

Re-organizing wellbeing: Contexts, critiques and contestations of dominant wellbeing narratives

Guest Editors: David Watson, Norwich Business School, UEA; Chris Land, Anglia Ruskin University; James Wallace, Swansea University; Jana Patey, Norwich Business School, UEA; Zareen Bharucha, Global Sustainability Institute, Anglia Ruskin University.

Wellbeing is emerging as one of the dominant discourses of management and organization. Practices of wellbeing are located in concrete organizational arrangements and shaped by power relations built upon embedded, intersecting inequalities and therefore require critical evaluation. Our concern is to locate wellbeing in its historical, social, ethical, political-economic, technological, and environmental context; moving beyond a narrow, individualised approach that has characterised wellbeing in most organizational literature to date. To this end, the special issue will focus attention on two main aspects of wellbeing: (1) Its emergence in particular managerial and organizational contexts, and the limits those contexts place on wellbeing's ability to encourage human flourishing; and (2) the potential for alternative, critical, radical practices of wellbeing, as well as potentially understanding illness as a counter capitalist practice.

Within a capitalist framework, workers are fundamentally human resources to be deployed in the pursuit of profit. Accordingly, employee wellbeing, and the activities that support it, can be understood as 'corporate wellness' (Harvey, 2019): a means to increase productivity, whilst leaving fundamental causes of unwellness unchallenged. In this manner, wellbeing merely serves to ameliorate symptoms of the unhealthy demands of work in the early 21st century. As Haunschild (2003: 51) puts it, wellbeing "solves problems that individuals would not have without being an employee". The assumption that employee wellbeing and productivity are compatible is manifest in the growing number of workplace wellbeing interventions, for example, the rise of both corporate mindfulness and wearable health monitors. Purser (2019) highlights how mindfulness individualises the responsibility for coping with the negative mental health outcomes of employment and the broader economic structure, whilst foreclosing space for social critique and collective, political action. All that is left is a generic 'McMindfulness' in which the subject should calmly deal with whatever is thrown their way, without critique or judgement (Purser, 2019). Likewise, Moore (2018) notes the 'quantification of self' through wearable technologies promises improved wellbeing, whilst simultaneously intensifying surveillance and individualising responsibility for health, potentially adding to, rather than alleviating, stress. The plethora of apps and other wellbeing products also creates a new and expanding area of consumption and data that can be harvested from employees. This data is a valuable commodity in itself (O'Neil, 2016) and is central to the growth of platform capitalism, which privileges information over privacy and worker rights to expand the capitalist economy (Srnicek, 2017).

These wellbeing practices blur the boundaries of work and life (Dailey et al., 2018; Dale & Burrell, 2014), reinforcing an expectation that the individual must be 'fit for work', and stigmatizing those that are unfit for work or 'occupationally disabled' (Maravelias, 2009; 2018; Holmqvist et al., 2013). The categorization of individuals as well or unwell is influenced by the organizational discourses they inhabit, but as McGillivray (2005) notes employees also bring 'a project of the self' into their work environments. Whilst organizational discourses and practices of wellbeing shape workers, individuals retain some agency and can in turn reshape discourses and/or choose to depart from practices, in some sense. Individual responses and interpretations do not necessarily align with production of willing and happy workers, opening up possibilities for wellbeing practices that are not harmonious with those shaped by capitalism and other organizational goals (Dailey et al., 2018). Critical responses might include the right to be unwell and not to be classified as a second-rate citizen or worker on the basis of ill health (Halasz, 2018), as well as the setting of boundaries around work, personal ambition and organization to preserve wellbeing. Employees might actively disengage from organizational wellbeing programmes as a form of resistance, but their ability to do so is constrained by the wider socio-economic context, for example in the US refusal to participate might incur significant health insurance costs (O'Neil, 2016). The rejection of dominant discourses of wellbeing and health can be seen in positive body image movements that have countered normative ideals of the

body shaped by a medicalized version of health and leading to the pursuit of an unattainable ideal (Tylka et al., 2014) which is gendered, ableist and racialized (Mirchandani, 2015; van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019; Jammaers & Zanoni, 2020). Obsession with health becomes a ‘wellness syndrome’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2015), a performative goal in itself, but only because life itself has been subordinated to an instrumental logic, split off from any discussion of ethics and the good life (Han, 2015: 50). The result is a form of ‘bare life’, which must be preserved by the individual at all cost, simply because there is no external purpose to wellbeing other than its own perpetuation.

The importance of wellbeing in work organizations is due in no small part, to the way in which contemporary work forms produce ill-being (Fleming, 2014). We must attend to the various ways in which work ‘occupies’ the body (Dale & Burrell, 2014), the increasing dismantling of health and safety legislation (Gray, 2009) as well as the precariousness of emergent forms of labour (Peticca-Harris, deGama & Ravishankar, 2018) and their impact on wellbeing. In contrast, we might reconsider the possibilities for a collective articulation of the value of life, replacing the hyperactivity of wellbeing – even when proclaiming the need for stillness and mindfulness – with a break and a refusal. In an organizational context, we might think about how discourses on employee wellbeing, sustainability and corporate social responsibility run in parallel rather than intersecting, and proceed without reflection of potential trade-offs or synergies. Notwithstanding the potential hypocrisy of messaging and action in these spheres, are there possibilities to re-organize through radical notions and practices of wellbeing, which unite personal and collective benefits with good organizational outcomes?

Whilst we cannot ignore the tensions between the forms of wellbeing shaped in the context of organizations and work, we must also recognise and explore the possibilities that exist for more radical practices of wellbeing. What possibilities might exist for practices that can reconstitute wellbeing in contrast to state sanctioned and organizationally dominant versions? This calls to imagine different possibilities for wellbeing also opens up the possibility to look to forms of wellbeing pursued by others elsewhere, in different cultures, and even in different times. For example, can we find more collective ideas of wellbeing by revisiting historic approaches to work organization that, whilst aiming to keep workers fit and healthy, also built solidarity through collective sporting and social activities (McGillivray, 2005)? Exploring collective as well as individualised counter-projects of wellbeing *against* organization, or towards an alternative mode of organizing, might illuminate the limitations of hegemonic perspectives on wellbeing. Perspectives exploring how wellbeing is practiced and maintained outside of employment, or that incorporate the more-than-human also matter (Gorman, 2019). Taking this line of enquiry, we might locate wellbeing in the current environmental crisis, which presents an existential threat to life itself (Glaser, 2019). To what extent versions of wellbeing incorporate our interaction with the more-than-human world is therefore an important question. We might also explore engagement with how social and environmental regeneration may provide new opportunities for individual and collective wellbeing.

Since January 2020 numerous countries throughout the world have been experiencing ‘lock down’ due to the spread of COVID-19. This raises many questions about how wellbeing discourses organize our lives. Some forms of work previously considered menial and unimportant has been reclassified as essential, whilst many other low paid and precarious workers find themselves pushed closer to the breadline. Enforced home-working arrangements have caused difficulties for some workers while improving work-life balance for others, creating new opportunities for individuals to cultivate wellbeing outside of work. The sweeping changes we have witnessed have been justified by the prioritization of health and wellbeing over all other considerations. This prompts numerous questions, such as what version(s) of wellbeing have guided these changes; how has the pandemic influenced organisational practices of wellbeing; and how might this prioritization alter our experiences of work and organizations outside of the context of the global pandemic?

The potential in exploring alternatives *within* wellbeing is to address “the question of whether discourses of wellness merely produce docile bodies (Foucault, 1977) incapable of reflexivity or

whether an active ‘Other’ of wellness can emerge” (McGillivray, 2005: 133). In addressing these issues, we welcome theoretical as well as empirical contributions. We particularly encourage papers that engage critically with the management of wellbeing at work, but that also move beyond a purely negative moment of critique to understand radical potentials for wellbeing that trace a line of flight away from managerial versions of ‘corporate wellness’ and the ‘wellness syndrome’.

Examples of themes and questions might include, but are not restricted to:

- Historical comparisons of health discourses today and in the past. How does the healthy body at work today differ from, and continue, past concerns and practices.
- Critical understandings of how capitalism produces/reduces wellbeing through particular practices.
- The potential to resist and reorganize capitalism/work through radical practices of wellbeing.
- The intersection between organizational practices of work and wellbeing and potential re-imaginings and alternatives.
- Resonances between the healthy body at work and the healthy body-politic.
- The links, synergies and potential trade-offs between wellbeing and sustainability goals within organizations, and what sort of initiatives may build bridges between personal and planetary wellbeing.
- Alternative, especially collective, practices of organizational wellbeing.
- What is good mental health today and can we articulate an idea of such without recourse to normalisation? How should we view neurodiversity in the era of cognitive capitalism?
- How have employees and managers actually implemented mindfulness, wearables and other ‘soft’ technologies of wellbeing?
- Ill-health as resistance: what does it mean to reject normalizing health discourses at work?
- Ill-health as discrimination: what does it mean to mean to experience shame, stigma and marginalisation within the workplace due to non-wellness?
- How are wellbeing ideals gendered and racialized? Is well-ness a neo-colonial project?
- In what ways has the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic re-organized work and organizations according to wellbeing, what responses, possibilities, challenges and concerns does this experience raise?

Submission

Papers may be submitted electronically from 1 April 2021 until the deadline date of 1 May 2021 (final deadline) to SAGETrack at:

<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/organization>

Papers should be no more than 10,000 words, including references, and will be blind reviewed following the journal’s standard review process. Manuscripts should be prepared according to the guidelines published in Organization and on the journal’s website:

<http://www.sagepub.com/journals/Journal200981/manuscriptSubmission>.

For further questions about the special issue please use the guest editors’ contact email:

organizationwellbeing@gmail.com

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