The "Narrow Self"? Developing a Critical-Historical Work Psychology

Introduction

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In this article, we explore how thinking historically may benefit critical work and organizational psychology (hereafter WOP). We start from the premise that "the essence of psychological categories … lies in their status as historically constructed objects" (Danziger, 1997, p. 12), reflecting the argument that "social psychology is primarily an historical inquiry" (Gergen, 1973, p. 310). From this perspective, we cannot understand WOP unless we attend to the way that it is embedded within "the cultural and historical nature of the topics that the subject addresses" (Billig, 2018, p. 286). Put simply, WOP needs to be understood within the historical, social and cultural context of its development, and in this article, we aim to further the project of a *critical-historical* understanding of WOP (c.f., Sullivan, 2020; Teo, 2020).

From our perspective, it remains unfortunate that history has been "thought to be of no relevance to psychology" (Brock, 2016: 39), and that even social psychology has remained "markedly ahistorical" (Sullivan, 2020, p. 78). In making this statement we do *not* mean to suggest that the project of critical psychology has been entirely dismissive of historical argument, whether, for example, drawing on neo-Frankfurt school perspectives attentive to political asymmetry (e.g., Sullivan, 2020), or a Foucauldian lens stressing power/knowledge (e.g., Bicknell & Liefooghe, 2006), or a discursive psychology focus on language (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Yet at the same time, we believe there remains a need to examine the rather narrow conceptualisation of subjectivity that has historically been apparent in WOP, and which can still represent a continuing tradition today. As Teo (2020) argues, "from a critical perspective, a theory of subjectivity must begin with an analysis of the social, historical, and cultural dimensions of human subjectivity" (p. 764).

In what follows, we firstly examine arguments made in the 1980s and 1990s that were supportive of a critical approach, and then consider why this critical agenda remained less

present within WOP until the 21st century, in spite of the cogency of its argument. Specifically, we suggest that an attachment to a particular conceptualisation of science may have helped to insulate work psychology from more critical voices. In this section of the paper, we also reflect on the current "reach" of critical perspectives within WOP. Though critical conjecture has gained some traction, we remain uncertain as to how much this has, as yet, influenced "mainstream" debate. In order to address this issue, we focus on the recently published "manifesto for the future of work and organizational psychology" (Bal et al., 2019, p. 289).

In the second part of the paper, we follow Kenneth Gergen's (1973) argument that we need to understand the social shaping of psychology, and its simultaneous influence on the way that people see themselves, its *performative* effects. Though we agree with writers such as Sullivan (2020) who have argued for a "critical-historical" psychology (p. 78), we also wish to attend to psychology's performative role in "creating the social landscape", as noted in Gergen's (1973) interest in "enlightenment effects" (p. 314), or Hacking's (1999) philosophical consideration of "looping" processes (p. 109).

In this sense, our critical-historical agenda remains closer to the "cultural-historical" orientation of authors such as Brock (2016), Danziger (1997), Gergen (1973), Pfister and Schnog (1997), or Stam (2003) than writers such as Sullivan (2020) whose chief theoretical orientation derives from Frankfurt School writers. Nevertheless, our approach differs from these traditions in that our principal point of theoretical departure lies with the work of Norbert Elias. As discussed below, this also means that we divert somewhat from established debates within sociology and critical management studies (hereafter, CMS) that are concerned to "address adequately the way in which power relations are *subjectively* experienced" (Collinson, 1994, p. 52) and the related desire to theorise agency because social structures "don't take to the streets" (Collier, 1994, p. 142)

Though difficult to categorise Elias, his work is perhaps best defined as lying somewhere between sociology and "historical social psychology" (Cavalletto, 2016, p. 193). In brief, we believe that his studies are of particular interest to critical WOP because of his enduring concern with "the connections between *changes* in the structure of society and *changes* [emphasis added] in the structure of behavior and psychical makeup" (Elias, 1994, p. xv), reflecting his belief that "society without individuals or the individual without society is an absurdity" (Elias, 1991, p. 75).

Historical Perspectives

As noted by the social historian of emotion, Thomas Dixon (2012), "psychological categories and concepts ... have this *reflexive* relationship with our mental lives, *shaping and colouring* [emphasis added] as well as explaining them" (p. 338). For example, respondents may be more likely to report that stress influences their health, or engage in stress management practices, as a historical consequence of the plethora of popular media articles and programmes that have reported psychological research related to stress over several decades (e.g., Kuokkanen et al., 2020; Newton, 1995). Psychological research is therefore not simply "independent" since people *actively respond to, and interact with,* psychological concepts and classifications, especially where they are heavily mediatized.

This historical argument about the double hermeneutic between psychological and lay knowledge (Giddens, 1984), its *interactivity*, was first put forward within psychology by Gergen (1973), using the term "*enlightenment effects*" (p. 314). He suggested that as psychology educated and "enlightened" populations about social patterns, "the grounds are established for altering these patterns" (Wang, 2016, p. 566). Gergen's attention to "enlightenment effects" subsequently received support from the near identical concept of "looping" promoted by the philosopher of science, Ian Hacking. To use one of Hacking's (1999) examples, namely the "child viewer of television", not only has the "child viewer"

been variously constructed as either too "passive" or too "(hyper)active" in social science studies, but these very classifications have led parents to *become concerned about* their children's television habits. In consequence, there can be interactive feedback between psychology and its object such "that the categories of psychology will continue to change" (Danziger, 1997, p. 193).

In sum, psychological knowledge does not appear as "independent" in Gergen's and Hacking's thesis, but instead constitutes part of an interactive, complex, and iterative process of social construction. There is *some* consanguinity with other approaches stressing performativity, such that of Callon's (2007) actor-network theory contention that the discipline of economics has a principal role in "performing" economic liberalisation and neoliberalism, based on the proposition that "social sciences contribute towards the production of the reality that they describe" (p. 157), or as Miller and Rose (2008) put it, "in a very real sense, 'the economy' is brought into being by economic theories themselves" (p. 62).

From these performative perspectives, it is important to analyse how psychological discourse has encoded certain notions of the subject and subjectivity. In a similar fashion to Callon's argument that the discipline of economics has advanced neoliberalism (e.g., Çalişkan & Callon, 2009; Callon, 2007), psychology can be seen as historically furthering the constitution of the contemporary self, whether this is through its mapping and identification (Foucault, 1979), its furtherance as an on-going existential project (e.g., Teo, 2015), or through its more general individualisation, medicalisation and psychopathologisation (e.g., Parker, 2007). With particular respect to WOP, we shall argue that the field has tended toward individualised notions of the self that simultaneously draw attention away from the sociopolitical context in which people are located (Islam & Sanderson, 2022). To illustrate this contention, we will explore studies of "dirty work" that have tended to utilise a "narrow",

"closed off", sense of self, or to use Norbert Elias's term, they employ a *homo clausus* characterisation of subjectivity (see below).

Before exploring this argument further, we wish however to firstly address the history of critical perspectives within WOP. When considered from a historical perspective, what is notable is that critical approaches have appeared relatively late within WOP when compared to other fields of psychology. In the first part of paper, we shall outline this historical context and consider possible reasons why WOP has historically tended to veer away from critical conjecture.

The Historically Late Appearance of Critical WOP?

Whether we view the workplace in neo-Marxist terms as the crucible of the relation between capital and labour, or adopt a Foucauldian approach attending to "the relations between power and knowledge" (Hollway, 1984, p. 26), the workplace invites critical consideration of how sociopolitical processes operate and are reproduced (Newton, 1998). Yet as Islam and Sanderson (2022) recently commented, "the relative rarity of avowedly critical scholarship within the W-O field appears particularly notable in view of the background of much more prolific critical voices within psychology more generally" (p. 4). Though critical traditions have developed in social psychology (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and health and clinical psychology (e.g., Bolam & Chamberlain, 2003), similar critical perspectives have been slow to develop within WOP, especially prior to the 21st century.

The above observation raises the question as to why the field insulated itself against critical traditions that have been influential elsewhere in psychology and social science, especially before the twenty first century. Given the influence of these traditions elsewhere, this does suggest a historical resistance within WOP to critical tradition. Though it is impossible to produce an exhaustive explanation of this "anomaly", we will endeavour to

analyse some possible explanations. These include, (1) the utilisation of a particular model of "science", and (2) the use of a "narrow" sense of the self and subjectivity.

Image of "Science"

As Islam and Sanderson (2022) also note, "the 'scientific' character of W-O psychology has persisted as a central point of disciplinary identity from its earliest days" (p.6). Yet one problem with adopting a critical perspective is that it may present a challenge to this legitimacy as well as a professional identity as guardians of "science". Firstly, if we follow established positions in the philosophy and sociology of science, the scientific method is not a guarantee of political impartiality since scientific endeavour is seen to be embedded in a range of socio-political projects, such as the military funding of projects in physics and engineering.

Secondly, a critical perspective creates a layer of doubt about the approach to scientific rationality within WOP. An example can be found in the sub-field that has long been central to WOP, namely that of personnel selection and assessment. As Ployhart, Schmitt and Tippins (2017) note, "the history of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (*JAP*) is very much the history of selection and recruitment" (p. 291). Even though JAP may chiefly represent the more quantitative traditions of WOP, this statement seems a reasonable characterisation of the 20th century history of the field, as acknowledged even by its critics (e.g., Hollway, 1984, 1991; Townley, 1994). Yet by adopting a technicist approach that tended to ignore the complex social and political issues that surround "fair" selection (Dick & Nadin, 2006; Islam & Zyphur, 2006; Islam and Sanderson, 2022; Newton, 1994), WOP could be accused of disregarding the sociopolitical context in which selection practices are applied. For example, Feltham (1988) provides an illustration of the "hyper-rational" tendencies of selection research in his complaint that selectors in assessment centres (ACs) "almost universally" (p. 237) base their final selection decisions on their own personal judgement of

candidates' test scores, rather than using a weighted average of the AC test scores. Instead, he reasoned that it would be far better to make selection decisions based on the weighted AC scores *alone*. However, to entrust selection decisions to such a purely technical surveillance would severely circumscribe political *control* over selection decisions, whether this is exercised by professional soldiers in the military, or line managers in business (Newton, 1994).

To anyone with a background in critical social science, Feltham's (1988) plea can appear as extraordinary political naivete. At the same time, his invocation to entrust everything to technical "measurement" remains *asocial* to the extent that it ignores the socio-political issues surrounding selection and recruitment. As Islam and Zyphur (2006) note, "the *social* [emphasis added] fact of measurement itself …largely remains unquestioned, and it is assumed that testing and ranking people hierarchically is an unproblematic and purely technical necessity" (p. 25). Yet whether we view selection in traditional terms of political control where line managers having greater control over selection decisions, either directly or through agenda shaping (Lukes, 1974), or in Foucauldian terms that reveal how it is "the [assessment] techniques that make it possible to see [which] induce effects of power" (Foucault, 1979, p. 170-171; c.f., Townley, 1994; Newton, 1998), selection remains an important social nexus of power within the organisation if only because it determines who is part of the enterprise, and who is excluded. Feltham's (1988) commitment to a purely "technical" conceptualisation of scientific rationality meant that he appeared quite unable to imagine the socio-political process through which selection decisions may be shaped and legitimised (e.g., Bozionelos, 2005; Knights & Raffo, 1990).

Changing WOP

In reaction to the above conjecture, it might be argued that WOP has moved beyond a narrow sense of self, or a neglect of the broader context in which its research and practice take place. However while critical perspectives have gained traction within WOP, we remain uncertain as to whether there has been a significant change within the WOP field "as a whole". In other words, have critical voices really entered mainstream debate?

In order to address this issue, it may be useful to consider the recently written "manifesto for the future of work and organizational psychology", with its aim "to build a better future for our field" (Bal et al., 2019, p. 289). Though this article represents only one "snapshot" of current perspectives, it is of interest because of the wide range of authors included in its production, and its manifest desire for change within the field. Yet while the manifesto has laudable aims, engagement with social, political and economic issues remain circumscribed, particularly that surrounding the "neoliberal university", which in consequence, raises questions as to how change will be achieved.

Though we believe that the joint authors of the manifesto sincerely desire change, it is nevertheless remarkable that there is no reference to important contextual issues such as "neoliberalism", "financial deregulation" or "globalisation", even though the first authors of this collective paper are known to write critically about neoliberalism (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Yet as a *collective voice*, it is noticeable that reference to the broader socio-political context of the "neoliberal university" is largely absent from this "manifesto". In addition, the manifesto can resemble a reaffirmation of *traditional* goals of work psychology, such as the support for "contributing to the quality of working life" espoused by the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (Bal et al., 2019, p. 290), or the desire to "engage in continuous systematic conversations" (Bal et al., 2019, p. 291), or to promote "democratic, bottom-up approaches" (Bal et al., 2019, p. 293). Indeed, much of the manifesto might have received the support of Douglas McGregor, given its resemblance to the "Theory

Y" neo-human relations sensibilities that have long informed WOP (Hollway, 1991). As Strümpfer (2007) notes, McGregor's "Theories X and Y are stock in trade of IOP" (p. 2), and together with other (neo) human relations influences such as Argyris, Bennis, Likert, Maslow, Mayo, and Roethlisberger formed the "humanistic core of industrial/organizational psychology" (Massarik, 1992, p. 389). In this context, rather than a radical programme for change, the manifesto can almost appear like a *restatement of the human relations traditionalism* that was long ago subject to critique by writers such as Rose (1990), Hollway (1991) and Newton (1995). To this extent, it seems a shame that this collective voice provides limited analysis of the historical processes through which neoliberal university governance has been promoted and established (see below), particularly when many of the manifesto's complaints about the academy, such as "precarious positions", "wellbeing", the "'the publish-or-perish'" system (Bal et al., 2019, p. 289), or loss of "dignity" (Bal et al., 2019, p. 291) may be rooted in the neoliberal university.

The question also arises as to how we situate WOP in relation to the twentieth century development of different forms of neoliberalism. Whilst it is too simplistic to agree with Braverman's (1974) labour process critique that work psychologists were the handmaidens of capitalism, we need to ask whether WOP, at least as predominantly written in the twentieth century, did very much to question various neoliberal propositions, especially when critics have suggested that the individualistic tendencies of WOP may have buttressed some neoliberal contestation (e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018; Islam & Sanderson, 2022). For example, though there were arguments that work stress necessitated job redesign and work reform by employers (e.g., Blackler, 1982), it nevertheless remained the case that the predominant twentieth century emphasis was upon interventions *targeted at the individual*, such as stress management and well-being practices (Murphy, 1988; Newton, 1995). In a performative sense, stress discourse could therefore be argued to have supported the individualisation of

workplace affect and subjectivity, and detracted from the possibility that "stressful working conditions stem from the political and economic ideologies which set the framework by which production … is governed in any one society" (McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012, p. 858). On the one hand, it is reasonable to question Braverman's (1974) critique of WOP. On the other hand, we need to ask how much twentieth century WOP may have played a performative role in relation to various forms of neoliberalism in a manner not entirely dissimilar to that which Callon attributes to economics (Çalişkan & Callon, 2009; Callon, 2007), where economics is not just a descriptive "engine to analyze [the world]" (Friedman, 1953, p. 35) but "an active force transforming its environment" (Mackenzie, 2006, p. 12).

In part, neglect of the broader context within WOP may reflect an insufficient integration of the psychology of the individual self within the social configuration in which she is embedded. In other words, does not a critical perspective necessarily imply that human psychology needs to be viewed from the historical and societal context in which the self is formed? As Burkitt (2008) argues, answering the question of "who am I?" is inextricably intertwined with the question of "who are we" since our individual self is historically *formed* within a particular *social* setting. To address this issue, we will now turn to the writing of Norbert Elias because his work is sensitive to the need to embed our understanding of the self within the broad historical, political and cultural context that may fashion our sensibility and behaviour.

The Narrow Self - Norbert Elias and "*Homo clausus*"

To introduce Elias's approach, it is useful to start with a quotation. Though lengthy, it is worth exploring because it highlights several characteristics of Elias's thesis. The quotation takes the form of a metaphorical story that Elias uses to emphasize the way in which people forget their "social past":

I once read the story of a group of people who climbed higher and higher in an

> unknown and very high tower. The first generation got as far as the fifth storey, the second reached the seventh, the third the tenth. In the course of time their descendants attained the hundredth storey. Then the stairs gave way. The people established themselves on the hundredth storey. With the passage of time they forgot that their ancestors had ever lived on lower floors and how they had arrived at the hundredth floor. They saw the world and themselves from the perspective of the hundredth floor, without knowing how people had arrived there. They even regarded the ideas they formed from the perspective of their floor as *universal human ideas* [emphasis added] (Elias, 1992, p. 135)

The key point in this quotation is the need for a historical approach to understanding subjectivity that addresses the ways in which our sense of our self is historically conditioned and variable. This argument remains significant because people may still think of themselves, their emotions and their subjectivity as "self-evident". For example, what it means to be angry, sad or mad often seems "obvious" and "natural" in spite of numerous indications that our emotions are subject to historical and cultural variation (e.g., Elias, 1994; Lutz, 1988; Morgan, 1994), with their expression changing over time and space.

The logic of this argument questions traditional assumptions within psychology, especially those of a universalist form, since "terms such as intelligence, emotion, motivation and the like are neither neutral nor natural but carry histories of conceptualisation" (Stam, 2003, p. 24). Furthermore, "some of our most important terms" can be seen as "scientized and institutionalized variants of an eighteenth-century moral language" (Stam, 2003, p. 24). In particular, critical psychologists and historians have suggested that this earlier moral language of human "passion" in the West was replaced by the "scientific" psychological study of "emotion" (Danziger, 1997, p. 41). As Dixon (2003) notes:

> The words `passions' and `affections' belonged to a network of words such as `of the soul', `conscience', `fall', `sin', `grace', `Spirit', `Satan', `will', `lower appetite', `self-love' and so on. The word `emotions was, from the outset, part of a different network of terms such as `psychology', `law', `observation', `evolution', `organism', `brain', `nerves', `expression', `behaviour' and `viscera' (p. 20)

As Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) argues, psychology has tended to adopt "the myth of universal emotions" (p. 42), a myth that has been increasingly challenged by recent work. For example, experimental psychology (Gendron, et al., 2014) and quantitative colexification analysis (Jackson et al., 2019) reveal strong cultural variability in the conditioning, appraisal and expression of emotions such as "fear", "anger", "sadness" or "love", such that there remains a "wide variation in emotion semantics across 20 of the world's language families" (Jackson et al., 2019, p. 1522).

In quotations such as that of the "hundredth floor" story above, Elias was concerned to challenge the restricted, "narrow" version of human subjectivity that fails to see how something as seemingly basic as human emotion can be both temporally and culturally variant. Elias termed this containment of the self, *homo clausus*, and he saw it as reflecting a strong post-Renaissance tendency for people in the West to disassociate themselves from the societies they inhabit, and the historical, social and political context that informs their assumptions and behaviour. Against this perspective, Elias stresses the need for an image of people as interdependent and interconnected, what he refers to as *homines aperti*, or "the image of a multitude of people, each of them relatively open, interdependent processes" (1970, p. 121).

This stress on *interdependence* is also emphasised in Elias's central concept of *figurations*, or "interdependency networks". Elias (1991, 1994) argues that from the moment

we are born we enter into a complex figuration of social interdependencies that have evolved slowly through the changing social and political structures of particular historical periods. Though Elias referred to social structures, he preferred the term figuration as the word "structure" implies something solid and static (and hence, easily reified), and which may be perceived as somehow "external" or "abstract" to the individual. Elias's defines figurations as fluid, and not as something that is *separate* from human agency. In other words, by using the term figuration Elias (1970) wanted to avoid any impression that "'the individual' and 'society' were antagonistic as well as different" (p. 130). At the same time, rather than evoking a separation between agency and structure, Elias saw agency as being produced through the *collective* "figurational" interweaving of the intentions and actions of complex networks of people.

From this perspective, it becomes inappropriate to think of a world composed of static "external" structures that are modified by human agents. Instead, as with actor-network theory, agency needs to be understood from the perspective of the *interdependent*, and fluid, network processes. In addition, Elias's (1994) approach also suggests that there is unlikely to be any simple relation between a particular "strategy" and a particular "outcome" since within any figuration there is the "*interweaving* [emphasis added] of countless individual interests and intentions" (p. 389). In consequence, "something comes into being that was planned and intended by none of these individuals, yet has emerged nevertheless from their intentions and actions" (Elias, 1994, p. 389). Analysis of such "coming into being" is necessarily a study of *processes* since social figurations may be in flux, neither static or easily predictable.

In this fashion, the work of Elias also addresses certain lacunae within labour process theory and Foucauldian studies. As Marx (1971) argued, the "mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general" (p. 198). To the

extent that labour process writers inherited this determinism, they tended to reproduce the old functionalist tendency of reducing human behaviour to being "part of a predefined social context" (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p.91), with the consequence that labour process approach such as that of Braverman (1974) were "widely criticized for failing to adequately theorise worker agency" (Tweedie & Holley, 2016, p.1884). For instance, Willmott (1994, p. 98) argued that in spite of his detailed attention to the subjective dimension of work, Burawoy (1979) extended Marx's methodological injunction to deal with individuals only insofar as they are the "personifications of *economic* categories, the bearers of particular class relations and interests" (Marx, 1976, p. 92, added emphasis).

Though Foucauldian work was meant to address this theoretical shortfall, the question persisted as to whether any seeming Foucauldian "success" with respect to power and subjectivity represented a sleight of hand, a kind of conjuror's trick which removes "the problem of the subject" by concealing it (Newton, 1998). For some, the difficulty with Foucauldian studies is that the agential subject is in danger of disappearing altogether. As the feminist philosopher, Seyla Benhabib (1992) argued, the self begins to look like "a kind of Lockean *tabula rasa* in latter-day Foucaultian garb" (p. 217) with the consequence that "discursive practices" appear as "subjectless practices" (Mouzelis, 1995, p. 47). According to such critique, the problem with the laudable Foucauldian desire to construct histories of the self is that the Foucauldian self is in danger of appearing chiefly as subject of inscription, a product of a discursive "regime" (c.f., Caldwell, 2007).

Though we may question whether Foucauldian studies underplay agency to this extent, there is still a need to explain how discourse and practice is "established" *within* the social (Newton, 1998). As Elias put it, "actions and ideas cannot be explained and understood if they are considered on their own; they need to be understood and explained within the framework of [interdependency networks]" (1970, p. 96). At the same time, an "Eliasian"

analysis, (1) produces a radical reinterpretation of agency which, as with actor-network theory, is depicted as a collective endeavour, the product of the uncertain figurational interweaving by a range of actors, and (2), emphasises how the asymmetry of interdependency networks is likely to strongly condition the deployment of new organizational practices, such as those deployed by work psychologists. For example, as argued above with respect to assessment centres (AC's), Feltham's desire that AC decisions are determined solely by the weighted average of the AC test scores ignores the political asymmetries that may often surround selection panels where line managers, rather than HRM professionals or work psychologists, may frequently determine selection decisions (Bozionelos, 2005; Knights & Raffo, 1990).

One other aspect of Elias's thinking is important to note, namely his stress on the *longue durée* and an *intergenerational* understanding of history. In particular, Elias reminds us that our contemporary ideas are not universal or timeless since they generally represent the product of generations of people. We therefore cannot fully understand ourselves without attending to such *longue durée* historical development. This does not mean that a critical-historical psychology has to be an intergenerational psychology, and Elias did undertake present day studies (e.g., Elias & Scotson, 1965). Yet it does imply that an understanding of contemporary psychology may often benefit from addressing its longer-term historical antecedents (see below).

Though it is too simplistic to argue that all work within WOP conforms to Elias's sense of *homo clausus*, there nevertheless remain tendencies in this direction, perhaps especially in the West, given that historical dynamics may have favoured greater individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Since we cannot produce an exhaustive analysis of these tendencies within a single paper, we will focus on the example of "dirty work" studies as we believe that it is illustrative of trends elsewhere within WOP.

The Narrow Self? Dirty work

We have chosen psychological studies of "dirty work" as an illustration of the *homo clausus* tendency within WOP because it constitutes a field of study that might "naturally" be thought to lend itself to critical thought since "dirty" does not simply denote material distinctions, but is typically imbued with social, political and moral significance (Douglas, 1966). In other words, "dirty work" is a category of work that hinges on ever-changing and historically determined societal classifications of what is clean or dirty, what groups are normal or stigmatized, and/or what is moral or immoral, (Makkawy & Scott, 2017). In this sense, the concept is not only central to a better understanding of this type of labour, but it unlocks grounds for perusing interdependencies and relations between "changes in the structure of society and changes in the structure of behaviour and psychical makeup" (Elias, 1994, p. xv). In other words, what is designated as "dirty" has emerged and changed *over time*, varying according to "the historical processes through which current labour configurations have arisen" (Duffy, 2007, p. 333). In consequence, dirty work studies resonate with Elias's stress that social processes are historically conditioned and variable.

The definition of "dirty work" has been sufficiently broad to attract multidisciplinary attention from sociology, anthropology, communication studies and psychology. In addition, dirty work stigmatisation is not only experienced by those involved in low-paid, low-prestige occupations such as refuse collectors, cleaners, and sex workers, but also by those in high-status professions, such as surgeons, dentists, nurses, etc. (as a result of their association with disease, infection, and death; Lemmergaard & Muhr 2012), as well elements of dirty work that exist in many other occupations (Sanders-McDonagh, 2014). However, there remains a notable overlap between tainted categories of low prestige dirty work and stigmatized categories of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Mendonca &

D'Cruz, 2021). In this sense, "dirt" gestures towards power differentials, and correspondingly to how exclusion and oppression are produced (Elias, 1994). As Elias and Scotson (1965) note in *The Established and the Outsiders*, marginalised groups are often held to be "filthy and hardly human" (p. xxxvii), and dirtiness may therefore be internalized in a way that can undermine self-worth and resilience.

Different disciplinary accounts vary according to their attention to power and resistance (for example, compare Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014, and Anderson, 2000). Yet as, Makkawy and Scott (2017) note, *psychological* studies still tend to adhere to "a *postpositivist* [emphasis added] lens and focus on understanding antecedents and outcomes of the dirty worker experience" (p. 4). Such postpositivist psychological studies have addressed issues such as stigmatisation and intergroup dynamics (Mejia et al., 2021), the psychological contract (Drew et al., 2007), health outcomes (Bickmeier et al., 2014), and turnover rates (Baran et al., 2012). Yet their theoretical assumptions are largely grounded in a realist ontology which assumes that identity can be treated as a relatively stable phenomenon (e.g., Southgate & Shying, 2014; Stanley & MacKenzie-Davey, 2012).

In effect, much of this research could be characterised by a combination of positivist epistemology and individualistic ontology. As McDonald and Budha-Litic (2012) suggest, the focus on *individual aptitude* in dealing with dirty work persists at the expense of considering the broader contextual configurations in which people are embedded. Drawing on an individualist ontology, WOP accounts therefore present a fairly "narrow" and "contained" version of human subjectivity, often disassociated from their historical, social and political context. In so doing, their implicit conceptualisation often remains close to Elias's *homo clausus*, rather than considering the conjunction between the human psyche, society and history. For instance, Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) suggest that, as physically tainted work is generally seen as "necessary" to society, it may benefit workers because their societal

usefulness may partly shield them from the stigma of their work. Underpinning their analysis is the assumption that dirty workers' responses and strategies are mainly governed by stability across time and space, rather than being *historically contingent*. Yet as Brown (2015) notes, the usefulness of dirty work changed under neoliberalism, as occupational value became increasingly defined by salary level and economic prestige (c.f., Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021). Similarly, offsetting stigma by appealing to traditional notions of masculinity (e.g., Johnston & Hodge; 2014) may render male dirty workers outmoded, and out of sync with changing gender norms.

Nevertheless, examples of more contextually aware and critical research do exist, even though they are not typical of WOP research. As an illustration, in their edited book, Aguiar and Herod (2006) examined what the enforcement of 'market discipline' meant for those doing dirty work. Soni-Sinha and Yates (2013) considered challenges faced by trade union leaders in organizing cleaners due to their diverse racial – ethnic background. Van Vuuren et al.'s study (2012) observed how miners' identities depended on their work context, while Mendonca and D'Cruz (2021) considered bullying and harassment in dirty work, and Tweedie and Holley (2016) addressed notions of "craftmanship" as a means of resistance. Studies have also addressed other non-Western contexts, highlighting the intractability of dirty work for ragpickers in Mumbai, India (Shepherd et al., 2021), the role of forgetting in the dignity claims of Dalit janitors in Chennai (Mahalingam et al., 2019), how dirty work may be perceived as insulting in China (Lai & Lam, 2012), and how caste/class inequalities are reworked and reproduced in identity construction processes (Mendonca et al., 2022).

Yet these literatures often fail to speak to each other, and the predominant trend in WOP studies of dirty work remains: a tendency toward *homo clausus* depictions of subjectivity that detract from the way in which "power, subjectivity and context … can playout in different combination" (D'Cruz et al, 2018, p. 3). As such, there is still a danger

that they "neutralise" historical and cultural understandings of human subjectivity through processes of decontextualization and depoliticization centring around a too narrow, restricted, sense of the self.

Implications for a Critical-Historical Approach to WOP

In this article, we have sought to outline a *critical-historica*l approach to work psychology, with particular attention to the way in which notions of subjectivity have been promoted within the field. This argument raises the question of how we move beyond a narrow *homo clausus* conceptualisation of subjectivity in WOP. In other words, what does this imply for critical WOP?

Firstly, a critical-historical approach can benefit major subject areas within WOP, such as that of work stress or personnel selection. An example of the former is provided by Kuokkanen, Varje and Väänänen (2020) who used documentary data to explore changing perceptions of stress, well-being, and mental health in Finland between 1995 and 2014. In particular, they argue that a gradual shift toward a neoliberal economy occasioned an individualization of mental health discourse that increasingly placed responsibility for the management of stress and well-being with the individual employee rather than the corporation (cf., Hutmacher, 2019; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012). In effect, this study provides an example of research that addresses Gergen's (1973) call to *historically* explore "the interrelation of events over extended periods of time" (p. 319). An example of the latter is provided by Newton's (1994) study of the history of army officer recruitment in British War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs), one of the principal influences on the subsequent development of assessment centres. Newton (1994) illustrated how army selectors did not simply adopt the terms of WOSB discourse, but rather appeared to have manipulated it according to pre-existing local power relations. As an illustration, control over selection decisions was upheld the military, rather than being transferred to psychologists and

psychiatrists, mirroring subsequent concerns that selection decisions are made based on the subjective and political concerns of line managers, rather than work psychologists or HRM practitioners.

As argued above, a critical-historical perspective also suggests that we need a broader interpretation of the relationship between "self and society" within WOP. For example, it is difficult to address the concerns of the "manifesto for the future of work and organizational psychology" (Bal et al., 2019), such as academic diversity, well-being, the academic precariat etc., unless we consider how the governance of universities relates to their broader socioeconomic context, especially the growth of neoliberal economics, technologies and practices (e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018; Bröckling, 2016; Miller & Rose, 2008; Watts, 2021). This project requires an examination of the historical development of technique and practice, so that we can position the psychological subject in their historical context. The work of Elias is particularly interesting in this respect given his continuing desire to situate the psychological self within the historical context of "figurational change". Through the example of dirty work, we tried to show how WOP studies have tended to utilise a rather narrow *homo clausus* analysis of human subjectivity, where the self is insufficiently related to the shifting social, economic and political context which they inhabit. Yet it is difficult to address the demands of "essential workers" doing dirty work unless we attend to the economic policies that have furthered the privatisation and devaluation of public sector occupations, or their broad relation to globalisation, (post)colonialism and migration, and how these socioeconomics changes have *historically developed across time and space*. Furthermore, it seems surprising to us that WOP studies in these and other fields have proceeded as though they are operating with one half of the picture missing, or at least rather obscure, where employee subjectivity is treated as though it operated in a silo, almost divorced from the historical processes surrounding sociopolitical and economic change.

At the same time, a critical-historical sensitivity may also inform the relationship between "micro" "individual" concerns of the self and "macro" "contextual" issues. Given the traditional more micro-analytical concerns of psychology (individual, group processes, etc.), this is highly significant to critical WOP, as critical psychology can potentially inform attempts to work from the "micro" individual/group level toward "macro" concerns such as ideology (e.g., D'Cruz & Noronha, 2018), political economy (e.g., Bourdieu, 2005), and performativity (e.g., Callon, 2007). Yet a critical-historical perspective also indicates that, though critical WOP shows particular promise in this arena, there remains a need for caution when working across the micro-meso-macro terrain. In particular, as the work of Elias suggests, we need to differentiate and unpick these *interwoven* processes as they have *historically* developed.

For instance, there has been work within critical WOP addressing the relationship between neoliberalism and subjectivity (e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018; Islam & Sanderson, 2022). However Watts (2021) has recently questioned the ease with which we can map the effects of neoliberalism on to subjectivity. As with other writers (e.g., Bröckling, 2016; Flew, 2014; Shamir, 2008), he argues that there is no *singular* neoliberalism, since the term is used to variously refer to "a set of economic policies … a hegemonic ideological project and ... a political rationality and form of governmentality" (Watts, 2021, p. 2). Unlike other writers who complain that neoliberalism "has become an asphyxiating and enervating monolith" (Welsh, 2020, p. 58), Watts is *not* seeking to deny its significance, but instead arguing that "neoliberalism is a coherent – if *polyvalent* – concept (2021, p. 2, emphasis added) that consequently implies diverse relationships with subjectivities.

At the same time, in speaking of the "neoliberal subject", Watts argues that we need to distinguish once again between different elements, such as those which variously invoke the "language of personal responsibility … the language of individualism … and … the

rhetoric of authenticity and self-realization" (2021, p. 8). Yet even within such differentiation between these variable subjectivities, Watts still suggests that a range of questions remain. To take just one example, why is there anything "inherently 'neoliberal' about the discourse of personal responsibility" when a similar political discourse can be found with "conservative, communitarian, … social democratic projects" (Watts, 2021, p. 9)?

What does this imply for the project of a critical work psychology? Firstly, it suggests that in attempting to relate "micro" individual and group psychology to "macro" issues such as neoliberalism, we need to be aware that these macro concerns are often polyvalent issues, involving a range of discourses and practices. For example, with respect to the "manifesto for the future of work and organizational psychology" (Bal et al., 2019) discussed above, not only is there a need to consider how its concerns, such as job precarity, loss of dignity and wellbeing, are located within the neoliberal university, but to also consider exactly which aspect of neoliberalism, and *how this has historically developed*. For example, Vernon offers a historical analysis of the development of the neoliberal university in the UK, considering such elements as increasing managerialism, audit, privatisation and financialisation. Though he does not draw on Elias, his approach is sympathetic to Elias's emphasis on the complexity and uncertainty of interwoven interdependency networks since it highlights how the neoliberal university was "not made by anyone agent or centrifugal force", but instead involved "a deeply messy, contingent, and uneven set of processes, set in motion by a variety of agents, discourses, and practices" (Vernon, 2018, p. 269). By unpacking this messy history, Vernon does not accept the term neoliberalism as an uncontested, and *singular* "given", but instead tries to place the varying *interwoven* strands of its development within a historical time and place.

Secondly, rather than "invoking the monolithic notion of a 'neoliberal subject'" (Watts, 2021, p. 16), we need to consider its "polyphony" (Bröckling, 2016, p. 59), and the

relationships between neoliberalism and subjectivity in a broad historical context. As Billig (2008) notes, even within critical psychology, "there is a tendency to provide somewhat shallow histories that do not lead much further back than the mid-20th century" (p. 22). Yet as a number of social historians and historical sociologists attest (e.g., Halttunen, 1982; Morgan, 1994; Slater & Tonkiss, 2000), the commercialisation of the self was not invented by neoliberalism, but instead can be traced back to earlier periods, most notably 19th century Europe and North America. As the "Eliasian" social historian, Marjorie Morgan (1994), noted of English society, there was a "growing commercialization of personal identity" (p. 117) during this period, stimulated by a combination of rapidly increasing marketisation and urbanisation, where people had to interact, "present" and commercially "*market*" themselves to a far wider range of others than found in rural societies (c.f., Giddens, 1991). Similarly, though Bröckling's Foucauldian account of the entrepreneurial self is predominantly located in the twentieth century, he does nevertheless include some historical references, such as that of Daniel Defoe "as 'an early form of entrepreneur'" (2016, p. 173). This is significant, as following Elias, we may better understand the enterprising self if we link it to the commercialisation of subjectivity over the *longue durée*. *Homo clausus*, (neo)liberalism, and the commercialisation of the self needs to be seen as *long-term historical trends*, firstly apparent within western societies, though increasingly observed elsewhere in developing countries in relation to globalisation and (post)colonial processes (e.g., Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb, 2002; Harvey, 2007).

Conclusion

In brief, we would suggest that to develop a more critical stance, WOP scholars can benefit from engaging with critical-historical social science, and question whether the field's neo-human relations traditions provide a sufficient analytical vehicle in the context of broader historical change, such as that represented by varieties of neoliberalism. In addition, there

remains a danger that presenting employees as individualised *homo clausus* agents, as though removed from any deeper social context, may normalize how their work, emotions, and status are quantified, and their performance appraised. It may legitimise existing norms, and performatively strengthen existing power relations, without necessarily taking broader historical, social and political issues into account. To rectify this omission, we believe that WOP also needs to engage yet more deeply with the critical tradition that has developed elsewhere in psychology and social science. Not only will this enhance WOP research, but it is also more likely to produce a "reality-congruent" approach to organizations and organizational change (Elias, 1987, p. lxix).

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