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

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Abstract

Wellbeing has emerged as an important discourse of management and organisation. Practices of wellbeing are located in concrete organisational arrangements and shaped by power relations built upon embedded, intersecting inequalities and therefore require critical evaluation. Critical evaluation is essential if we are to *reorganise wellbeing* to move beyond critique and actively contest dominant wellbeing narratives in order to reshape the contexts in which wellbeing can be fulfilled. The COVID-19 pandemic under which this special issue took shape, provides various examples of how practices continue to be shaped by existing narratives of wellbeing. The pandemic also constituted a far-reaching shock that gave collective pause to consider to the extent to which work is really organised to realise wellbeing and opened up potential to think differently. The seven papers included in the special issue reveal the problematic and uneven way in which wellbeing is pursued and examine possibilities to

imagine and realise more radical practices of wellbeing that can counter the way in which ill-being is produced by the organisation of labour.

Dominant narratives of organisational wellbeing

In both the academic literature and in practice, organisational approaches to wellbeing are predominantly anchored in narrow, individualised and psychological perspectives (Calvard and Samg, 2017), frequently operationalised as 'Subjective Wellbeing' (Bryson et al., 2017; Heyes and Tomlinson, 2021; Wright and Cropanzano, 2007). The result has been to responsibilise organisational subjects for their health and wellbeing, most specifically for their mental health but also for physical health concerns like obesity or musculoskeletal aches and pains. In most practical guidance, organisational wellbeing courses, and in the dominant approach to theorising wellbeing through positive psychology (Purser, 2019; Kenttä and Virtaharju, this issue), the contextual causes of ill-health are bracketed off, or deemed immovable aspects of context. All that remains is an individualised, often moralised, subjective response to these conditions that neglects both the causes of ill health, and the social-organisational factors that situate subjects with differential access to resources with which they can manage those factors and their impact.

Stress and depression can be an outcome of the organisation of work. For example, accountability without autonomy, unachievable 'stretch' targets, work intensification, precaritisation, automation, and redundancy can all contribute to stress and ill health. Similarly, we know that a sedentary, screen based working life can contribute to obesity, back, neck and wrist pains, and poor eye-health. Most wellbeing guidance pushes the responsibility for this back onto individual subjects, who are encouraged to 'take regular breaks' from the screen. We can even buy technologies, like smart watches, to remind us to move around every so often, and take another 100 steps towards our daily target. What is missing from these accounts is an analysis of the potential to change the very structures of work that tie us to a desk, answering emails or writing reports for hours at a time, or the need to have a single job, repeating the same movements all day, every day. Finally, what is missing from this account is the social organisation and distribution of capacities for negotiating such conditions. Too

often, this responsibilisation is overlaid with a moralism that equates an inability to be resilient with moral 'weakness'. In this framing, someone who is unwilling to remove 'toxic people' from their lives, who lacks the discipline to practise yoga, walk 10,000 steps, and go to the gym every day, lacks moral fortitude and character. Someone who succumbs to burnout and escapes from stress, depression, anxiety, and boredom in a bottle of gin, a video-game, or ketamine trance, is the problem to be fixed, rather than a symptom of a wider systemic failure. This repeats the common, neo-liberal move of recoding politics as ethics, and the organisational as individual. Within this paradigm, even the articulation of a social, political, or organisational critique that point towards structural inequalities, can appear as a moral failing.

Sadly, such critique can also lead to a kind of 'left melancholy' (Brown, 1999) or sense of depression and futility in the face of an overpowering capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009) if we are unable to also articulate some kind of alternative. It was our intention, in editing this special issue, to create space for articulating both an organisational critique of wellbeing and proposing alternatives to the dominant perspectives and practices. After all, most of us would rather not be ill, depressed, and in pain, so it does seem a little perverse to want to reject wellbeing. As Martin Parker once asked, when discussing the biopolitical regime of health and security: 'So what is resistance? Eating chips?' Rather than reject wellbeing entirely, therefore, we wanted to see what might be salvaged from it, or how it might be recovered. We wanted to better understand why particular versions of wellbeing so often failed to deliver the human flourishing they promised but as a step to moving beyond the confines of the current discourse of organisational wellbeing to explore other, political and collective practices of wellbeing, that might avoid putting all of the responsibility onto individuals.

Our first contention is that the failure of dominant approaches to actually deliver wellbeing results from a basic assumption that a humane workplace will be a more efficient and profitable one. Managerial and corporate claims of the need to invest in workplace wellbeing rest on the contention that 'healthy' employees and increased levels of output serve to reinforce each other, otherwise known as the happy-productive worker hypothesis, referred to by some as the 'holy grail of management' (Peccei, *et al.* 2013; Wright and Cropanzano 2007). The positive relationship between wellbeing and

productivity is thought to underpin an employment relationship based upon 'mutual gains' for both employer and employee (Van De Voorde 2012), leading the way to a more enlightened form of HRM, that takes seriously the need to look after its human resources (Guest, 2017). Under this logic, workplace wellbeing would be a mechanism whereby employers provide resources and support for employees in order for them to have the opportunity to improve their health. In return, employees are expected to repay their employer by directing their efforts towards organisational goals.

The relative rarity of academic studies, films, novels or other cultural texts about happy workers, all getting on together and making lots of money for shareholders in a world that isn't literally burning, might give pause to reconsider this 'win-win' assumption less sceptically. More critical perspectives on workplace wellbeing have argued that, within a capitalist framework, employees are fundamentally human resources to be deployed in the pursuit of profit. As such, workplace wellbeing may be understood to serve two purposes. Firstly, as a form of 'corporate wellness' (Harvey,2019): a means to increase productivity, whilst leaving fundamental causes of unwellness unchallenged. In this manner, wellbeing merely serves to ameliorate or normalise symptoms of the unhealthy demands of work in the early 21st century (Wallace, 2019). As Haunschild (2003: 51) puts it, wellbeing "solves problems that individuals would not have without being an employee". Divisions like gender, class, age, ethnicity and (dis)ability often inflect variations in how 'human resources' are deployed and exploited to support productivity. The pandemic highlighted how many workers' experiences were rooted in existing inequalities (Butterick and Charlwood, 2021). Delivery workers, supermarket workers, health and social care staff - disproportionately feminised, working class and from ethnic minorities - had to work through the pandemic, placing themselves and their families at increased risk for the safety of better paid, more privileged workers. No amount of clapping from the front step, or rhetorical valuing of these workers as 'essential' (Murtola and Vallelly, 2022 – this issue), compensated for the structurally disadvantaged position that these employees faced.

This perspective draws our attention to how individualised wellbeing practices can actively obscure these inequalities by focussing on the individual. In his critique of mindfulness - a common practice of organisational wellbeing - Purser (2019) considers US Congressman Tim Ryan's revelations following a mindfulness retreat with guru Jon Kabat-Zinn, in which he meditated on a raisin, to draw

all his focus and attention into the here and now. Purser asks what if, instead of focussing on an individual subjective experience, Ryan had extended his mindfulness to reflect on the organisational conditions of possibility of his contemplating a raisin:

> 'What if Ryan had contemplated the farm where the raisin was grown by Hispanic migrants doing back-breaking work in the San Joaquin valley, earning a cent for every two-hundred grapes harvested. Reflection on the raisin could call to mind units from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement rounding up workers like cattle and deporting them. Might Ryan be cognizant of the smog where the raisin was grown? What about the water shortages, or the fossil fuels burned to transport raisins from central California to his Catskills retreat? What about the grocery store staff that unloaded, unpacked and stocked raisins on the shelf? Would Ryan be mindful of the fact that the CEOs who run large agribusiness and grocery chains earn hundreds of time as much as store clerks?' (Purser 2019: 220)

This hypothetical alternative version of mindfulness opens up from subjective experience to reveal the wider organisational processes that constitute that experience, resurfacing collective practices of political organisation that connect bodies across space and time.

In contrast, most wellbeing practice neglects these broader dimensions and persists with a narrow neoliberal perspective of wellbeing that seeks growth at all costs and positions the need to maintain and develop productive capacity as the dominant organising value. From a critical perspective, however, the importance of wellbeing in work organisations is due in no small part to the way in which contemporary work forms produce ill-being precisely because of this imperative towards economic performativity (Fleming, 2015). We must therefore attend to the various ways in which work 'occupies' the body (Dale and Burrell, 2014), the dismantling of health and safety legislation (Gray, 2009), the precariousness of emergent forms of labour (Peticca Harris, deGama and Ravishankar, 2018), their interdependencies, and their differential impact on wellbeing. These impacts are experienced unevenly. Under typical working conditions migrant workers are more likely to experience mental health conditions, poorer quality of life and have poorer access to health services (Liem *et al.* 2020) enabling the potential wellbeing of others at the cost of their own.

Critical perspectives on workplace wellbeing have thus highlighted how managerial discourses position wellbeing as an individual imperative; a responsibility placed upon employees. In this way, organisational wellbeing practices blur the boundaries of work and life (Dailey et al., 2018; Dale and Burrell, 2014), reinforcing an expectation that the individual must be able to contribute to requirements of productivity, and stigmatising those that are unfit for work or 'occupationally disabled' (Maravelias, 2018; Holmqvist et al., 2013). 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. Ultimately, obsession with health can become a 'wellness syndrome' (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Butcher et al. this issue), 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 as an unlimited, plastic potential. The individualising perspective on wellness can thus be seen as the latest iteration of the historical tendency for management to exercise control over workers' bodies and minds, directing them towards open, indefinite, productive ends (Wallace, 2022).

Many of the contributions in this issue engage with this strand of critique to deepen our understanding of the construction of wellbeing practices in a range of organisational settings. In their paper, Tim Butcher, Eric James and Peter Bloom, analyse an extreme form of wellbeing within a performative organisational context, demonstrating how the body can be utilised as a symbol of exceptional wellness to demonstrate organisational commitment and hyper performance. Here the organisational context provides a means of understanding disciplinary practices that harness the body and direct it towards organisational ends but with individual costs despite or rather because of the elevation of individual excellence. The potentially limitless yet narrow conceptualisation of wellbeing

is so damaging because it is inflected by a moral assumption, whereby self-care (regardless of form) is inherently understood as good. The authors reveal this particular form of self-care that is embedded in the organisation's culture and strategy as a dead-end for wellbeing, underlining the need to question what forms of empowerment can lead to individual and organisational wellness. The paper by David Jones, Tony Wall, Amy Kenworthy, Fiona Hurd, Suzette Dyer, Peggy Hedges and Sankaran Shankar identifies a persistent, yet meaningfully void, message of wellbeing within neo-liberal higher educational contexts, which has paradoxically led to a diminishment of wellbeing practice. They explore how individuals can tactically conceal practices that generate wellbeing in a context where the institutional culture and narrative of wellbeing is experienced as undermining wellness. This 'tactical concealment' then functions as a clandestine, quasi autonomous means of generating pathways to wellness. In a context of neo-liberal individualisation, tactical concealment allows individuals to 'hide in plain sight' which allowed them to connect with others meaningfully and enhance relational wellbeing that functions against, and in spite of, the dominant neo-liberalised, managerial context that would empty this relationality of content, to be replaced by pure productivity. Instead, the tactical concealment enables a mode of grounded, and value driven, collective wellbeing, grounded in the substantive value practices and care of the group, rather than deferred into an abstracted future 'potential'. Darren McCabe and Hadar Elraz's contribution to this issue also picks up the theme of resistance through concealment, though with a different emphasis. Their paper examines ways in which workers with mental health conditions resist the stigma of dominant wellbeing discourse through making their conditions invisible to authority. This 'chameleon resistance' involves individuals make themselves visible as 'normal' and productive organisational members in a manner that essentially reproduces stigma surrounding mental health conditions, but also enables individuals to blend in and escape persecution. Through this account we are reminded again of the highly ambiguous ways in which resistance can take place; a dubious mixture of consent and survival, though with a much more limited potential to enact alternative, subversive, counter-practices of wellbeing. Concealing poor mental health, whilst appearing to meet the ideal of healthy, high performing workers, risks deepening and internalising the dominant discourse rather than rejecting it, whilst simultaneously resisting the surveillant demand to make one's health visible to management and subject to their monitoring and

judgement. Concealment may be a necessary tactic when wider organisational strategies appear detrimental to wellbeing (Smith and Ulus, 2020).

Anne-Marie Murtola and Neil Vallelly's contribution to the issue further develops the critique of corporate wellness by highlighting an uncomfortable truth that came into focus during the COVID pandemic: That the reproduction of social inequality constrains the ability to be well within the workplace and within society. Through a social reproduction reading of the category of essential worker they highlight the relational, socially distributed and materially grounded character of wellbeing. The paper by Pratima Sambajee and Dora Scholarios underlines this character in studying workers in a context where employment precarity has become normalised. The authors reveal constraints on wellbeing that exist for many of the world's workers by focussing on migrant workers in the global south who exist beyond the usual purview of workplace wellbeing literature. This paper focuses on the lens of meaningful work to understand how wellbeing can be achieved by workers frequently denied the material resources that underpin wellbeing. This contrasts well with the strategies of concealment discussed by other contributions as it highlights strategies to more explicitly reclaim meaning and dignity in work through enhancing employee voice and relationships. However, this is a struggle against a context where migrant workers encounter working conditions that impinge on wellbeing and job precarity is normalised.

Finally, Peter Kenttä and Jouni Virtaharju's paper in this issue explicitly addresses the tension between the dominant, positive-psychology view of wellbeing that underpins many of the problems critiqued by the other contributions, and the more critical, sociological paradigm informing most of the papers, but incommensurable with the dominant view. Rather than grounding this tension in an epistemological or political divergence, Kenttä and Virtaharju see this as grounded in distinct perspectives on freedom that has led to a conceptual impasse in wellbeing debates. The authors introduce Isaiah Berlin's framework of positive and negative freedom in order to make sense of the polarisation of perspectives regarding wellbeing. Following this, and drawing on Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad, the authors argue for conceptual pluralism as a means to identify 'novel wellbeing vocabularies' in order to direct future wellbeing research. In outlining this metatheoretical understanding of wellbeing, the authors charge future researchers to enlighten the practice of wellbeing.

Whether it is possible for critical perspectives to more tangibly move beyond critique of organisational wellbeing practices to concretely envision and achieve alternatives remains an open question. This paper contrasts, and encompasses, the other contributions by asking us to reflect and reappraise the paradigms from which our theorisation and critique is articulated.

After Work: Resisting and reshaping dominant narratives of organisational wellbeing

This question of freedom (Kenttä and Virtaharju, this issue) draws our attention to a parallel set of ongoing debates in critical studies of organisation; a tension between power and resistance. For a long time, an established line of critique of Foucauldian perspectives on biopower and discourses like wellbeing has been that they neglect the agency of workers and fail to recognise the constitutive role of resistance in creating organisational realities through struggle. The papers in this collection, we believe, have avoided this pitfall by attending to questions of resistance and escape: not only escaping from power but along lines-of-flight that might give rise to alternative, autonomous practices of wellness, exploiting the inevitable incompleteness of power and discourse to carve out spaces for 'other' practices to emerge. As McGillivray (2005) notes, employees bring 'a project of the self' into their work environments. Neither individual nor collective interpretations of wellbeing practices necessarily align with production of willing and happy workers and this gap opens up spaces for counter-practices of wellbeing to emerge at odds with, or tangential to, capitalist and managerial goals (Dailey et al. 2018). Critical responses can include exorcising the right to be unwell without being classified as a second-rate citizen or employee on the basis of ill health (Halasz, 2018). By recognising the un-wellbeing generated by working practices, critical responses might reconsider the value of work as the central plank of subjectivity, reappraising boundaries around work, career and ambition to prioritise wellbeing *over*, rather than *at* work. In extremis, illness might even be embraced as a potentially counter-capitalist practice, with a cold or mild-flu offering an almost welcome break from another day of meetings and email: an opportunity just to stay in bed and refuse to be productive (Fleming, 2015).

Whilst the COVID pandemic has perhaps changed our collective relationship to illness over the last three years, it has also heightened our awareness of wellbeing as a central organisational concern, with parallel phenomena like 'quiet quitting' and 'the great resignation' being a key secondary narrative of the long-term economic implications of COVID. The explicit focus on wellbeing that the pandemic created heightened awareness and acknowledgement of ill-being. During enforced remote working, meetings frequently began with wellbeing check-ins. Some organisations relaxed performance expectations in an attempt to pursue employee wellbeing that is perceived as 'authentic' (Nayani et al., 2022). In some contexts, the pandemic heightened awareness of mental health issues and acceptance of how these might impact work, but for other workers there was no drop in performance expectations and the added burden of additional demands, such as childcare. The anxiety provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to widespread decline in mental health, although evidence suggests that those with more resilient personalities could cope better (Paredes et al., 2021; Fida et al., 2022) and that those with existing mental health conditions fared worse (Iob et al., 2020).

The pandemic led to calls from some to create a culture of care (Corbera et al., 2020) but others have argued that the pandemic has rather extended the neoliberal governmentality, heedless of its impact on wellbeing (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Undoubtedly the experience of the pandemic has prompted searching questions of how work and society is organised and the impact on wellbeing, underlining the political dimension to this (Zanoni and Mir, 2022). An on-going tension at the time of writing is about what a 'return to the office' should look like and for what reason/s; whether it is time for companies to move to a four-day working week? Clearly the contested idea of wellbeing has not been entirely subsumed within the dominant discourse of 'fitness to work' and can still offer a resource for counter-narratives of wellness, at odds with the dominant, productivist work ethic. A fundamentally hostile organisational environment to wellbeing perhaps justifies the exploration of hidden approaches to maintaining wellbeing whilst appearing to conform to expectations even if this might not openly challenge dominant (and counterproductive) logics of wellbeing.

The pandemic saw many of us working from home, especially cultural intermediaries and commentators, but also changed our relationship with spaces of leisure and non-work, putting an end

to socialising in the theatre, cinema, or pub, and to working out at the gym, dojo, or Pilates studio. Already successful platforms like YouTube expanded into these now vacant spaces, offering novel forms of wellbeing-curation and self-care, enacted online and mediated in the presence of others. As Kseniya Navazhylava, Amanda Peticca Harris and Sara Elias demonstrate in their contribution to this issue, the pandemic focussed attention on settings of wellbeing practice outside work organisations, but in a novel juxtaposition to the new emergent working practices of lock-down. In their analysis of 'Yoga with Adriene', they explore how wellbeing could be realised through socially mediated bodily practices combined with reflective writing in an online environment that spilled across people's living rooms and laptops. Whilst the pandemic forms its context, the study's emphasis lies in understanding virtual spaces as a means of curating one's wellbeing through interactions with others in an online setting. The authors try to move beyond the dichotomy of positive and negative views of organisational wellbeing characterised as antagonistic paradigms (cf. Kenttä and Virtaharju, this issue), by exploring the creative potentials emerging in these novel practices as they unsettle and reconfigure organisational boundaries. Significantly, whilst this practise of wellbeing disconnected both body and mind from an organisational setting, it retained the instrumentality of the productive subject underpinning wellbeing within a modern context. It highlights the way in which organisational narratives of wellbeing are not bounded by the locale of the workplace but are embedded in modes of subjectivisation that carry through 'work' well beyond the workplace.

In a similar vein, Murtola and Vallelly's paper in this special issue focuses on the category of essential workers to highlight the need for organisational studies of wellbeing to take the wider social reproduction of wellbeing as its starting point and not confine it to the workplace. This starting point might offer a basis to more radically rethink how work can be re-organised whilst attending to wellbeing, but their contribution is still rooted in a trenchant critique of the dominant wellbeing discourse and its ignorance of social reproduction work as fundamental to societal wellbeing. We are witnessing this ideological impasse playing out in disputes over pay and working conditions, and the maintenance of critical public services in the high levels of industrial action in the UK in 2022-23, something we are working through in our own organisations at the time of writing.

Although employees might actively disengage from organisational wellbeing programmes as a form of resistance, or seek to constitute alternative practices of wellbeing, their ability to do so is constrained by the wider socio-economic context. In the US, for example, refusing to participate might incur significant health insurance costs (O'Neil, 2016). The rejection of dominant discourses of wellbeing and health can also be seen in positive body image movements that have countered normative ideals of the body shaped by a medicalised version of health and leading to the pursuit of an unattainable ideal which is gendered, ableist and racialised (Butcher et al., this issue; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020; Mirchandani, 2015; Tylka et al., 2014; van Amsterdam and van Eck, 2019). It has been argued that a focus on the body of the worker has led to a form of bodily exceptionalism whereby the 'fit' implicitly and explicitly judge the 'unfit' as inferior (Butcher et al., this issue), and those whose bodies are understood as less able are marginalised and discriminated against (Foster and Wass, 2013). However, in the context of widespread enforced home-working throughout various lockdowns and a corresponding shift from physical workplace interactions towards a virtual work environment, much of the motivation and opportunity for these comparisons was removed as result of the effective disembodiment that virtual working produces. Whilst the ability to compare one's fitness that of colleagues was curtailed during the pandemic, the experience of lockdowns caused many to take their physical exercise online (Davalos, 2021), demonstrating, somewhat ironically, that social interaction is an important element in the pursuit of individualised wellbeing. This trend served to exacerbate the 'quantification of self' (Moore 2018) as exercise apps allowed individuals to maintain social comparison virtually. Consequently, individuals contributed personal wellbeing data that is a valuable commodity in itself (O'Neil, 2016) and expanded profit through platform capitalism, which privileges information over privacy and worker rights (Srnicek, 2017).

The wider, social organisational context is therefore critical in understanding and determining the possibilities for employees to realise wellbeing, but – as the papers in this special issue demonstrate – this does not necessarily exclude the pursuit of meaningful forms of wellbeing through work. Migrant workers in the global south may find their working conditions conditioned by structural inequalities, but they can respond to these inequalities through bottom-up organising to achieve greater dignity and meaning in their work to support wellbeing (Sambajee and Scholarios, this issue). The COVID-19

pandemic has laid bare the reliance on work that has been regarded as low quality and therefore less important, which if taken forward may prompt further reimagination of how work can be reorganised to produce wellbeing more equitably.

The initial tumultuous upheaval of the pandemic prompted collective self-reflection of the ways in which we work and for what purpose. Intentions to build back better have largely fallen by the wayside and, in the UK at least, we find ourselves already at a historical and political juncture where the emphasis remains firmly on growth and solving the puzzle of productivity with little thought for wellbeing. The battle lines between business interests and workers interests in the form of trade unions have been drawn and skirmishes are ongoing in various sectors, including academia. As we stressed in our call for papers and as the papers included in this special issue begin to address, there is an urgent need to move beyond discourses of wellbeing that mask an overriding focus on productivity and critique of these dominating discourses. We need to move beyond critique and solidify practices of wellbeing that heed the criticisms of dominant discourses of wellbeing without being nullified by them.

Whither alternative organisational wellbeing?

Our first intention in putting together this special issue was to examine the ways in which work and organisations shape experiences of wellbeing. Many of the papers in the special issue elucidate this point, thereby highlighting one of the ironies of organisational wellbeing: that, despite proclaimed intentions, wellbeing does little to make us well. In seeking to challenge this situation our second intention in the special issue was to explore alternative ways of practising wellbeing. In our call for papers, we particularly sought contributions that engaged critically with the management of wellbeing at work, but that also moved beyond purely negative moments of critique to understand radical potentials for wellbeing. The papers included in the final special issue reveal just how difficult it is to disentangle radical possibilities from an organisational discourse of wellbeing that is dominated by individualised notions of wellbeing underpinned by managerial, performative intentions. Wallace (2022) argues that we can trace different moments or modes in the trajectory of the wellbeing discourse

as employees have moved from infantilised to adjusted and finally empowered subjectivities, but consistent throughout this discourse is the production of subjects who are 'fit *for work*' (2022, 16). Perhaps the papers of the special issue reflect an emerging mode and a new moment in this discourse as employees and organisations become increasingly aware of the cynicism with which the narrative of the empowered employee is regarded. Nevertheless, this cynicism, and the resistance which it may inspire (Fleming and Spicer 2003), ultimately seems to come closer to a means of coping with dominant narratives of wellbeing, rather than meaningfully enacting alternatives.

The levels of ill health and poor wellbeing present in society can rightly be described as a crisis, but typically this refrain is accompanied by the translation of this crisis into economic costs (e.g. absenteeism, productivity loss) and swiftly followed by advice on how to remedy this situation (e.g. https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/factsheet-mental-health-and-wellbeing-in-a-crisis-and-beyond/). Attempting to address poor wellbeing from within the institutional framework that has created it inevitably leads to seeing it as partly or wholly a problem of reduced productivity since this is workers' function. It was our hope to go beyond this critique and seek out contributions and concepts that might enable us to stake out modes of workplace wellbeing that are not dominated by productivity and the need to produce profit. One might conclude that the concept of wellbeing is too encoded within capitalist logic, but a more hopeful position is to attempt to map out ways of achieving greater conceptual pluralism of wellbeing, not by reconciling the two perspectives, perhaps, but by constituting a third position from which the conditions constituting the initial contradictions can appear in a new light, and open alternative perspectives that might constitute a change in the very conditions of possibility for well-being. Watson (2021) argues that whilst we must acknowledge and reveal the way in which capitalism produces ill being through work, an alternative basis for wellbeing is possible and in pursuing it, the structures of production and consumption that characterise our work can be re-made. To achieve this reorganisation we do though need to look at and build upon wellbeing practices beyond typical organisations and workplaces to consider the wider organisational processes that produce them (see Watson 2020, for example). In this respect, the papers included in this special issue prompt searching questions about how wellbeing might be realised outside, or instead of the managerial discourse of

wellbeing but they only begin to provide the answers to such questions. We hope therefore that this collection of papers can be seen as an ignition point for further contributions that trace a line of flight away from managerial versions of ‘corporate wellness’ and the ‘wellness syndrome’.

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