pusey, 1987). But the bars of the cage are gossamer thin and arbitrary, like cobwebs, not rigid and inflexible at all. If we understand the truth of this, then things can change. If we brush away the cobwebs, we can see ourselves and others more clearly, broaden our appreciation of our emotional world and, more importantly, see how others might see their world too. So, I want to examine in more detail some of the assumptions that shape our workplace, and challenge their hypernormality in contemporary organisations. Does this false consciousness work for you? Does it undermine your attempts to flourish? Which side of the relational seam that knits together our lifeworld and systems must shift for us to achieve a more harmonious life?

The scientific management of relationships

The atomised workplace. For nearly four decades, neoliberalist ideology has shaped our global economy. With the authority and inescapability of scientific laws, we have sacrificed our social interests on the high altar of investor confidence. It has become hypernormal for all things to benefit from the market, where invisible, amoral forces weed out the weak and prioritise according to growth, productivity, and efficiency. State-led economies have fallen from favour, only to be replaced by outsourcing, floods of foreign capital, privatisation, and food banks for the unlucky. The idea of governments being responsible for welfare has given way to expectations of individual responsibility and competitiveness. We have relinquished protection from our employers, distributive

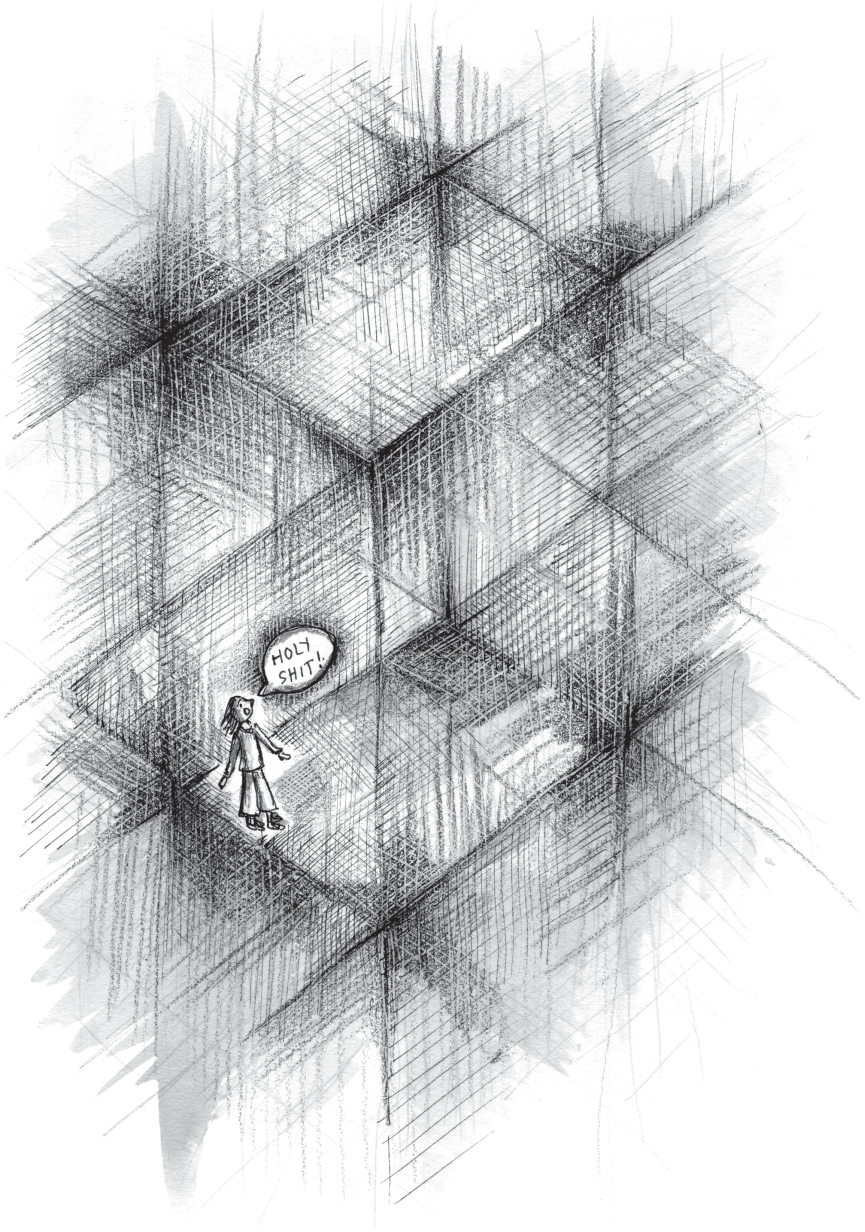


Figure 2.1 Holy Shit!

equality, access to essential services, and environmental sustainability for the cult of individualism. This is having disastrous consequences for our wellbeing. *Scientific Management*, pioneered by Fred Taylor at the dawn of the last century (1911), has received a new lease of life for managing an atomised, untrustworthy workforce who can be reduced to “cogs” in an organisational machine. Concerns about the dehumanising effects of *Scientific Management* led to the development of worker communities such as Bourneville and Port Sunlight in the UK, where the focus was on people as a resource, to be “socialised and Christianised” for the good of business relations. Such a *Human Resource* (HR) approach was not so much a departure from *Scientific Management*, but an extension of it. Both seek to exert control over workers by either manipulating or avoiding relationships, but the HR philosophy is especially seductive. It breaches the boundaries between our work and non-work selves, and prizes worker autonomy only if it aligns with what the machine wants. You can manage your own time flexibly so long as you submit to surveillance (see *The Panopticon* – Chapter 7).

Order, control, sex, and gender. For trail-blazing civil rights activists such as Ruth Ginsburg it made perfect sense at one time to use the terms sex and gender interchangeably, because the former “meant only one thing” to the overwhelmingly male population of US lawmakers in the past. Yet during pregnancy, my wife was regularly and confusingly asked, even by health professionals, *what gender are you having?*, reflecting our ongoing hypernormal assumptions about sex, gender, and control. Sex in this context describes our biological differences, i.e. male and female, while gender refers to the complex social practices used to build our identity from the expectations, attitudes, behaviours, values, stereotypes, and ideologies that permeate the culture associated with our sex (Fine, 2017). Gender is about what we do – it describes our *behaviour*. It is how we learn to “do this” under some circumstances, and “not to do that”, under others. Men of my age will understand how satnav technology rescues us from asking directions when lost. We need no longer wind down the car window and risk our membership of the “real man club” by admitting we are not competent and in control.

Expectant parents have been able to determine the sex of their unborn children since the 1970s when obstetric ultrasound first began to enter the mainstream. This medically useless information only cements our expectations of gender, and undermines Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s optimism in his *Social Contract* from over two hundred years ago that claimed we were *born free*. The blue paint in the metaphorical nurseries of every little boy, symbolising their un-earned male privilege, is long dry before he even puts in an appearance. The political power of gender is a deadly serious matter. An estimated 126 million females

who *should* have come into existence up until 2010 have not done so because of selective foeticide linked to obstetric ultrasound (Grech, 2015). It has been recognised for some time that organisations are gendered; advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion are organised in terms of whether you are a man or a woman. While masculine ideals of order, control, hierarchy, and domination are not *essential*, which is to say they are not qualities intrinsic to our biology, they do seem to be useful if we wish to progress in the workplace. In reality, it is more complicated than this because gender does not stand alone in shaping what informs inequality or exclusion in the workplace. Other differences intersect gender in this respect, including age, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and of course social class (Acker, 2012). A white middle-class man worries less about feeling included at the office than, say, a black working-class woman.

When Joan Acker began thinking about gender bias, people in paid employment could look forward to a lifetime of service with a single employer. Relationships between workers and their bosses were relatively stable and characterised by collective representation by trade unions. Loyalty was rewarded with a pension, gradual career progression, and job security. A job description – which sets out criteria like qualifications, skill, complexity, and effort required – remains the building block of our rational bureaucracies. It has the worthy intention of replacing informal practices with more formal scientific processes that aim to meet the higher needs of the organisation over those of corruptible individuals (see Chapter 7). The rational bureaucracy adopts a transactional approach to employment, and assumes that people are fundamentally lazy and untrustworthy resources to be motivated, managed, and instrumentalised through scientific job selection.

A job is like a box, a thing apart into which a person must fit. The underlying logic is that we employ a disembodied, gender-neutral “vanilla” type of worker to fit into the box. Although the intention is fairness, the unintended consequences are far from this. Every job in an organisation is shaped by the unstated and inherently masculine preoccupation with order, control and domination: the colour of the box is decidedly *blue*. In the face of this apparently rational and fair arrangement, structural inequality becomes *hypernormal*. It is so deeply engrained that we no longer see that the experience of work is typically male, and not necessarily typically human. The very notion of a hypothetical worker excludes by definition people with bodies that reproduce, experience the menopause, become ill, are disabled by their built environment, become distressed, or who do not want to play the game of masculine domination and control.

The tension between production and reproduction. A huge body of research now supports Acker’s theoretical claim that the hypernormal idea of jobs in hierarchies, so often used by managers to exert control in organisations,

disadvantages women, people with other intersecting characteristics, and men who choose not to conform to a stereotype (Britton & Logan, 2008). To achieve the qualities of a hypothetical worker we need to become just like a stereotypical man whose life is centred on *production* through a full-time, life-long, all-consuming job. Meanwhile, the thoroughly exhausting and fundamental work of *reproduction*, which is about creating life and sustaining relationships (e.g. who picks up the phone at home, keeps up with friends, plans meals, etc.), and of supporting the stereotypical man, is usually, but not always, achieved through the support of a woman (see stay-at-home fathers in Chapter 8). Industrialisation has segregated men, women, and our children in a way which does not reflect how we got here as a species. Women are signalled early in their careers that traditional male traits are expected for senior roles, and that promotion depends on their ability to act like their male counterparts; “I did not realise I had to be a man to get to the top”, is a comment I have heard many times. The pressure to postpone pregnancy or even relent on the aspiration of having children are examples of just how women are invited to comply with the ideal of the hypothetical worker. In the USA, insurance companies now invite women to put their *eggs on ice* with the dubious promise of starting families later in their career. Because the abstract worker in fact corresponds to the Protestant man of vocation, then his body, minimal responsibility for child rearing, and the control of emotions pervades our work processes and contributes to our invisible cage.

The knowledge-based economy has created millions of jobs that did not exist 30 years ago. Workers now expect to change their employer frequently in search of better opportunities or in response to job insecurity that goes along with downsizing, lay-offs, and mergers. Technology facilitates the mobile *precariat* who are told that the rhythm and timing of our work (*production*) is now better adapted to our commitments outside (i.e. *reproduction*). A certain version of feminism has entered a dangerous liaison with neoliberalism, one which prizes individual achievement, responsibility for women’s own welfare, and competitiveness. So-called empowerment has become overwhelmingly interpreted as “womenomics”, or the segregation of more and more women into less well-paid precarious work (Eisenstein, 2017). According to the *World Economic Forum*, three-quarters of cashiers in shops are women: nearly all of them are expected to lose their jobs with increasing automation.

The gender gap in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects means masculine biases go unchallenged in the evolving field of Artificial Intelligence. The gig economy undermines the notion of hierarchy and the meaning of a “job”, although problems persist around exploitation and working conditions. Individualised career maps replace discrete career “ladders”. The absence of standardised job descriptions and progression pathways leads to arbitrariness, confusion, and further atomisation.

Career maps give our managers discretion with little accountability or clarity to guide affirmative action. Bias is implicit in career development and promotion because managers *homosocialise*, or to put it another way, “birds of a feather flock together” (Elliot & Smith, 2004). Given the difficulty of monitoring and comparing career progression across organisations with open and flexible approaches to progression, unfairness and injustice are hidden and even more difficult to monitor and challenge.

Where next? I believe it is healthier to recognise our biases rather than deny them and how they shape our humanity. Perhaps it is the shame of accepting our flaws that leads to there being no proven link between recognising our biases and revising them? Researchers have found that racists armed with greater self-awareness only become worried about their behaviour and instead withdraw from encounters with other racial groups for fear of being offensive. The current trend for *Unconscious Bias* training in organisations is a positive thing if it gets us talking about difference. Yet, introspective sessions that merely nudge managers and employees into recognising – with an accompanying sense of shame – that they *are* biased becomes a distraction from the embedded, and structural disadvantages built into the workplace (Noon, 2018). We will forever wrestle with more or less transparent ways to re-distribute privilege in our social worlds, and in Chapter 7 I address in more detail our hypernormal attitudes to power in the workplace. In the next section I want to consider how we organise ourselves in the workplace, and identify alternatives to the scientifically informed hierarchy (Box 2.1, and see next).

Box 2.1 The informal clan resists neoliberalism

Interesting solutions emerge at a time when empowerment for women means competing for insecure and precarious employment in the marketplace. Female and male sales representatives selling generic medicines for rival pharmaceutical companies in a major European city decided to cooperate rather than compete. Unbeknownst to their managers – all male – workers from rival companies regularly met over lunch to discuss how they would divide their sales territories and redistribute their work. By cooperating as opposed to competing, everyone kept his or her jobs, and the fabric of society at the local level was maintained through balancing the work of production with reproduction. Growth remained at an acceptable level for the companies concerned, family-run restaurants prospered, and family work continued without the disruption that would inevitably accompany unemployment and relocation.

Organisational culture

Ecologies of the workplace. Organisational culture and climate are ideas that blur into each other. Research into *climate* goes back as far as the 1960s and focuses on what we can understand about an organisation from its written policies, practices, and procedures. I say more about this in the context of the *Corruption Complex* in Chapter 7. The study of *culture*, on the other hand, is more recent and tries to understand intangible things like shared perceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions about how groups understand, think, and react at a fundamental, perhaps pre-conscious, level of awareness (see Chapter 6). Culture talks about tribes, villages, histories, traditions and subcultures that merge and blur into the whole, or *gestalt* of an organisation. The critical function of culture is to create a distinctive identity for its members so they can tell themselves apart from others. It helps us shape how we engage with each other, learn from our mistakes, promote team-working, share values and influence the overall objectives of our organisations. We instinctively understand that the workplace contains more than one type of culture, or “them and us” subgroups, or cliques that we move smoothly through, between, around or within. Organisations are invested in promoting certain cultures because it is thought that staff who sign up to their values, mission statements, etc. become self-managing and cost less to motivate and monitor. Senior managers and leaders believe that culture is amenable to manufacture, and can be created in a top-down fashion. However, cultures are in fact spontaneous, ever-evolving, and largely beyond the ken of senior management, which is bad news for business schools (Grey, 2005).

Organisational culture results from the unintended, emergent consequences of two competing dimensions interacting with one another, namely: who is

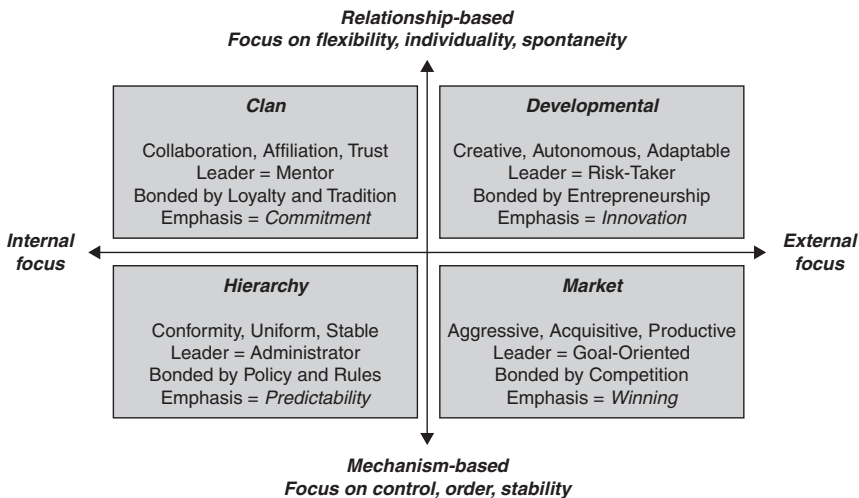


Figure 2.2 The competing values of organisational cultures.

the organisation for, and how much control can leaders exert to achieve their goals (Figure 2.2)? Organisation representatives will focus their attention on the development and wellbeing of people either *internally* or *externally*; although the boundaries are blurred, the former might look like a school, university, or hospital, for example, while the latter might be an insurance company. The target population for an organisation also influences its need for *control*, which aligns with predictability, stability, and hierarchy on the one hand, but rigidity, reporting failures, and missed opportunities on the other. *Flexibility*, meanwhile, a much-prized characteristic in the knowledge economy, is about a responsive, agile, and innovative workforce. The intersection of these four variables (i.e. *external/internal* masters and *controlling/flexible systems of management*) creates a quadrant model (Box 2.2. *Clan, Developmental, Hierarchical, and Market*) for thinking about our different and often coexistent organisational cultures at work.

The story is, of course, more complicated than this because, quite astonishingly, researchers are only just beginning to acknowledge the head and heart dimension of an organisation's culture. This is about the importance of such things as the idealism, compassion, and personal meaning invested in the things we come together to do (Grabowski *et al.*, 2015). I say more about this in our final chapter, but for many of us, work is not just about our search for daily bread, but for our very meaning.

Box 2.2 Workplace ecologies

- The *clan* culture is typically characterised by an inward-looking stance, having at its core the belief that the organisation trusts in its commitment. This in turn is reciprocated through a cohesive, securely attached team ethos (see Chapter 6). Clans possess high morale and strong ethical working practices along with a deep sense of satisfaction and team commitment.
- A *developmental* culture is outward-looking, and values both personal and professional growth, autonomy, creativity, and risk-taking. Success is measured through innovation and cutting-edge outputs.
- *Hierarchies* focus on minimising anxiety through internal control. At their core is a lack of trust in people and resources. The core assumption is that predictability and stability lead to efficiency. Hierarchical cultures also value precise or even over-communication, conformity, routine, and consistency.
- *Market* cultures have an external focus and assume that achievement is measured through competitiveness, aggressiveness, productivity, and shareholder value. The most fundamental belief is that clear goals and money are sufficient to motivate performance. Things like beating competitors, improving product quality, and enhancing market share are measures of success.

A study of over 10,000 companies reveals that organisations do not exist as a single culture, but instead consist of a complex and dynamic blend of multiple intersecting and interacting cultures complementing each other and evolving over time (Hartnell *et al.*, 2011). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is found that organisations with a strong market culture are rubbish at the business of caring and compassion. Their inability to be *nice* to their customers can, however, be ameliorated when a clan culture, which emphasises collaboration, trust, and support, is encouraged to participate in the business (van Beek & Gerritsen, 2010). Both *hierarchical* and *market* cultures have increased in popularity at the expense of *clans* in UK healthcare settings, for example, a process reflecting the marketization of care (Jacobs *et al.*, 2013). The importance of these and similar studies is that culture, even within large organisations, is not separate from but is shaped by context. This should not surprise us, as the boundaries between the workplace and the outside world are permeable, like the walls of a cell in symbiotic relationship with its environment.

In conclusion, the workplace contains a blend of cultures which if ignored or neglected becomes dominated by the prevailing cultural climate. In contemporary market-driven societies this means the atomising chill wind of neoliberalism blowing through our organisations. If the humanising clan and developmental cultures are acknowledged, understood, and nurtured, then with self-awareness and wisdom an organisation can support groups and teams become stewards of their own relational environment, thereby fostering the conditions for their members to flourish (Box 2.1 and 2.3).

Cultural ecologies and configurations of self. The idea that an organisation simultaneously exists as several dynamic and interacting cultures mirrors how the humanistic *Relational Approach* helps us integrate the often-contradictory facets of what it is to be a person. Configurations describe coherent patterns of feelings, thoughts, and behavioural responses that help us manage all manner of situations in our lives. Thinking about identity as configurations offers us a more sophisticated way of responding to the diverse and often contradictory external demands and internal imperatives that people face. Drawing on the example from earlier in the chapter (i.e., p28), suppose some *Unconscious Bias* training alerted me to a secret prejudice. I could deny that such shame-worthy attitudes define who I am, and simply avoid situations where my secret could be unwittingly revealed. Alternatively, I may accept this shadowy configuration of myself that feels uncomfortable with people who are unlike me. Acknowledging the part of me that fears what I do not understand helps me to accommodate the contradiction that I also think of myself as an accepting person. Allowing the shadowy, anxious configuration to live alongside the kinder one who acknowledges, and more importantly resists his shadow rescues me from insanity and may even lead to some personal development (Mearns & Thorne 2000, p. 116). Understanding

organisational culture as an ecosystem mirrors configurations, because rather than inviting denial, awareness of complexity and conflict can furnish creative opportunities that may otherwise be missed. Giving voice to different self-concepts or cultures helps us to assimilate internal conflicts rather than split them off or project them elsewhere (see *Projections* and *Splitting*, Chapter 7). Through a non-defensive approach to both our personal and organisational contradictions, we avoid “zero-sum” interpretations, whereby for me (or the organisation) to win, someone else has to lose. In the example provided in Box 2.1, an informal clan of sales representatives recognises that for everyone to win, the contradictions of both collaboration and competition had to be assimilated so that a solution to the problems of the prevailing market culture was found.

Box 2.3 Reflective Exercise 1. Cultural ecologies at work

Consider the context in which you work. How many of the cultures in Box 2.2 can you see around you? Perhaps you belong to a group of peers who already offer you your main source of direction, support, inspiration, and feedback? If you belong to a team that is part of a market-based hierarchy, does your line manager seek to control what you do, and how you behave? Is your organisational setting about winning and competing? Does it pay attention to key performance indicators, and is the competition external, internal, or both? Are there elements of your organisation that seek to take risks and be innovative? Is there conflict here with the market-focused hierarchy that seeks a return on investment, and is uncomfortable with unpredictability? How does your organisation accommodate all these different parts? Which culture do you feel most comfortable with? Which, if any, raises strong feelings of belonging and connection for you?

Learning to work at the cultural boundaries. A tried and tested approach to cultivating reflectivity and self-awareness in organisations is *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI; Trajkovski *et al.*, 2013). It adopts a positive perspective, focusing on strengths as opposed to problems that only sustain discord (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2008). The first phase of *discovery* invites people to identify the best things about their organisation. The second phase is of *dreaming*, which imagines what the organisation might look like if the best things about it became the new *normal*. Taken together, these processes help identify clear goals for the subsequent *design* and *delivery* stages (Mills *et al.*, 2013). The lessons learnt through

AI are not easy listening for hard-driving competitive (*market*), bureaucratic, or controlling leaders and managers (*hierarchy*) in the compassion business who attempt to control structures from the “top down”. Working with the sick and the dying is notoriously associated with high levels of surface acting, compassion fatigue, and burnout. An AI by healthcare professionals uncovered how oppressive hierarchical management, dispassionate role models, and a lack of support for reflection extinguished the flame of self-compassion and worker wellbeing (Curtis *et al.*, 2017). As we shall see later, organisations in the compassion business can nurture both *clan* and *developmental* cultures through democratising relationships (Chapter 5). Trusting both clan and developmental cultures requires we acknowledge that workers understand that we do not live in a utopian world of limitless resources, and that we can be accountable for what we spend and how we spend it. Should you remain unconvinced by the problem with market-driven bureaucratic hierarchies, then please, indulge me for a little longer.

The problem is ... I’m too busy to listen ... or reflect! The most persistent complaint of the bureaucratic command-and-control leadership model is that it is dehumanising and paradoxically inefficient, especially in the context of the business of caring for others (de Zulueta, 2015). The machine metaphor invites the myth of control, assumes linear causation, and focuses on the objectification of human beings rather than on a deeper engagement in relationships. The *market* culture, especially, instrumentalises and objectifies people and our interactions with each other. We stop recognising ourselves in our own works, and instead become estranged and alienated from one another. The exercise I describe in Box 2.4 (*I’m too busy to listen – is it OK if I fake it?*) was developed in response to a genuine and, I think, reasonable question posed during a well-being training course I facilitated. It is an attempt to answer the question as well as foster a sense of authentic concern for the wellness of a fellow human being in the context of work. When we truly listen, a person can tell you about himself or herself, what really troubles them, and perhaps even how they can find their own solutions.

Academics challenge the notion that organisations involved in the compassion business, knowledge management, and high-end technology have at their core equally sophisticated levels of reflection. The truth does not sit easily with the outward appearance of seeming *smart*. Irrationality and a rigid adherence to wishful thinking supports the myth of certainty and predictability, especially in hierarchal cultures where skilled incompetence means real problems are either avoided or ignored. This is not a criticism; busy people do the best they can to make reasonable or acceptable decisions in the time they believe available. Mats Alvesson and André Spicer coined

the provocative term *functional stupidity* (2012) – not to be confused with cognitive impairment, incompetence, or irrationality – to describe unreflective compliance and decision-making, which I believe is driven by a need to defend against difficult emotions such as anxiety, fear, and shame. Hierarchies, Alvesson argues, are simply intolerant of authenticity and vulnerability. An organisation uses *functional stupidity* to defend itself against frightening self-doubt, uncertainty, and the inability to justify structures and actions (see Bion's *Basic Assumptions*, in Chapter 6). Reflectivity risks raising doubt among leaders and managers about their legitimacy and undermines their commitment to potentially dubious courses of action. Although *functional stupidity* may be necessary to the internal workings of an organisation, it nevertheless has the negative effect of ensnaring people into distorted or incongruent ways of both thinking and being. When doubt is thrown on the meaning of our working life, it threatens a downward spiral toward cynicism, alienation, decreased motivation, and detachment. When this happens, we defend ourselves by retreating into ways of thinking and feeling that distract us from potentially identity-threatening and uncertainty-inducing consequences. This self-reinforcing loop of functional stupidity elicits even more illusory certainty.

A similarly provocative observation on the problem of (*functional*) stupidity in hierarchies was made by the soldier Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord (1878–1943), who felt he could divide his officers into four groups: clever, industrious, lazy, and the (*functionally*) stupid. Each one, he believed, usually possessed two of these qualities. The clever and industrious were appointed to the highest level of his staff. The officer who was clever and lazy was suited to high leadership positions because they had the requisite intellectual clarity and composure to make difficult decisions. Under certain circumstances, use could be made of those who were (*functionally*) stupid and lazy, because they were less likely to do harm. Yet the (*functionally*) stupid and industrious “must be got rid of”, for they were far too dangerous.

A fundamental assumption about the market hierarchy is that we use control as a proxy for trust. When structures grow beyond a certain critical mass of, say, a clan, we can no longer rely on being heard, have our dilemmas understood without judgement, or be sure that strangers have reflected carefully on actions that affect us. We do not trust we are valued for who we are beyond the economic transaction of our contracts or positions in the hierarchy. At the heart of a *Relational Approach* is trust, and we cannot go further without considering the types of contract which enshrine such trust in the workplace.

Box 2.4 Too busy to listen – is it OK if I fake it?

At least three people are required for this exercise (see *The Triad Method*, Chapter 4, for more details). It can be carried out sitting or standing, with the latter resembling our informal encounters.

The *speaker* briefly (3–5 minutes) describes some challenge they are facing at work. Choose an issue that is real and relevant to you, but not so sensitive that it requires a confidential setting.

Listener A is positioned at a slight angle to the speaker – close enough to hear what is being said, but not too close to feel intrusive. Their aim is to communicate *attending skills* to the speaker. They should seek to hold the speaker gently in their gaze, focusing on the bridge of the nose, or some point midway between the brows. Both non-verbal (i.e. nodding, positive facial expressions) and verbal (hmmm, uh-huh, I see, I hear what you are saying) encouragers are useful to let the speaker know that they are being heard. Along with active listening, you can also use sparingly, OARS micro-skills (see, Chapter 5, Box 5.2 for more details).

Listener B is also positioned alongside *Listener A*, at a slight angle to the *speaker*. They have the difficult task of avoiding the use of attending skills. This means they do not engage in eye contact or verbal and non-verbal encouragers. They can play with their phone, stare out the window, or perhaps work on their laptop (sound familiar?).

At the end of the exercise, *Listener B* de-briefs. What did you hear? What details of the speaker's story can you recall? Did you pick-up on any emotional content in their story? Now *Listener A* de-briefs. Does the experience of the two listeners differ? Are there any surprises? Did the content of what was heard differ? Finally, the *speaker* describes their experience of being heard and not-heard. Now swap roles and repeat.

Fairness is in the eye of the beholder

Our silent contracts. A legal contract is a formal, written-down thing negotiated and understood by those involved. It implies that those who are part of it have read and agreed to its terms and conditions. An employment contract, on the other hand rarely involves equal partners. Nor is it explicitly negotiated and agreed to in the same way that simpler ones are. In general, entering into a relationship with an employer means becoming junior to a more powerful authority. For example, the emotional labour when offered a

job as a middle manager in a poorly led organisation is perhaps implied but rarely made explicit. This is because the employment relationship is suffused with the ambiguity of implicit and unspecified expectations. It is an informal, dynamic social process and not a static one-off economic transaction as implied when we buy something like a toaster. To illustrate the point, consider one of the most potent weapons in the armoury of a Trade Union, which is working to rule. Here, workers can cause huge disruption to the employer by merely agreeing to follow to the letter their contract or job description. If following the rules of a written contract can be so disruptive, how can it fully define the working relationship? Denise Rousseau (1995) recognised the ambiguity of work as a social process through the idea of the psychological contract. It helps us understand work in terms of relationships that unfold in usually unnoticed ways that is strongly influenced by our personal biases, emotional histories, anxieties, fears, and what we feel entitled to. The psychological contract influences the relationship as it unfolds over time, from the preparation of a role specification and when the prospective worker reads the job advert. Rousseau recognised two forms of psychological contract:

- *Relational* types are open-ended, often long-term, and as such require ongoing tweaking informed by good faith, ideas of fairness, values, mutual support, and inter-dependency. It has been shown that when we can convey a strong sense of fairness, virtue, and transparency in the workplace, employee commitment and turnover are improved (Huhtala & Feldt, 2016). So research supports the old adage: *people leave managers, not jobs*.
- *Transactional* arrangements are unfortunately increasingly popular in the neoliberal economy. Work tends to have a fixed, short-term duration with a narrow focus on a clearly defined outcome. Commitment and security tends to be low on both sides. Whilst the transactional can evolve into the relational, the popularity of short-term arrangements has led to a fragmentation of the workforce and an erosion of organisational memory, good faith, perceptions of fairness, and ethical behaviour.

The unspoken nature of our psychological contracts means they are largely silent until one or other party casually, carelessly, or furtively changes something. The elusive nature of our unspoken expectations means that it is often difficult to explain how or why our contracts are either *breached* or more seriously *violated*. The former occurs when a perceived imbalance or inequity in the psychological contract comes into awareness for employer or employee. For example, a large company based on the edge of town decides to introduce parking charges, with the fee set as a percentage of employee income. There may be good reasons for doing this at an organisational level, but workers may see this change as an unjust *breach* of their psychological contract because up until that point, it was assumed that free parking was a benefit of employment.

The very perception of unfairness at work has a profound negative impact on employee psychological wellbeing. Feeling strongly about some change indicates that we have gone beyond a contract *breach*, and are now in the serious domain of a *violation*. We may not always recognise at a cognitive level when a breach occurs, but we *feel* strongly about violations. Staying with the car-parking scenario, anger among ordinary employees, a sense of betrayal and industrial action quickly follow when it emerges that the salary-indexed parking fees are to be capped below the pay of the best-off senior managers in the organisation. A sense of injustice develops into outrage when it appears, quite justifiably, that workers are being exploited.

The hierarchical culture often views the expectations of workers as mal-adjusted and problematic. For managers who believe their decisions – about parking charges, for example – are based on a rational appraisal of economic factors, breaches and violations of psychological contracts are seen as resistance by workers (or unions) who want only to maintain the status quo. For workers it is a different and simpler story: managers fail to keep their promises and commitments. The difficulty lies partly in contemporary employment relations, where managers are increasingly intolerant of time-consuming collective bargaining. With the rise of neoliberal values, informal arrangements are more useful to managers because promises can be readily made and broken in response to the fast-moving business environment. Rather than attempt to rescue an acrimonious and failing project, I propose that it is much simpler to examine our silent contracts before embarking on the enterprise (Box 2.5).

Box 2.5 Reflective Exercise 2. Exploring the silent contract

Consider a project or task where you will be working with several others.

- What are your unshared hopes?
- What do you imagine to be the unplanned outcomes?
- What prevents you from sharing these aspirations?
- What fantasies do you have about the unspoken ambitions of others?
- Do you imagine that others also share these blocks?
- In exploring these unspoken ideas and fantasies, are there any actions you would now consider taking?

Justice at work. Our individual sense of justice lies at the heart of our silent contracts. We develop our own belief in what is fair recognition for our labour at work by balancing inputs with outcomes. The former broadly entitle me to the latter, and can include obvious things like effort, time, skill, and compliance. However, it also extends to how far I am willing to tolerate compromises to my values and

integrity, i.e. how much incongruence can I survive? *Outcomes*, on the other hand, include a balance between financial rewards, job security, stability, esteem, a social network, pensions, and health care. If I feel that the balance is out of kilter, then we may adjust our input to re-establish some sense of equilibrium. In addition to this narrow, transactional concept of fairness, our sense of equity can be seen as a set of broader social practices in the workplace. Perceived injustices around how rewards are shared (*distributive*), decision-making processes are conducted (*procedural*), and how we are treated by others (*relational*) all have the potential to seriously undermine our psychological wellbeing, and the likelihood we will absent ourselves from the workplace (Box 2.6; Ndjaboué *et al.*, 2012).

Box 2.6 Reflective Exercise 3. *How fair is your workplace?*

Consider how fair your workplace feels in terms of:

Distributive justice

- Do you feel the stress in your job is worth the effort?
- Is your salary fair compared to the efforts of your colleagues?

Procedural justice

Are procedures in your workplace designed to:

- Hear the concerns of all those affected by decision-making?
- Provide opportunities to appeal or challenge a decision?

Relational justice

- Do you feel criticised unfairly or appropriately praised for your work?

How do we deny the disruptive power of the silent contact? It is all too easy for busy people to believe that we do not have the time to clarify the boundaries of arrangements we make in our everyday working lives. Unless we can give attention to even the most obvious details, misunderstandings and assumptions can occur, leading to perceived breaches, violations, wasted time, and emotional labour further down the line. You may already be familiar with some of the tell-tale “get-out clauses” or phrases that we use with others, or hear used on us when communicating our levels of commitment to some arrangement or project:

- **I will try ...** (*but expect to fail*) and get back to you next Tuesday.
- **I think I will ...** (*but not sure I can*) make it a priority.

- **I should ...** (*but probably won't*) follow this up with an email.
- **I can ...** (*but may not*) put this on my list of things to do.
- **I will work on it ...** (*but doubt I will succeed*) before our next meeting.
- **I will take a look ...** (*but not sure when*) at this ... leave it with me.

In common with what underpins effective psychotherapy, clear, precise, and inclusive contracting creates a strong working alliance. It ensures an open and transparent process without hidden agendas. People are *included* in decisions that affect them, they are more likely to commit to change, and it helps all parties know when the work is complete. We return to goal-oriented relationships in Chapter 5, but here I want to outline a useful framework for denying the powerful forces of competing psychological contracts in the workplace (Box 2.7).

Box 2.7 Denying the disruptive power of our psychological contracts

- *Who will be involved?* If someone important has not been invited at the beginning, there may be difficulties when completing the task down the line.
- *What will these people do?* Precision about who will be accountable for which aspects of a project – especially when many people are involved – is an obvious but important thing to agree at the outset.
- *How long will it take?* If deadlines are driven by external factors then there may be little flexibility. However obvious it may be to some, stating and writing down agreements about timings is essential.
- *What is our goal?* Contracts invariably flounder when there is a lack of clarity about the goal. Classically, goals must be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely (SMART). However, when there are too many competing goals, energy for the project becomes diffuse. All involved must be clear about how a transparent contract will benefit them, so to promote trust, openness, energy, and motivation.
- *How will we recognise when the task or process is finished?* If it is difficult to measure or it is intangible then all must agree to re-visit this on a regular basis.
- *How will we mark the end of the contract?* When a project simply fizzles out, people become demotivated and feel that their investment of time and energy have not been recognised. It is important that all contributions are valued, prized, and celebrated.

Things to keep in mind

- We arrive in the world of work with a good part of our *worldview* already in place. It has the dual role of helping us navigate our environment, yet it potentially undermines our wellbeing and limits how we engage with others.
- The organisational ecology in which we find ourselves is an array of intersecting and interacting subcultures which, when approached with self-awareness, offers a potentially sophisticated approach for responding to internal imperatives and external demands.
- Clear and inclusive contracting ensures transparency because it denies the powerful forces of our silent contracts. An eye for detail, an appreciation of context, and well-developed listening skills facilitate effective contracting and encourages trust.

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