

Dialectics of workplace flexibility between humanistic ideal and neoliberal ideology – Preliminary considerations

Severin Hornung & Thomas Höge

University of Innsbruck, Institute of Psychology

ABSTRACT

In this article, we present some preliminary thoughts regarding the development of a distinctively critical perspective on research and practice of workplace flexibility. We thus aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of some of the observed tensions, contradictions, and antagonisms, and, described as the „Janus-faced character“, the „double-edged sword“ or the „paradox“ of workplace flexibility. At the core of our perspective is a conceptualization of workplace flexibility as an inherently dialectical societal phenomenon, which simultaneously reflects and promises humanistic ideals regarding individual autonomy, self-actualization and self-determination, but at the same time, is also outgrowth and embodiment of neoliberal ideology, serving particular interest of employers and capital owners to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of human resource utilization. First, we will address the humanistic potential of workplace flexibility in terms of employee-oriented individual flexibility – in contrast to employer-oriented organizational flexibility. Second, we will argue that workplace flexibility, its manifestation in organizational and individual practices, as well as the entirety of academic and public discourses on the topic, are deeply contaminated by neoliberal ideology. Finally, we will integrate these two perspectives into a dialectical conceptualization of workplace flexibility and discuss some implications, usefulness, and prospects of the flexibility concept for the project of a radically humanistic and emancipatory work and organizational psychology.

Keywords

Employee-oriented workplace flexibility – dialectics – paradox – humanistic management – neoliberal ideology – system-justifying ideologies

In economically advanced Western societies, the changing nature of work and organizations confronts individuals with systemic „paradoxes“ – creating ambiguous, ambivalent, contradictory, or overtaxing work situations (Gouliquer, 2000; Kalleberg, 2011; Putnam, Myers & Gailliard, 2014; cf. Glaser, Hornung & Höge, 2019). Driven by economic crises and pressures, escalating and emerging „new“ stressful demands arise from constantly reconfiguring working environments, dissolving job boundaries, employment insecurity, and ever-increasing performance and flexibility requirements of employers (Allan, O'Donnell & Peetz, 1999; Archibald, 2009; Burchell, Ladipo & Wilkinson, 2002; Höge & Hornung, 2015; Pedaci, 2010). Arguably, organizational efforts to increase flexibility via strategies of de-regulation and de-bureaucratization, along with „high-involvement“ human resource (HR) management and autonomy-oriented work practices,

also increase opportunities to individualize and (self-) enrich one's work experience (Boxall & Macky, 2014; Hornung, Höge, Glaser & Weigl, 2017; Kashefi, 2009; Nordbäck, Myers & McPhee, 2017). Pursuing self-determination and actualization tendencies, employees use unspecified „white spaces“ to customize job features, improving fit with personal and professional interests and goals, supporting fulfillment of work-related needs, and pursuing increasingly diversified lifestyles, careers, and occupational identities (Gubler, Arnold & Coombs, 2014; Miscenko & Day, 2016). This dual character of workplace flexibility as source of stressful demands and reduced social cohesion, *and* enhanced possibilities for personal growth and „individuation“, is a recurring dialectic (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Reedy, King & Coupland, 2016; cf. Höge, 2019). In this article, we present preliminary thoughts and suggestions on a distinctively critical perspective

on research and practice of flexibility at work. We share our dialectic understanding of tensions, contradictions, and antagonisms, variously described as the „Janus-face“, „double-edged sword“, „Pandora’s Box“ and „paradox“ of workplace flexibility (Cañibano, 2019; Gouliquer, 2000; Putnam et al., 2014). Flexibility is analyzed as a dialectical societal phenomenon, which promises the realization of humanistic ideals of individual autonomy, self-actualization, and self-determination, but is also outgrowth and embodiment of neoliberal ideology (Bal & Hornung, 2019). As such, it serves particular (socially, ethically, and morally questionable) interest of employers, investors, and management to increase effectiveness and efficiency of HR utilization (e.g., Burchell et al., 2002). First, we focus on potentials for humanistic management to proliferate work practices promoting employee-oriented flexibility – as opposed to the antipode of employer-oriented organizational flexibility as restructuring and rationalization strategy (Hornung, Glaser & Rousseau, 2018). Second, contributing to a current disciplinary debate (Bal & Dóci, 2018), we argue that workplace flexibility, its manifestation in organizational practices and individual behavior, applied research in the workplace, and academic and public discourses, are deeply entrenched in and contaminated by neoliberal ideology. Lastly, we consider ways to dialectically comprehend these two antipodes, provide examples, and discuss the usefulness of the flexibility concept for humanistic, critical, and emancipatory perspectives in psychological scholarship.

Flexibility as humanistic ideal

For disentangling contradicting implications of workplace flexibility it has been suggested to distinguish between employer-oriented *organizational* flexibility and employee-oriented *individual* flexibility (Hornung et al., 2008, 2018). These two forms of flexibility differ in who has the control over flexibility potentials. Organizational flexibility describes institutional control over short-term changes in financial, numerical, temporal, locational, and functional parameters of the workforce, and HR management systems improving the alignment of supplied capacities and capabilities with changing and limitedly predictable requirements of dynamic market environments (Kalleberg, 2003). In contrast, employee-oriented individual flexibility refers to the control individuals possess to vary, adjust, or modify their work and employment conditions to better fit personal needs, preferences, values, and goals – without incurring disproportionate losses, disadvantages or risks (e.g., discrimination due to nonstandard hours; Munsch, 2016). Contrasting organizational and individual flexibility reflects claims that bureaucracy

can take on more or less coercive or enabling forms (Adler & Borys, 1996), that HR management can be oriented towards the common good (Chiva, 2014), that there is a „high-road“ in employment relations (Osterman, 2018), and that, generally, alternative forms of work organization and humanistic management promoting employee health, personality and moral development are possible (Reedy et al., 2016; Weber & Jeppesen, 2017; Weber, Unterrainer & Höge, 2008). The perspective of individual flexibility focuses on the circumstances under which work arrangements are genuinely, and not just in theory or rhetoric, chosen voluntarily and based on mutual advantages for both employees and employers, mindful of diverging economic interests and implications of flexibility raising tensions with a „new quality of work“. Notwithstanding the rich bundle of paradoxes and tensions associated with workplace flexibility, one domain, where employee and employer interest are commonly regarded as closely aligned is the task-related dimension of functional flexibility (van den Berg & van der Velde, 2005). In addition to the temporal or numerical aspects, the concept of employee-oriented flexibility also applies to the functional dimension (Hornung et al., 2008). From the organizational perspective, this refers to employing multi-skilled or „polyvalent“ human resources, which are able to fulfill a broad range of different tasks or jobs, thus generating dynamic capabilities with regard to the scope, quality, and quantity of deliverable products or services. From an employee perspective, functional flexibility can be defined as the ability to exercise influence over their work tasks to better align the fulfillment of job duties with their personal and professional preferences, needs, interests, values, or goals. Based on such an employee-oriented reconceptualization of flexibility, a humanistic approach towards flexibility that serves to provide workers with real control over work tasks and other features and conditions of their jobs, can be grounded in well-established traditions of human-oriented work design, such as action-regulation theory (Hacker & Sachse, 2014). A main proposition of action-regulation theory is that the psychologically most relevant unit of analysis, according to the *primacy of the work task*, is the human work activity, characterized by inherent features of the work and the conditions under which it is carried out (Oesterreich & Volpert, 1986; Ulich, 2011). In this tradition, the work task, rather than the economic or social exchange relationship, is seen as the core psychological link between the individual and the organization. Drawing on Russian activity theory, the notion of *person-task dialectics* describes work as the goal-directed transformation of objects (or information) through which the working subjects are also changed themselves (Weber & Jeppesen, 2017; cf. Frese, Garst & Fay, 2007). Based on the socializing or

personality-forming function of work, this comprises not only work-related knowledge, skills, and abilities, but, in the longer term, also more stable personal orientations and behavior patterns (Frese, Kring, Soose & Zempel, 1996). Dynamic processes of reciprocal determination are assumed to be driven by individuals' innate actualization tendency, for instance, striving towards fulfillment of growth-related psychological needs for autonomy, competence, relatedness, and meaning at work (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017). Flexibility-oriented, proactive work design constructs like job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau, 2015) conceptualize workers as active designers of their jobs from bottom-up, rather than passive „recipients“ of „top-down“ implemented job-design and some scholars emphasize the employee-oriented, humanistic potential of these „micro-emancipatory“ approaches (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Hornung et al., 2018; Melé, 2005). Research relating such constructs to worker health and well-being supports the potential of workplace flexibility for humanistic management. However, still too little theoretical and empirical work addresses questions on how employee-oriented conceptions of flexibility can be implemented as elements of procedural justice (Hornung, Doenz & Glaser, 2016), embedded into democratic organizational structures (Weber et al., 2008), and, become building blocks of a new generation of quality of working life initiatives (Grote & Guest, 2017).

Flexibility as neoliberal ideology

Any interpretation of workplace flexibility as a primarily humanistic concept, would have to close its eyes to a large body of interdisciplinary literature identifying detrimental aspects of flexibility-oriented practices, resulting, for example, in work intensification and extensification, job insecurity, alienation, decreased social cohesion, and impaired psychophysical health (Archibald, 2009; Höge, 2019; Höge & Hornung, 2015; Kubicek, Korunka Paškvan, Prem & Gerdenitsch, 2014; Sennett, 1999). Here, we will elaborate on a common argument that workplace flexibility is ambiguous, because it includes both employee-oriented and employer-oriented practices, where the latter demand employee adaptivity and restrict their autonomy (Gouliquer, 2000; Knights & Willmot, 2002; Putnam, 2001). Expanding and accentuating the academic discourse, we offer a perspective on workplace flexibility as a practice and a topic of scientific inquiry that is strongly permeated and biased by *neoliberal ideology*. Skipping over the numerous elaborated (neutral and critical) definitions, we use the term „ideology“ for a body of meanings and practices that encode certain interests

relevant to social power (Eagleton, 1991; Thompson, 1990). Ideologies strive for societal hegemony, legitimating and obscuring the underlying interests by means of universalization and naturalization of the status quo. Denying or suppressing alternative perspectives, assumptions, and interpretations, eventually makes even the possibility of another reality unthinkable (Fiori, 1970; Eagleton, 1991; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Attaining hegemony means that ideological beliefs have been disseminated „top-down“ from the powerful social groups whose interests they objectively serve to the subordinated social groups whose interests they objectively contradict (Jost, Federico & Napier, 2009). If the latter internalize those ideologically biased belief-systems, the paradox situation arises that the same disadvantaged groups justify, uphold, and quasi from the „bottom-up“ reproduce the status quo of a social order that runs counter to their individual and collective socio-economic interests. Rewarding and likely unconsciously motivating this „intellectual self-mutilation“ is the „palliative“, health-conserving function of reducing cognitive dissonance, a well-tested core proposition of psychological system-justification-theory (Jost, 2019).

The dominant political-economic ideology today, all around the globe but especially in Western societies, is neoliberalism (e.g., Harvey, 2005; Plehwe, Walpen & Neunhöffer, 2007). Although we agree that „neoliberalism“ is a complex, diverse, and problematic term (Dunn, 2017), we still find it useful, as there is at least some consensus on its usage. Neoliberalism stands for a transnational version of laissez-faire (American) corporate and financial capitalism, emphasizing free enterprise, free markets and trade, privatization, deregulation, and, advancing the interests of economic elites, such as businesses, shareholders, and management (LaMothe, 2016). Recently, Bal and Dóci (2018) initiated a debate on the role of neoliberal ideology in today's workplaces and specifically within work and organizational psychology as an academic discipline. We contend that research and practice of workplace flexibility provides an exemplary case for the ways in which neoliberal ideology influences academia and practice by interest-driven conceptualizations, constructs, and conventions. According to Bal and Dóci (2018) neoliberal ideology influences workplace practices and work and organizational psychology via three political logics: *instrumentality* (e.g., employees as means to achieve organizational goals), *individualism* (e.g., stressing employee self-reliance), and *competition* (e.g., increasing individual and organizational competitiveness as the central criterion of all workplace practices). These three logics are argued to proliferate superior-inferior narratives, themes of social Darwinism, and notions of social engineering, tacitly shaping theory and practice, for instance, em-

phasizing personnel assessment and selection, instead of development and worker emancipation, individual behavior instead of collective agency, and job and organizational performance, instead of individual and collective happiness, dignity, social responsibility and contributions to the common good.

Employer-oriented flexibility, in terms of managerial strategies to improve organizational competitiveness and profits by de-regulation and increasing the numerical, temporal and functional adaptability of the workforce evidently are manifestations of neoliberal logic (Bal & Dóci, 2018; LaMothe, 2016). However, even more human-oriented strands of flexibility-related practices and research involve risks of legitimizing, proliferating, and obscuring doctrines of neoliberal ideology. We will discuss this for two exemplary applications: 1) The increasingly dominating belief in employee self-reliance, reflected in individual-level, flexibility-related proactive behavior concepts like job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau, 2015); and 2) the related discourse on the changing and „new“ psychological contracts between employees and organizations in the flexible world of work (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Hornung & Rousseau, 2017). An instructive example for the interest-driven, system-justifying and palliative effects of the neoliberal ideological belief of employee self-reliance is the empirical research on the roles of managerial ideologies in mass layoffs. Ideological foundations of organizational downsizing were initially identified in managerial beliefs in neoliberal principles of de-regulation, de-bureaucratization and employee self-reliance (McKinley, Mone & Barker, 1998). Empirical studies confirmed that adherence to neoliberal ideologies of market competition and shareholder value, displayed in the annual reports of U.S. utility companies, predicted the occurrence and scope of managerial downsizing decisions (Rust & McKinley, 2016). Mixed results were found for an ideology of employee worth, stressing the instrumental „value“ of human assets. This finding can be explained by conceptual overlaps with an ideology of employee self-reliance, prescribing that employees should be fully independent and self-responsible in their employment and careers, including qualification, training, and skill development (McKinley et al., 1998; Rust & McKinley, 2016). This „managerial“ ideology has been shown to be internalized by employees, apparently driven by psychological defense mechanisms against the traumatizing effects of violations of reciprocity. A study from the employee side found that adopting an ideology of self-reliance „inoculated“ employees against experiencing stressful psychological contract violation, even when getting laid off, demonstrating a „palliative“ role of this emerging „new“ system-justifying employment ideology (Edwards, Rust, McKinley & Moon, 2005).

Antipode of the ideology of employee self-reliance is employer reliance. Employer reliance reflects paternalistic notions of organizational responsibility for employee development and welfare, underlying the „classical“ relational psychological contract of long-term stable industrial-era qualified employment (job security, training, and internal promotion against loyalty, reliability and personal sacrifices). The „changing“ and „new“ psychological contract in a flexible world of work demonstrates a transition from relational psychological contracts based on employer reliance to widespread acceptance of work arrangements from which employer obligations for long-term employee security and welfare have mostly disappeared, replaced by more short-term oriented transactional cognitive models stressing employee self-reliance (Blickle & Witzki, 2008; Rousseau, 2006). From a critical perspective, this „new“ form of psychological contracts is nothing but the collective acknowledgement that organizations tend not to live up to their promises. The normative power of the factual demands accepting that extensive employer obligations reflect „unrealistic“ expectations in the new world of work (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006), and declaring as the „new normal“ what used to be perceived by employees as breaches under the „old deal“. In other words, *breach* of psychological contracts in the interest of employers and shareholder is interpreted as a „new type“ of psychological contract, while normative employee expectations based on „old“ contracts are de-legitimized and invalidated (Bal & Hornung, 2019). Cumulative results on the health-impairing effects of contract breach and violation give an impression of the human costs of the sweeping „haircut“ employers have applied to their commitments, revealing inherent ideological bias, elements of wishful thinking, and (self-)deception in the psychological contracts of employees.

The concept of idiosyncratic deals is both a logical and *ideological* successor for the self-deconstructing psychological contract (Hornung & Rousseau, 2017). Focusing on individually negotiated work and employment conditions, idiosyncratic deals more directly acknowledge diverging employee-employer interests and the risk of notoriously unfulfilled organizational obligations. Yet, this also opens up new ways for a performance-based redistribution of formerly broad-based employee benefits and inducement, stripped from the impoverished „no frills“ employment relationships prescribed by neoliberal logics for the more easily replaceable, flexibilized parts of the workforce.

Notably, similar dialectical processes regarding the impact of interest-driven „objective“ structural strains for the emergence and proliferation of new ideological beliefs justifying these constraints and perpetuating inequality, are described on a societal level by Greene (2008). This author analyzes historical de-

velopments and functions of different ideologies of *individualism* in the United States from the post-civil war reconstruction period until the present. He identifies three individualistic ideologies necessary to normalize inequality in their respective historical contexts: 1) Individualism as an ideology of self-willed wealth or success in post-civil war period; 2) individualism as complete self-reliance, since the first half of the 20th century, and 3) individualism as an ideology of high self-esteem, starting from the 1970s. Each relate to structural societal strains in different historical phases, such as lacking advancement opportunities, eroding social support systems, inequality and exclusion (Putnam, 2001; Wacquant, 2009; Moscone, Tosetti & Vitadini, 2016). Dominating different phases of societal development, these ideologies serve to uphold valued individual beliefs, while simultaneously moderating expectations directed at society, normalizing austerity and injustice, and promoting compliance, fulfilling functions of system justification (Jost, 2019). Historically, every new form of individualism complements the last in its ideological purpose. Ultimately, the current ideological version of present-day individualism is an amalgamation of all three. Those who are exploited, marginalized, and excluded under the regime of neoliberal capitalism are indoctrinated to draw self-esteem and pride from unmitigated exposure to socio-economic insecurity and risks of recurring capitalist crises – without posing demands or burdens on the individualized society around them (Greene, 2008). This changing relationship between individual and society complements, contextualizes, and thus helps to better understand transitioning psychological relationships between individuals and organizations – culminating in the emergence of a paradox ideology of employee self-reliance.

Research on individualistic ideologies in different societal subsystems, gives an impression of the cascading, mutually reinforcing structural, social, and psychological processes underlying changes in social attitudes and values, frames of references, and belief systems (Jost et al., 2009). A resulting „new“ disillusionment recognizes work organizations as abstract, amoral, and, essentially, „sociopathic“ systems, creatively executing economic imperatives without regard of the human costs and inherently lacking scruples, conscience or remorse. Indeed, this critical realization increasingly seems to replace previous more naïve and romanticizing conceptions of organizations as anthropomorphized entities acting in coherent and socially responsible or paternalistic ways (Bal & Hornung, 2019). This development has a positive side, as it implies overcoming faulty assumptions and illusionary beliefs and recognizing social realities. We believe that the described trends and trajectories underscore the need for a more thorough under-

standing of contemporary employees in terms of the sociological employee-proposition, that is, as quasi-independent, self-managing „self-entrepreneurs“ of their own labor power (Höge, 2011; Pongratz & Voß, 2003). Compatible with literatures on employability, career self-management, and idiosyncratic deals, this perspective on the „subjectification“ of work (Becke, 2017; Dettmers, Deci, Baeriswyl, Berset & Krause, 2016), includes a critical understanding of flexibility as a new era of ideological coordination through indirect and internalized control and compliance mechanisms (Moldaschl & Voß, 2002). More research is needed on the dialectical processes at the intersection of ideological indoctrination and psychological introjection, identification, and integration (Deci et al., 2017), culminating in formation of occupational and personal identities (Miscenko & Day, 2016).

Flexibility as a dialectical concept

The previous two sections reflect the metaphorical imaginary of the Janus-face of workplace flexibility, its contradictory, paradox, and deceptive double character. Theoretical discourses and practical examples of an employee-oriented implementation of organizational practices, on the one hand, speak for the potential of workplace flexibility to facilitate humanistic ideals of self-determination, autonomy, psychological appropriation or ownership, and personal development. This positive image serves as an optimistic antipode to insecure, erratic, and precarious working conditions promoting psychological strain, alienation, impaired mental health, and, ultimately, exclusion (Burchell et al., 2002; Lengfeld & Kleiner, 2009; Pedaci, 2010). Research and practice of workplace flexibility, on the other hand, is indeed systemically permeated and inherently corrupted by neoliberal ideology, which, first and foremost, serves the interests of employers, shareholders, and management, routinely ignoring, misrepresenting, or counteracting the interests of employees (Gouliquer, 2000). Questions regarding how these two opposing dimensions are theoretically interrelated and manifest in practice, have been attracting academic interests. Cañibano (2019) suggested that the tension field between flexibility for the employer and the employee can be approached as: a) the two ends of a continuum (opposed, incompatible, „either/or“); b) bipolar and dynamic (independent, fluctuating, „not only/but also“); or c) a paradoxical relationship (complex, ambivalent, „both/and“), where flexibility functions as both employer inducement and employee contribution. Drawing on the literature on organizational paradoxes and the Taoist symbol of the Yin and Yang, this author elaborates on the complex properties of the two forms flexibility, such as interdependence,

inherent tensions, and potential complementarities (cf. Putnam et al., 2014). In the following, we build on the thinking of these scholars by emphasizing a dialectical interpretation of flexibility and applying it to the organizational level. Dialectical thinking is an analytic device with explanatory power beyond the concept of paradox. Where paradox emphasizes inherent contradictions and ambiguities, dialectics describe a dynamic process of antagonistic tensions, „amalgamating“ transformations and emergence of qualitatively new phenomena (Farjoun, 2019; Levins, 1998; Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016). This is expressed as the dialectic tri-step of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, combined with the motions of negation, transformation (elevation to a higher level), and continuation (preservation of lower-level properties) in the newly emerging configuration.

Without making use of this full potential here, in the following we will sketch out examples for possible forms of underlying dialectical relationships. Three relevant cases are manifestations of workplace flexibility as employee-oriented humanistic ideal and employer-oriented neoliberal ideology in 1) different organizations, 2) for different groups of employees within the same organization, 3) as inseparably intertwined aspects of the same work and organizational practices. The first is the case, when the degree of humanistic and employee-oriented versus ideologically biased and employer-oriented practice of flexibility is investigated as a function of the „ideology“ and culture of a specific organization. For example, workplace flexibility in organizations with high levels of structurally anchored democracy and employee-ownership (e.g., self-governed worker co-operatives) and a highly authentic socio-moral organizational climate (Weber et al., 2008) has another meaning than in conventional hierarchical enterprises, let alone in modern corporations led by a management dedicated to maximize shareholder value. Essentially, this comes down to genuine intention, commitment, and dedication to implementing and practicing employee-oriented workplace flexibility, for instance, in the context of democratic processes and humanistic or socially responsible management models (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Chiva, 2014; Melé, 2003; Weber et al., 2008).

The second form of dialectics is reflected by the core-periphery model of organizational flexibility (Atkinson, 1984). It differentiates employment quality between a skilled, well-paid, comparatively secure *core* workforce segment with standard employment contracts and high levels of job autonomy, from a peripheral workforce consisting of precarious workers with atypical contracts and high insecurity (Kalleberg, 2005). Subject to further differentiation and segmentation, core and the peripheral workforce complement each other as the functionally and numerically „flex-

ible firm“, where privileged core employee groups enjoy the humanistic ideal, whereas peripheral employees bear the costs of the dark side of neoliberal flexibility. Competition for better employment conditions (or avoidance of job degrading) at the fault lines between core and periphery and systematic exclusion of lower performers – widely recommended management practices (Allan et al., 1999; Archibald, 2009) – introduce „dynamizing“ elements, metaphorically turning this internal labor market into a „through-flow reactor“ or „pressure cooker“.

A third dialectic of workplace flexibility is more complex and dynamic. Involving a longer-term perspective, it assumes that neoliberal ideological work practices indirectly advance their own antagonistic „negations“, thus, potentially proliferating emergent solutions and reconciliation of underlying tensions (Farjoun, 2019). The classic example for this dialectic on a macro-level is the social theory of historical materialism regarding the creation and exploitation of the working class by capital, progressing to a point where a revolutionary movement would be inevitable to relieve the structural tensions and energize the transformation of society towards a new configuration in the distribution of power over the productive forces and surplus value (Kolođlugil, 2015). Systems theory has established non-linear emergent processes are limitedly predictable and thus, at best, are subject to theoretical speculation (Levins, 1998; Pratten, 2013). Examples for such intertwined, dialectical processes on a micro-level have been described for flexible work practices, such as telecommunicating and part-time work (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018; Kauhanen & Nätti, 2015). Another rather unlikely example can be found in the current phenomenon of co-working spaces for the self-employed. Indeed, some scholars have argued that co-working spaces are a possibility for precarious freelancers to overcome social isolation and develop collaborative structures, build „new“ social capital and share, bundle, and cooperatively exploit their resources (Butcher, 2016; Gandini, 2015; Gerdenitsch, Scheel, Andorfer & Korunka, 2016). Born from necessity to survive economically under the neoliberal regime, such new forms of work may open niches or „laboratories“ to develop a new „class consciousness“ of professionals sharing similar constraints and interests – a potential movement towards building „flexible“, collaborative, self-managed, resource-saving, and, therefore, socially responsible and productive new organizational structures and practices. These new organizational forms frequently consist of and attract broadly qualified and multi-skilled people, who are used to proactively stand in for their interests, „hardened“ and disillusioned in the daily neoliberal struggles. If coupled with specific political backgrounds and value orientations, this new generation of free associations of „independent labor-

ers“ or social „entreploees“ may be able to strengthen societal tendencies for a social-ecological transformation of society – or at least parts of it – by developing alternatives for collaborative emancipation, individuation, and solidarity in opposition to the economic excesses of neoliberal ideology (Kolođlugil, 2015). Of course, this is a very optimistic and maybe overly hopeful perspective. It is equally plausible (and maybe more likely) that, in reality, co-working spaces become new arenas for increased competition and instrumentality masked by inauthentic and opportunistic quasi-collaboration, cloaked in a rhetoric of solidarity. This unresolved tension illustrates the non-deterministic, ambivalent, and cautionary nature of dialectical thinking that we are advocating here. Future developments and research need to answer this question empirically by analyzing the conditions under which flexibility-oriented practices originally initiated by neoliberal economic interests can indeed be transformed from within to produce counteracting, liberating and emancipatory effects – embodied in dialectical synthesis. Following the „individualistic turn“ in work psychology from the collective to the individual level, which, reflects a manifestation of the ideology of flexibility by itself, this includes potentials for proactive behavior as „micro-emancipatory“ bottom-up actions of individuals taking initiative and using agency in vaguely defined work situations. While worthwhile and important, exploring these possibilities should not lead to assuming that all employees necessarily have access to, can adequately use, or, eventually, can really profit from such personal flexibility resources.

Abandoning or reclaiming flexibility?

Recognizing its conceptual fuzziness and ideological contaminations, the question arises whether „workplace flexibility“ continues to be a useful scientific concept. In our view, research on workplace flexibility can make a relevant contribution, only if it not primarily serves the interests of organizations, but first and foremost, benefits individuals and society. This requires a critical perspective, which includes identifying, calling attention to, analyzing, and challenging observed dysfunctional, psychopathological, or socially corrosive trends – instead of conveniently downplaying or ignoring them. On the societal level, hegemony of neoliberal ideology and associated social inequality, projection of societal risks on individuals, and trends towards de-facto de-democratization and „de-civilization“, warrant loud, clear, and tireless calls for social reform (Harvey, 2005; LaMothe, 2016). Scrutiny on the organizational level deserve, among others, HR and work systems promoting or demanding unsustainably high and/or steadily increasing performance,

competition among coworkers, and pressure to adapt to temporal or functional flexibility requirements (Becke, 2017; Dettmers et al., 2016). Such practices are enabled and reinforced by rising social tolerance for inequality and erosion of institutional protections for employees (Lengfeld & Kleiner, 2009; Wacquant, 2009). Based on the critique of adverse human-made „environmental“ conditions, applied psychological research should strive for insights that are relevant, useful, and beneficial for all its stakeholders. Certainly, this refers not only to those profiting from or in charge of managing organizations, but to all individuals navigating the „brave new world of work“ – faced with pressures and conditions requiring them to be flexible, proactive, adaptive, and self-reliant in managing their own careers and quality of working life (Höge, 2011). Research on employee-oriented aspects of workplace flexibility holds the promise of generating such recommendations. On the one hand, this pertains to principles and practices of socially responsible or humanistic management; on the other hand, to healthy, ethical, and constructive cognitive and behavioral strategies for approaching work, pursuing careers, and developing positive occupational identities in the era of flexibility. Of relevance here, among others, is the literature on proactive organizational behavior, comprising self-initiated and unauthorized acts of job crafting and renegotiation of work and employment conditions through idiosyncratic deals (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Hornung et al., 2008, 2018). Illustrating tensions of interests at the individual level, as well as ideological contamination, however, proactive work behavior is also considered a dimension of job performance. Research on the positive aspects of task or functional flexibility, thus, runs a thin line between employee self-actualization and self-exploitation, and must not underestimate adversity, competition, and pressure in contemporary work situations. Proactive improvements of the work situation may be difficult to distinguish from adaptive coping efforts to counteract alienating or health-impairing conditions, which, in the longer term, possibly converge with dysfunctional or unsustainable self-endangering coping strategies, partly based on pressure-driven over-engagement (Hornung et al., 2017). This corresponds with our argument that behavior is a limitedly useful category of analysis without knowledge of the underlying motivating, constraining, and influencing contextual and psychological processes.

The dialectics of the subjectification of work under regimes of workplace flexibility would be incompletely represented without the opportunities for self-actualization, opened up by changing organizational structures and practices. Shared assumptions regarding inherent human tendencies towards growth, altruism, and self-determination, particularly under conditions of adversity, are found in humanistic, existential,

and critical streams of psychology (Teo, 2015). These traditions provide a basis for evoking, positioning, and promoting humanistic values as a backdrop of employee-oriented forms of flexibility and to counteract socially corrosive neoliberal antipodes of individualism, competition, and instrumentality. On the positive or utopian side, this includes a vision, courage, and commitment to continuing to explore emerging dialectic potentials for *individuation*, *solidarity*, and *emancipation* at work.

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Correspondence to:
Priv.-Doz. Dr. Severin Hornung, MSc
University of Innsbruck
Institute of Psychology
Maximilianstraße 2
A-6020 Innsbruck
Severin.Hornung@uibk.ac.at