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The making of a performative pathology. Stress and the self at work

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Preface

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Introduction

In his novel “*The Flame Alphabet*” (2012), Ben Marcus depicts a reality that can no longer be conveyed through speech, because language itself has become toxic. Every utterance that comes out of a child’s mouth bears an increment of poison to the adults listening in. Among the notable symptoms is how the faces of those exposed to language gradually starts to decrease; the exposure to words, whatever their content, lead to seizure and fever, they set off internal bleedings and cause the collapse of organs. The government and health authorities are at disarray, assuming that some sort of advanced and extreme allergen has taken possession of all languages known to mankind. Great measures are taken, then, to shield and retreat the whole adult population from the audibility of words spoken by children.

In response to the “modern epidemic” of stress, language seems to be afforded a similar function, as a source of ailments emerging in the midway between perception and reality. In contemporary stress management, stressful individuals are conceived of as captives of a language that make them sick. Stress management therefore seeks to intervene into individual’s very *experience* and *description* of their own surroundings and themselves, so as to locate how their sense of reality becomes distorted and twisted by negative thoughts and emotions: “*The point is to avoid becoming a victim of your own negative thoughts. If you find that your thoughts are filled with negative content, try turning your attention to what's good at the moment and become more aware of what's right for you. From thinking that you cannot manage something, move your attention to what it actually takes, what resources you have, who you can contact, etc. This way you may experience better internal control and greater influence on your thoughts and actions, while strengthening both your self-esteem and self-image. Here is a basic question for all those who think their boss and colleagues are asking too much of them: Are you sure that they are actually expecting this much or is it just something you imagine?*”¹ (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 6, 2008: 20).

Putting the reality into words – perceiving the world – comes at a high price if you voice it in a language of self-resentment and affect. Subjects under stress are therefore exhorted to release themselves from their own tragic and self-imposed narratives of themselves; a number of “language-exercises” are purposefully seeking to filter reality differently, by way of voicing other words than those of the tragedy, that is, by producing alternate accounts in a positive and self-affirming voice.

¹ All following quotes from Norwegian journals and books have been translated into English by myself.

In these arrangements of the boundary between perception and reality, there's also another striking oddity at play. When stress is made into such a weighty concern in working life today, it is a problem that at once both indicates illness and health. Phrased differently, we might say that the burgeoning industry of stress management courses and occupational health promotion relies on a paradoxical notion of the problem it seeks to solve. Stress is on the one side, unlike other ailments, often perceived as intrinsic for the performance of work, as a necessary motivational force for the employee. However, at the same time, stress is viewed as having a potentially strong negative impact on employees, as a source of serious health problems, which also affects organizational productivity. Occupational stress is considered both harmful and productive, it calls for measures of prevention and treatment, but must not diminish completely, because that would endanger the employees' motivation and drive for work. Stress management is therefore not only concerned with encircling threats towards employees' health, but also revolves around outlining strategies for "*turning stress into an asset*", as one management-expert phrases it, for both the organization and the employee (Gallo 2011).

Within the social sciences, there are by now a wide range of different causalities offered, as to why stress has emerged as one of the strongest threats towards the well-being of individuals in our present working life. For the time being, sociological inquiry is accordingly in the trenches over what constitutes the *actual* cause of stress, wherein gender, acceleration and technology are among the competing explanatory models (see Duxbury et al. 2014; Green 2002; Wajcman 2008). For instance, the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and private life, due to the proliferation of devices such as the cellphone and laptop, are one of the common frameworks of clarification (Chesley 2005; Towers et al. 2006). In this thesis, I want to unlock the problem of stress from the notions of plain cause and effect found in the "work-life balance"-perspectives that permeates a notable part of occupational studies and stress research (Roberts 2007; Robey and Cousins 2015). This also indicates that, as far as the current analysis goes, the subject matter cannot be sociologically explained according to any *given* structural circumstance.

Here, I will for the moment leave aside the causal question of how there is something "out there" (in society) affecting a state "within" (the individual) and the following account does not provide an answer to why people are stressed, but pursues how this "why" is, among other things, directed towards subjects as a means of self-assessment. Up until this point, there have been few efforts to pin out an analysis of the paradoxes contained in this identity.

My intention is to offer such an analysis here. For this reason, I do not seek to arrive at a conclusion on stress as an ontologically determined problem. I am not concerned with stress as a problem of cause and effect, but how it is made into a problem in the first place.

The medical historian Mark Jackson has pointed out that the term *stress* probably first starts to circulate in the English language in the sixteenth century, referring to notions of hardship and affliction. He quotes from the famous “*Dictionary of the English Language*” by Samuel Johnson, published in 1768, wherein stress is afforded a double function as both a noun and a verb. As a noun it designates a force which is “either acting or suffered”, as a verb it connotes “to put to hardship” (Jackson 2013: 37). During the 20th century, the term is diagnostically advanced by physiology, whereby it starts to disseminate throughout a number of European languages, eventually gaining a position as a “modern epidemic” (Wainwright and Calnan 2012). In this thesis, I will examine this supposedly rampant and yet vague disease by asking what is *behind* the problem of stress and its management. This question cannot be answered properly by coupling stress with an already set diagnosis of society. The subject of stress cannot, then, from the onset be bundled together with “widescreen” diagnostics such as neo-liberalism or individualization without an investigation of the “stress problem” in its specific historical emergence and intertwinement with, among other things, occupational health and management. It has, for instance, been suggested that the “stress epidemic” must be seen in relation to broader “socio-cultural” changes, in which “*problems of work are no longer seen as collective issues to be fought over through industrial action or political activity, but as individualized threats to the mental and physical health of the worker, to which therapeutic intervention is the response*” (Wainwright and Calnan 2002: 161). Such conclusions tend to predispose a particular narrative, in which a (previously) politically conscious workforce has fallen victim to the individualizing lenses of therapeutization. The suggestion of “stress” being tightly knit to a fragmented workforce no longer capable of claiming their rights or engage in battles on behalf of political collectives, seems to be more founded in a political indignation than in a sociologically motivated historization of the field. What is behind the case of “stress” must be opened sooner than enclosed in the self-assuring diagnoses, offered by both critical positions of sociology as well as the organizations themselves. Rather than placing stress in an already diagnosed terrain, such as blurring boundaries between work and home or neo-liberalism, my ambition is to re-describe this “epidemic” by centering in on the articulation of the problem itself and the tensions found herein, by asking, among other things, how stress emerges as one of the most pressing health issues in working life today and

how this requires a “new” language and a quest to improve our abilities to cope with our surroundings and ourselves. To borrow the words of Armin Nassehi, the point is to obtain a “*distance from the self-made stories of organizations (and their traditional sociology) to achieve off-key observations*” (Nassehi 2005: 179)².

The interest in this thesis is not driven by a wish to decide on which side stress can be placed in the distinction between illness/ health or individual/ collective, but by an interest in the paradoxical communication emerging when stress becomes the center of attention in working life. My curiosity in the “stress problem” revolves around how it enables an incessant uncertainty of what the problem “really” is, that is, a form of uncertainty that the organizations seem to desire and communicate through. The problem of stress – from the organization’s point of view – is laced with a paradoxical craving for being both illness and health and both scarcity and resource, at the same time. It is an epidemic that must be fought, yet the “infection” offers a welcoming opportunity. Among other things, organizations respond to this state by formulating stress policies and sending off staff to courses on mindfulness and other self-help programs in order to learn how to handle the “pressure”, acquire “balance” and turn their ailments into a positive force. What kind of consequence this has for those employees who experience stress, burn-out, anxiety etc. will not be left unanswered, but will be pursued by looking at a) the intervening mode of stress management (for instance, what form of agency is sought re-instated in the stressful employee and by which means) and b) how employees themselves report on the experience of stress.

Accordingly, the question here is not whether the label “stress” in reality serves to conceal exploitive conditions or asymmetrical power relations at work, but how the problem seems to composite the self as a peculiar instance of powerlessness, which can be directly linked to his or her illness and productivity. Among other things, it does so by bringing the employee into a performative confrontation with himself, by asking “*who are you when you choose to experience your illness like this?*” or “*could you perceive of this in another way?*”. I want to make it less obvious how and why stress appears as a problem that relies on the self-assessment of individuals.

In order to get a proper hold of this peculiarity, it is not sufficient to just systematically pursue the notion of stress as it emerges and develops within organizations, because that would make us blind for its historical character of being one “health issue” among others and

² Nassehi here refers to Luhmann and his organizational sociology

for how it today is sought resolved as a health problem that at the same time can bring about vast resources for the organization. A lot of effort seems, in this process, to be put into making the individual decide for himself how to ascribe pathological experiences to himself and/ or his circumstances. It might seem obvious that no one else can decide whether and why you feel “sick” on your behalf. The point of inquiry in this context is, however, not *whether* experiences of illness and difficulties at large today have become increasingly “individualized” in organizations but *how* the employee’s illness has become a source of such great concern as a *self-relationship*. Organizations today seem to *invest* in a problematizing of the self, in such a way that also illness now offers an *opportunity* for both the organization and the employee. How has this emerged as a problem for the organization, when and how did the “self” start to appear as a problem and solution to its own self-produced “pathologies”? To get a grip on this, I will therefore enlarge the scope of inquiry and historicize the observation of illness and health as such in organizations. How has illness been mapped and prevented previously? How has the employee appeared as a potential risk or hazard to his own health or to others’? How has his health been sought safeguarded or improved? What epistemological status has been ascribed to the problem of health/ illness and what kind of knowledge has this acquired? These are among the few questions that will be raised in order to clarify the historical development of this problem. The strategy for this problematization will be elaborated in the forthcoming pages.

The systems theory of Niklas Luhmann offers a rewarding possibility to deal with these questions, because it consequently requires a clarity on distinctions. From this theoretical angle, it becomes clear that underneath seemingly indistinct and thoroughly ambiguous forms of communication, there are still boundaries marked up, that make it impossible to let such indistinctness maintain itself. Systems theory provides a second glance at things, albeit a very ambitious one, which I basically will use as a strategy to confront the empirical material with its own impossibility. For instance, what form of communication is at play in the oscillation between illness, power and “self-transformation”; what communicative expectations are folding out in a pathology that seems to contest its own character as pathology by also becoming a recourse and source of “growth”? An observation of illness cannot be continued as an observation of economy or pedagogy or law without displacing the communication, that is, by pursuing the problem by the means of a different logic. Systems theory provides a point of departure to systematically detect when such shifts are made and ask how this happens.

Furthermore, systems theory assumes, in complete divergence with the interventions made towards stressful employees, that the self - our consciousness - is simply inaccessible to its environment. Our minds and perceptions are always out of reach for communication. This perhaps controversial postulation obviously requires an elaboration and will be conducted in the coming pages, but it does under all circumstances offer rich theoretical possibilities to irritate a practice which so unremittingly is centered on opening and transforming our “inner vaults”.

Against this backdrop, the following questions will be pursued in the thesis:

1. How is the distinction between health and illness set in work life and how does health-issues assume their character of problems, that acquires different forms of action from the organization? How and where is illness marked, mapped and resolved in organizations, historically and today?
2. How does language and emotions appear as recourses to handle issues of health and illness at work?
3. How does the problem of stress emerge as a problem in work life? How does stress management and the implied transformation from “stressful” to “balanced” involve a strategic shift of language and perception?
4. How are different forms of communication such as power, performance and illness interlinked and problematized as a self-relationship, in which the organization seeks to intervene?
5. How is stress perceived and interpreted among employees and how do they relate it to their work?

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical framework: Communication in society as society

In systems theory, *communication* is considered to make out the basic entity of society. This sets the theoretical entry somewhat apart from a variety of other offers in sociology, in terms of how society at all can be understood. Max Weber, for instance, is among those who has held a long-lasting influence by invoking “social action” as the primary reference of sociological analysis, linking it explicitly to the behavior of human beings (Weber 1964: 88-90). When *communication* is proposed instead, as the point of departure of sociological inquiry, it has a few consequences for how society can be grasped as a sociological object, which I will briefly sketch out.

The concept of communication forwarded by systems theory is understood as a process synthesizing three components: information, utterance and understanding (Luhmann 2012: 45). The snow falls heavily (information), someone remarks (utterance) and people turn their heads to look outside (understanding). One can easily imagine how communication would not emerge in a similar scenario: Someone sees the snow but does not care to mention it. This banality marks a crucial difference, namely that between consciousness and communication. The thoughts that run through our minds do not communicate, because they are not communicatively present in communication. No one has access to the vast ray of images, perceptions and feelings taking place within the consciousness of others and this inaccessibility is simply the reason why we continually select pieces of information (such as the weather) and treat them as objects worthy of utterance. Had psychic systems been mutually transparent, so that everyone at all times could read the consciousness of everyone else, communication would be superfluous and most likely impossible, because of the relentless cacophony of voices and perceptions bleeping towards us. Since we are not granted any such form of transparency, we are left with ascribing, for instance, context, motivation and intention to utterance’s we are exposed to. The meaning of communication can therefore never be firmly established when the intention behind it is disclosed (if there is any intention to begin with), because this remains unknown – even in cases where individuals explicitly seeks to unveil them. The reason is, quite simply, that also such efforts of disclosure requires a recipient who cannot but interpret what is being said. The meaning of communication is rather to be found in the communication itself. Somebody mentioned snow, and then someone else mentions skiing. Perhaps this sets off a plan to venture up into the mountains

later on and a sociality of planning-a-trip emerges, unrelated to the intentions of the person mentioning the snow in the first place. Noteworthy in this regard, is that communication cannot be conceived of as a *transference* of meaning or information from one actor to another. Systems theory proposes on the opposite that such a transference cannot take place, since we are unable to make copies of our consciousness and forward them to others (Luhmann 2012: 116). Unlike Max Weber's concept of social action, there is therefore no form of equation between the sociality of communication and human beings.

This holds true for all of society, which implies that human beings are not necessarily in charge of societies. In fact, systems theory goes beyond this assumption and completely "de-privileges" the common location of human beings in the midst of society through the quite daring claim that human beings make out the environment of society rather than actually a composite part of it. Unlike the economy or science, human beings do not make out a system, but are composed of different systems such as the consciousness and biology, but these systems cannot take part in, for instance, political disputes, paradigm shifts or economic transactions. They have no access to form the meaning of communicative events, but remain on the outside, unable to participate in communication *as* communication (Luhmann 2012: 6-10, Luhmann 1997: 89-91). It is perhaps easier to imagine how, for instance, our digestion or bloodstream is unable to reach into communication than it is accepting that the same goes for our minds. However, if we are willing to let go of the assumption that our mind is directly transferable, the "middle-ground" does not really seem to be an option, because human beings under all circumstances lack a "final" and all-encompassing address in society. When we come together for supper, the event will be processed differently in the various systems that together adds up to the human being. We might (interactionally) make enquires about the recipe, while the hand (mechanically) grabs the spoon and brings it towards the mouth. Meanwhile, the psychic system starts to think of tomorrow's appointments at work and the biological system sets off a process of digestion. There is no unity holding these systems together; the consciousness cannot proceed with our bodies digestion and our heartbeats are unable to feel delight or embarrassment. Therefore, the human being cannot be present or really represent itself in society, since, for instance, neither our consciousness nor biology is able to constitute a human being that is accessible to society or, for that matter, empirically observable to sociology. When parts of sociology still tend to appoint the behavior of human beings to the driving force of society it is, or so would Luhmann claim, because old-habits die hard. We tend to associate and connect what we can perceive of other people, such as their

“actions” and utterances, with the representation of human beings in society. However, most of the time we might not even say what really is on our mind (and it is always a lot more than what can be spoken or expressed), due to context, “norms” or efforts to keep the conversation going. When we do speak out, there is always a vast range of possible meanings that can be ascribed to what we say, so that the mentioning of “snow” does not result in cross-country-skiing, but perhaps in a heated discussion of climate change. Due to this fact, the concept of communication deployed in systems theory requires us to discard the idea of communication as a distribution of meaning between a sender and a recipient, for instance, as a discourse in which participants can offer their rational arguments (Habermas 1981: 43-44). People are never in control of communication, it lives a life of its own unreachable for the ideals of a “deliberative” exchange of opinions or even “human intervention” as such (Luhmann 2002d: 155-168).

Therefore, instead of bringing human beings and their behavior to the center of the interpretive schemes that can allow for an analysis of society, systems theory centers in on different forms of communication, on the assumption that everything which is observable to sociology is observable only as communication. So far, I have briefly sought to clarify the nuts and bolts through which systems theory arrives at such a hypothesis, which can be summed up followingly; a) communication is not transferred between actors, but is a synthesis of three components – information, utterance and understanding, b) people do not communicate, only communication can communicate, and c) society is not the sum of its individuals, as Norbert Elias proposed (Elias 1991: 3-7), but the sum of its communication. Society is therefore a communication system and can only be assessed accordingly in systems theory.

From first order to second order observation

The objects of the world do not themselves necessitate how they are to be observed. For this reason, they do not themselves establish the observations making them appear in the first place, whether they are sexual encounters, bureaucracy or unruly behavior. The oceans cannot tell us that their biodiversity is endangered. Instead, we rely on patterns that can enable us to distinguish, for instance, critical pollution from that of less critical. The pollution does not convey itself, neither does any other topics in the vast realm of communication that is available to us. To an oncologist, this hardly matters of course, since no improved

treatment can be extracted from such an insight. To a sociologist it cannot but matter a great deal, because the point of departure in sociology is the observation of society. If the qualities embedded in the objects of social reality are not possessed by these objects themselves, this leads to the question of how the relation between the observer and the observed can be assessed from a sociological perspective, that is, beyond the mere assumption that social reality is “constructed”. The suggestion afforded by systems theory is that of *second order observation*, which emphasizes that the observation of society must be trailed and questioned as observations of society. Reality does not realize itself, as “facts” and solid “empirical” foundations, but must be, from any point of view, observed as reality in order to become reality. No matter how indisputable or conflicting its subject matter, this goes for all of society, as well as the sociological assessment of it. Any sociological inquiry can only take a foothold once it has decided how to observe society – no matter where its exact objects are to be located – and posits in this regard a certain amount of resources, for example “capital”, “network” or “anomie” to name but a few. Via observational devices such as class and ideology, Karl Marx could, for instance, show how the enterprise of capitalism comes to present itself as an objective knowledge – that is, observation – of society, in the form of political economy. The concept of observing observations is not exclusive to systems theory but can be found throughout a wide number of theoretical propositions forwarded in the name of social science and sociology. The difference between these various approaches and systems theory is, however, that systems theory goes further than merely consigning sociology to the task of “observing observations” of society but offers an epistemological point of departure for elaborating *how* the venture of analyzing society as observations of society can come about. Above anything else, this encompasses how “theory” and “empirical reality” can be identified along the same threshold of sociological investigation, so to irritate each other. This means, for instance, that a sociological analysis of society must take into consideration how it can avoid shielding itself in an external or critically “advanced” position vis-à-vis its subject matter. The theory must make itself visible and put itself on the line, so to say, within the scope of the sociological inquiry at play. In systems theoretical terms we are here dealing with the “autological” capacity of theory (Luhmann 2013a: 335-337). In this regard, the sociological gaze must include a reflection of itself when it reaches out and tries to make sense of whatever excerpt of social reality that is summoned to sociological enlightenment; not only by sketching out how the theoretical approach provides new knowledge on its empirical subject matter, but also how the theoretical approach co-produces the object of its investigation. The disclosure of observational criteria must therefore include

the sociological observation itself and not only the criteria used to distinguish the observed object, as if these designates two separate units, wherever the object is found, be it “elite”, “conflict of interest” or “learning disabilities”. This will be described in the next few pages.

As we have stated, no objects of social reality can extract a singularity of meaning by the means of their own existence. There is always an option to see a problem differently. Of this follows that when the enactment of observing changes, it changes the object which is observed (Luhmann 1994: 133). Foucault has, for example, described how the practice of punishing criminal offenders in the late Middle Ages enables an enterprise centered on bodily torments and deprivation, according to principles of symmetric retaliation and public spectacle. During the late 18th century and onwards, however, the criminal becomes the target of a new type of intervention, requiring a range of techniques that seeks to reform his criminal dispositions and turn him into an improved citizen of the state (Foucault 1995). The observation of criminality and punishment changes, whereby the criminal appears according to a host of topics previously ignored or unknown, attached to his newfound individuality and *humanness*. Instead of pinning out an ontological explication of the phenomena of crime and the attached perpetrator, Foucault centers in on the observations of crime and punishment – within judicial, scientific, administrative and political realms – in order to analyze its emergence and gradual change as a societal problem. This approach can be generalized to all forms of second order observation; one cannot obtain access to or solve the problems of society directly. Instead, the second order observation shadows the often numerous and contradictory ways in which an object of social reality is made into a problem, in the broadest possible sense of the term. “Marriage”, for instance, can actualize a variety of possible meanings, such as marriage/ commitment, marriage/ economic incentive, marriage/ tradition, marriage/ gay rights etc., but a sociological investigation on second order cannot determine one of them being more in line with reality, more “just” or unreasonable than any other. The same piece of information, such as “divorce”, will be processed differently depending on who, where and when it is observed. To law it is observed as a change of status concerning rights and duties, to science it is a statistical fact, to economy it cancels out old transactions and sets off new ones (mortgage, child payment, etc.), to mass media it might – provided a “pattern” can be detected – evoke a possibility to alarm and cause concern to society, and for the couple involved it can be perceived as a tragic or relieving life event. All of these observations exist simultaneously, and none are closer to the “core” of the event than any other.

The second order observation is centered on how a difference *makes* a difference once it is marked (Bateson 2005: 374). This enterprise, of observing observations, is largely based on George Spencer-Brown's work on the calculus of form (Spencer-Brown 2011). According to the calculus, there must be an indication of difference, in order for any observation to take place. To begin with, Spencer-Brown remarks, we must draw a distinction, to perceive the world. Any trivial activity and any statement, whether it is a traffic sign, a remark from a colleague or a medieval hymn, always indicates *something* in one direction or another. The traffic light says "stop" as opposed to "go"; there are always two sides of an observation, the indication itself and its difference. When the indication is marked, it makes a world of difference! Spencer-Brown formally outlines it like this:

m ⊧ u

There is, accordingly, a marked side and an unmarked side. The figure above visualizes the distinction which constitute the possibility of observation. It might, at first sight, seem as if this boundary establishes a basic asymmetrical condition at play between the side of the marked and the unmarked. However, it is not necessarily the marked side that draws our attention, while the unmarked side is left in the shadows for itself. The unmarked side is just as significant to the emergence of communication as the marked side; there are no boundary-less forms to be identified in communication. To take an example: When looking at the crescent moon, we cannot see the shadows cast from earth, giving the moon its momentarily "shape" and at the same time also see the moon, even though both have to be present in order to form a "sickle".

The second order observation is not superior to other observations, it does not offer a privileged position of "higher" insight but is simply a position on *another* level. In fact, a second order observation is also a first order observation, because the second order observation obviously also has explicate and distinguish *something* in order to observe (Luhmann 2013a). The difference between an observer on first order and an observer on second order is primarily a difference between "what" is observed and "how" it is observed (Esposito 1996: 593-596). The observation sees what it sees, but it does not have the ability to question the foundation of its own axioms; it cannot reach back to its own conception and is therefore unable to trace *how it observes as it observes*. This constitutes the blind spot of all communication. As long as the observation observes, it cannot conceive of its two-sidedness, but only work on one side of the distinction at a time. As Luhmann phrases it: "*the*

observer cannot see what he cannot see – and fails to see this as well” (Luhmann 1994: 137). This blindness, however, is at the same time what enables the observation in the first place - it is a precondition for seeing. This is far from rhetorical playfulness, and for the sake of clarification I will provide one more example. The pedagogical gaze conceives of a child as (more or less) apt to learn, it can detect progress and obstacles for learning; within the child, its environment, the educational system etc. The assessment of the pupil’s ability to learn (for instance, how does he or she interpret and acquire information, solve problems and “develop”) can only be performed as long as the constitutive moment of the pedagogical enterprise, clustered around the difference between learning and not learning, is *not* taken into account. It might seem obvious that a pedagogical critique, for instance, of the content found in a curriculum or of outmoded methods used in classrooms are centered on *learning*, and not whether the school is economically feasible. However, exactly because learning so obviously is the matter of fact, it is impossible to ask where this “fact” derives from without leaving behind, at least momentarily, the pedagogical gaze, in which learning takes its shape as a problem. Why is this impossible? It is because the question of how the difference between learning and not learning emerges is not constituted by an interest in learning, but by an epistemological interest in the emergence of learning. The difference is crucial. With a point of departure in how the *difference* between learning and not learning unfolds itself, one is not able to provide, for instance, improvement of learning, to make it more effective or skilled or even take responsibility for learning as such. Rather, a second order observation can investigate how the “problem” of learning affords a world in which children can be distinguished as potentially knowledgeable and skilled subjects. That is the where the epistemological difference between a first order and seconder order observation lies.

With this in mind, I will proceed to elaborate how this perspective can be made empirically fruitful, inspired by Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (1999). Drawing mainly upon Luhmanns work, I will present three *analytical strategies*; a form analysis (clarifying *how* social reality is seen when it is distinguished as illness, by asking how illness paradoxically forms communication), a semantic analysis (clarifying how employees’ illness is individualized as a self-relationship, by asking how the problem of illness is conceptualized) and a coupling analysis (clarifying how different forms of communication are coupled in programs and policies geared towards the management of illness).

CHAPTER 2

At a second glance: Analytical strategies

The first analytical strategy: Form

A form divides, it *is* the boundary that can make a distinction appear and, at the same, the form also contains the two sides of this distinction. In the form analysis I am concerned with how such a distinction can be investigated by the means of a second order observation. When I make the question of form a starting point in this thesis, it is because such an inquiry will enable me to investigate how a communication on illness is brought about in the first place, that is, by asking through which difference does this communicative form hold itself together? The point is to make it clear how and what is communicated, when health and illness is at the center of our attention. First, by outlining the form of illness, I aim to provide a framework that can enable an analytical accuracy unfettered by the commonplace notions of health and illness that we all share to a certain extent in our daily lives. One such “commonsensical” assumption could be the typical opposition between health and illness itself, which also is conveyed semantically in the realms of “health care” and “health service” that most often is dealing exclusively with prevention, injuries and (potential) ailments of all kinds.

Second, I also want to pin out a foundation for a sociological inquiry that is detached from the conceptualization of health and illness found, for instance, in the mentioned health care, medicine or psychology. Across these institutions and disciplines, illness is observed directly as a first order phenomenon, through assessments of the biological and psychological “state” found in individuals, groups and populations; blood cells are analyzed; x-rays are made; stethoscopes placed on the chest, all in order to consider whether and what kind of treatment is required. Sociology, however, is not itself faced with any patients and must make itself aware of this fact. Therefore, a sociological investigation of illness (and health) must carefully distinguish its own observation of illness as communication from the observations of illness found across other domains of society, wherein illness is observed directly as a pure empirical fact. The form analysis provides the first step in this regard and asks, quite simply, what designates the specificity of illness as a communicative form? How does communication emerge, when illness is indicated?

All communication has to establish itself through a differential mode of observing, it cannot come about otherwise. A form analysis centers in on the *unity* of such a difference, that is not

taken into account by the observation itself. In Spencer-Brown's sense the form holds something else, that is, a different – but not better – quality altogether, for the observer on second order than what it does for the first order observer. The crucial difference is that a second order observation has access to both sides of the distinction, whereas a first order observation only can handle one side at a time. Between these two sides there is a boundary, from which the distinction emerges. The first order observation cannot see the form it establishes through its boundary and how it thereby splits up the world in two sides. As an analytical tool, the form analysis is therefore designed to get a sense of how a boundary is drawing up one side of the distinction from the other. It is, as such, a tool that can generate a genuine curiosity and fruitful “un-knowingness” in the further investigations of empirical phenomena because it is geared towards the thresholds of meaning in communication, through an assessment of how boundaries are fixated, in such a way that it make things appear natural and obvious to us; money, intimacy, education, trust, algorithms and everything else that makes itself known in society. The analysis of their form is intended to disturb their ontology.

Once a form has established itself, there are few restrictions on *what* kind of objects that can be formed in its mode of communication. A wide range of relationships can be taken up and assessed in the code of payment/ non-payment, between an employer and employee, between family members or between the state and its citizens. The form is not confined to a specific domain of society but can actualize itself and often provoke irritations across different parts of society. Elena Esposito has shown how *fashion*, for instance, emerged as a communicative form in the late Middle Ages, causing shock and disbelief, because it turned the whole social reality, from customs of faith and clothing to family, into an imperative of contingency (Esposito 2004b; Esposito 2011b). *Fashion communication* appears eventually in treatises of theology and natural history, it links seemingly unconnected discussions of poetry and eating habits and serves above all to recast old certainties in light of a new temporalization; when God could be viewed as fashionable, he could just as easily become *old-fashioned*. As such, the form can set in motion vast communicative resources, *because* it has “*an open reference to the world*” (Luhmann 1999: 17).

The form analysis asks how communication is paradoxical, when both of its sides is taken into consideration. Think of a political leader standing in front of a party congress, which seeks to invoke her own loyalty to the party. A difference between loyalty and disloyalty is established and the congregation to whom the appeal is made, is told that any suspicion of a

disloyal behavior is unwarranted. However, only someone who is perceived as disloyal can be summoned, by herself or others, to act and behave in accordance with a code of loyalty, otherwise no appeals to loyalty would have to be made in the first place. A form therefore contains a paradox, since it unifies the difference from which the communication emerges to begin with. All communication is invested with such paradoxes. Going shopping involves transactions formed as the unity between payment and non-payment and a prayer to the gods is oriented towards the difference between immanence and transcendence. The communication cannot, as already mentioned, perceive how it perceives as it perceives and has therefore no immediate access to its own paradox. The law cannot not judge whether the distinction between right and not right itself is a *rightful* distinction and science cannot decide whether the difference between true and false itself ultimately is true or false.

On the other side, a form has the capacity to handle its own distinction by re-entering its own difference into itself. During the cold war, for instance, the difference between peace and war re-enters the distinction, so that the gearing towards a possible “war”, in the form of nuclear arms race and military advancement, simultaneously appears as a condition for “peace”:

peace \neg war

peace \neg war

When looking into the form of a communication we examine the constitutive conditions of the communication itself, or as Luhmann phrases it, “*the condition of possibility of operation*” (Luhmann 1999: 17). To confront a communicative form analytically, therefore means to look into how the unity of a differentiating operation is possible as a paradox. I am thus concerned with how social reality appears, when it unfolds as illness. As a starting point, I ask how this form brings together the two sides, which makes the communication possible? How does illness distinguish itself?

The second analytical strategy: Semantics

The starting point of this thesis is, as already mentioned, positioned epistemologically by an interest in the *present*. As a tool for a historical sociological enquiry, the semantic analysis enables us to reach “into” history from a specific perspective. This is decisive. It implies that the historical account guided by the semantic analysis is motivated by a problematic, an irritation, found in the “order of things” as they appear for now. The history that I aim to reconstruct bears with it this irritation as a precondition, from which it hopefully will enable us to shed a different light on the present moment. I emphasize *reconstruct* because of this reason exactly; it is written backwards, starting off from a sociologically informed problematization of a contemporary situation. It is a history constructed recursively from the present. Hence, it is not a history that in anyway represents itself as history, but a history guided by a present-day “twitch”, unfolded through the lens of systems theory. Of this follows also that there are no “ready-made” histories out there, only waiting for their dust to come off and to be put into a book; the historical material itself does not in itself narrate a specific historical account. On the contrary, the material is gathered and arranged into an archive with an eye on the specific requirements of an analysis, that seeks to detect, among other things, the interplay between the points of continuity and discontinuity in an evolving semantics. Certain sources will obviously be favored above others and only a specific part of these sources’ various and manifold semantic register will systematically be traced and “mapped”, while numerous others will be left un-shadowed for now. What these sources consist of and how they have been selected will be elaborated in closer detail, but the point is that this archive only can emerge as an archive once a strategic rehearsal has been made, considering how a sociological problem of the present can be handled by way of historical inquiry.

However, while the material of this archive is gathered with the purpose of constructing a specific analytical account of a period ranging over a century and a half, the material itself would obviously also be tinted in other colors had, for instance, Bourdieu’s concept of a historical sociology been applied to it, or a Marxist framework. In other words, the same material would produce completely different accounts, possibly another history altogether, had other analytical entries been deployed. When a semantic analytical strategy is favored in this context, it is closely related to the already stated epistemological purpose of this thesis, which is to provide another perspective on the self-assuring causalities and connections between pathology and employment within organizations today. In other words, the problem

of this thesis cannot be described with and through the same problems in which the field co-currently describes itself. Such an account would merely add another layer to and possibly reinforce the self-description of the organizations that, for the time being, calls upon various forms of self-intervention to improve and restore the health and wellbeing among its members. Furthermore, the semantic analysis (alongside the form analysis) is also mobilized in order to avoid motivating the analysis with an external variable, for instance by pointing out scarcity of time, “blurred boundaries”, “work-life balance”, gender or technology as the key explanatory scheme, in which “stress” and other work-related ailments often find their clarification today. As already mentioned, such perspectives can easily miss “the thing in itself” and instead end up narrating a history of a gradual deterioration, observed from an immobile critical position on working life, technological “colonization” and so forth. Our analytical point of departure cannot, then, *“treat discourse as document, as a sign of something else, as an element that ought to be transparent, but whose unfortunate opacity must often be pierced if one is to reach at last the depth of the essential in the place in which it is held in reserve; it is concerned with discourse in its own volume, as a monument. It is not an interpretive discipline: it does not seek another, better-hidden discourse. It refuses to be “allegorical”*” (Foucault 2010: 138-139). Lastly, these problems can neither be explained “instrumentally”, for instance by pointing at the arrival of psychologists in occupational health promotion and “human resource” in working life - that is obviously a symptom of a development, but it cannot help us explain it. Instead of trying to detect, underneath seemingly different regulations, strategies, conducts or everyday practices, a shadowy matrix from which everything is really connected and arranged (such as the interests held of neo-liberal capitalism), the problematization itself must be turned into an object of investigation. The semantic analysis seeks to expand the attention towards the specificity and particular development of a problem - in this case illness - by centering in on the struggles and disputes that lies prior to its current actuality.

A semantic history is therefore also a strategic position, on how to avoid troubling the analysis with problems of first order, such as how and why some employees experience illness or how this more efficiently can be prevented. Instead, I will seek to gear the analysis towards the problem of how a certain concept such as illness attains its very character of problem and how the problem historically develops within organizations. How has the notion of health and pathology arrived at its current stage of “intervention-distinctions”, in the form of psychologized measures, prevention and treatment (Moe 1998)? How are some forms of

illness made into a problem for organizations to begin with? Why have, for instance, the idea of *personality* and individual *perception* for long periods been ignored in these problematizations, just to become an invaluable “asset” for the organizations as well as the individual employee, in the current working life?

I cannot, to begin with, know how the employee, the self and illness is interlinked and must therefore historicize the development that today make these different variables appear “naturally” possessed by the same coherent problem. Who and what the employee *is* or what illness and health *is*, can therefore not be derived from any external criteria, but is a part of the analysis itself. Furthermore, communication systems, such as the organizations that observe their own relation to their employees or the state that intervenes in order to handle “social problems”, have a massive pool of semantics available for use and choose extremely selectively from this reservoir. What on the surface might seem as “buzz-words” or passing “fads” in the public sector or in working life, are therefore rarely only a stroke of pure chance, but constitute communicative events that are connected to previous communication. From a second order perspective, this makes it all the more thrilling to ask why one form of semantics is highlighted above others.

Semantics is by Luhmann described as the “*condensed modes of expression in language such as names or terms, sayings, situational definitions and formulas, proverbs and tales for saving communication worth preserving for reuse*” (Luhmann 2013a: 32). Three dimensions of meaning can be appointed in these “condensed modes”:

The factual dimension: The unity of inside and outside. The economy, for instance, conceives of the world in its relevance of transaction and nothing else. It arranges a relation between a social client and the state, or an employee and employer as purely conceivable in economic terms.

The time dimension: The unity of past and future. The present is situated between a past already gone and a future that can never be reached. A budget forecasts a present economic perspective into the future, establishing a horizon of expectations which an organization can gear itself towards but never finally arrive at (by the end of the “budget-period”, the future has become something else). Another example could be social clients that are sent off to courses in order to improve their “employability”, in which their client-status is temporalized as a temporary status on the condition of the client’s gradual self-insight and skills.

The social dimension: The unity of ego and alter. The question is how utterances, in which “they” appear is understood by “us”? Sociality revolves around how identities are constructed by distinguishing “us” from “them”, such as criminal/ law abiding, mad/ sane or employer/ employee.

Luhmann points out that the “*meaning dimensions are asymmetrized from the start. What is distinguished cannot be exchanged. Inside is never outside, before is never after, ego is never alter, although the next observation to come (but only through the expenditure of time) can shift the distinction so that what had earlier been inside is now outside, and so on*” (Luhmann 2013a: 340). I will, in the next pages, describe how such shifts and alternations systematically can be grasped with the help of Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of the concept.

The concept of concepts

Just as no form of “history” can write itself, neither can a concept appear detached from its emergence and various stages of development, if we are to make it into the object of a semantic analysis. In other words, the enactment of conceptualizing a phenomenon, like “law”, “childhood”, “climate” or “sociology”, demands a careful historicizing that can allow us to map the trajectory of its current position. A concept has a particular status in the semantic analysis, as the principal point of reference in a historical account.

To begin with, one might ask what exactly distinguishes a concept from all those other sayings, names or formulas underpinning a semantics? To answer that I will say a few words on what a concept is *not*. A concept is not equivalent with a word, a statement or a topic. This implies that there are different levels of “conceptuality” in concepts, but also that there are only certain modes of observation that be fit into an analysis of conceptualization. The word “bottle”, for instance, or the word “alcohol”, designates easily identifiable entities that are not levied with any form of internal contradiction and disturbance. They possess therefore no conceptuality. Our society does not contain any struggles concerning what a bottle or what alcohol *is*. The word “consumer”, however, can be ascribed to a number of heterogeneous meanings, for instance the “political consumer”, “anti-consumerism”, “consumer society” or “consumer policy”. The consumer can be linked to the emergence of a key audience in the economic system, invoking the central point of reference in sectioned markets (whether it is the military industry, families or institutions for elderly care), made visible through strategies of branding and advertisement etc. The consumer holds a history, it is made into an object of

strategizing, it allows for companies to perceive of their future and gear themselves towards competition. In other words, the consumer appears as a concept when we start to consider the variety behind its immediate presence. Of this follows also that a concept never holds its own singular representation above time and space, in which case a historical account of its emergence and development would be superfluous. The concept of reform has another content today than what it did in the era of Reformation, but what exactly the concept of reform entails will also today be a source of dispute, contestation and struggle. A concept is heterogenous, its meaning can never be unambiguously fixed, but remains open to struggles that exactly revolves around its fixation. One can, for instance, just think of how concepts like “discrimination” or “culture” are highlighted in political debates today. Their manifold potential of interpretation is what gives concepts their character of conceptuality and it is this that allows us to investigate how they are political and historical objects. Their defining feature is how they always-already slip away from all efforts of definition.

The primary distinction in a semantic analysis is that between concept and meaning (Andersen 2006: 31). When we formalize this distinction by way of Spencer-Brown's logic of form, it appears accordingly:

concept | meaning

We have drawn a distinction! For our purpose, that is the semantic analysis, we must indicate the concept rather than the meaning of its content, which means that for such an analysis to get going, we must loosen ourselves from all presumptions of any grounded ontological linkages between the concept and its meaning. A concept such as “elite”, for instance, cannot be examined by any predefined criteria, but only according to the ways in which it is made into a source of political dispute, self-assessment, ridicule, critique etc. There is, as such, a number of competing and incommensurable meanings attached to the concept, but it is not possible to arrive at a conclusion as to who the elite actually is composed of or how their influence can be assessed when we ask into its conceptual status and history. Instead, the semantic analysis takes one step back and asks what is observed when a concept such as elite is attached to a specific group or segment in society? As with most other concepts, the variety of the concept of elite will become clearer if one considers the other side of the distinction, its counter-concept. The same relation can acquire vastly different meanings depending on its conceptualization. Is the elite opposed to “people”, the “working class” or the “uneducated masses”? What is at stake in such a variety is the relation between the *singularity* and

generality of concepts (Koselleck 2004: 75-92). The same relation can be conceptualized in very different ways, so that “passive recipient” and “job-seeker” both can point towards the status of the unemployed, albeit in contradiction. A group can in this process make claims to the generality of a concept, so that it becomes singularized and thus exclusively valid for that group. One example is how a state becomes singularly linked to its citizens, demarcated through national borders and citizenship or how “green” parties seek to take primacy in addressing environmental issues. It is, however, not possible for a singularity of meaning to obtain absolute possession of a concept. There is always a possibility for another actualization of its content, for instance if a traditional leftist party succeeds in advancing environmentalism as a question of redistribution of resources. On the other side, the singular can also be advanced as generality. One can think of how the European Union seeks to associate itself with a diverse notion of “Europe” or how different indigenous groups across the world join forces to politically advance the question of indigenoussness as a universal claim. Nevertheless, the relation between the two sides of a concept, that is, the concept and its counter-concept, is necessarily conditioned by an “*asymmetric opposition*” (Koselleck 2004: 156). The relation between concepts and counter-concepts are asymmetric because others are excluded by the definition of oneself. No concepts are immune against such tensions, one could, for instance, think of how a concept like “humanity” is invoked when people, due to “human considerations”, are sentenced to jail or capital punishment. The asymmetric structure between concepts and counter-concepts can be formalized as such:

singular | general

As indicated previously, the meaning of a concept will to varying degrees evolve over time. Not all concepts are invested with the same level of intensity in terms of change and inner tension. The concept of madness is one example of a concept that for a period of many hundred years did not attract any significant attention, until it quite suddenly becomes a problem of intense scrutiny during the Enlightenment (Foucault 2006). This is a crucial part of analyzing “societal problems” from a second order perspective; the interest in a concept often sets off when it currently seem to be in some form of transition or rupture, which again can lead us to uncover the historically “hidden” debates and “buried knowledge” behind the present actuality of a concept. Among the concepts Koselleck investigated himself, was that of revolution. The history of the concept of revolution cannot be studied as a sort of general social mechanism, for example by looking into instances of rebellions and uproar against established orders across the centuries, because such an account would be charged from the

onset with a specific meaning acquiring a predetermination of the historical concept of “revolution”³. We would, accordingly, not get a grip on its conceptuality as a concept. Koselleck shows how the concept of revolution initially designates a mechanical notion of circularity, in the form of a recurrent cycle of movements back and forth from an initial position. This meaning is eventually lost in the latter part of the eighteenth century, for a concept which is now familiar to us, invoking the event of an abrupt break and a following transformation, often in the form of forecasts of a political or social development, in which the concept becomes a political factor itself (Koselleck 2004: 43-57). In order to clarify the conceptuality of “revolution”, one has to take into account both its previous content *and* its current position as well as the interplay between its singularity *and* generality, if one is to avoid privileging one meaning above the other. These variables make out what Koselleck describes as the diachronic and synchronic features of the conceptual history.

The diachronic feature attends the question of how meaning is condensed into a concept, in such a way that “revolution” at one point in time can signify *circularity* and *abrupt break* at another point. The diachronic questions are centered on: How is a concept sought to attain a singular content and thereby make exclusive claims to generality? How does the concept convey a heterogeneity of meanings struggling to possess it? How is meaning condensed into the concept?

The analysis of the diachronic features is thoroughly interlaced with the synchronic features. The synchronic feature is concerned with how a concept inscribes itself in a semantic field. The concept of democracy, for instance, cannot be properly analyzed without considering how that concept is connected to other concepts and situated within a network of enunciations, procedures, and regulations, such as election, representation, legitimacy, majority rule, debate, parliament and so forth. The synchronic question is centered on how such a semantic field emerges as a difference between concept and counter-concept and asks: How is the relation between a concept and its counter-concept established? How is the asymmetric structure continued or displaced?

³ The same goes for stress as a topic that invites to pre-determined assumptions. One could, for instance, reach out for the protestant conception of time-waste as a deadly sin, pointed out by Max Weber, and from thereon formulate a critical assessment of culturally informed attitudes and habits that leads to the stressful condition of modern society (Weber 1995: 102-105). Another option could be to look for corresponding analogies throughout different periods of time and begin with the ancient Greek conception of *crisis*, which referred to the ability to act under the constraints of time-pressure (Koselleck 2002: 244). However, the “source” of the problem would then already be determined, as an issue of repressive cultural forms or temporal scarcity.

Throughout the semantic analysis, I therefore investigate how different forms of meaning have been condensed into the concept of “illness”, as it appears in the field of occupational health promotion. How come, for instance, do organizations start to concern themselves with the well-being of their employees rather than just merely preventing injuries from happening and diseases to develop? How does the “inner life” of employees start to emerge as a strategic asset for organizations trying to diagnose and treat their illness? In the semantic analysis, I will deal with these questions by, as mentioned above, looking into how the counter-concepts to illness vary and change and how different meanings struggle to possess its conceptualization.

A second semantic analysis will follow from the first. From this point on, I will return to the initial problem of this thesis, which concerns the problematization of stress. This analytical part therefore adds a layer to the preceding semantic analysis, by specifically looking at one “health issue” among a number of others that also occupy the whole area of “occupational health”. I will mainly trace a figure that seems to be underlying the stressful individual, that is, a self opposed to itself. This second analysis will introduce a *genealogical* element into the semantic strategy by tracing the history of the subjectivity of the stressful individual. Genealogy is oriented towards the “*rediscovery of struggles and raw memory of fights*” (Foucault 2003a: 8).

The analysis switches its attention from a concept-problem to a problem of subjectivity, in order to identify the lines of continuity and rupture that hosts the “self-opposed self” found in the stressful subject. This point of departure has certain consequences for how and what kind of sources that are actualized, because we are not dealing with a chronologically assessable problem, but with a problem of how certain discursive elements are transformed, whereby a practice can repeat and re-address itself across different realms. Foucault himself, for instance, pointed towards how *examination* allows for a disciplinary gaze which is repeated and re-actualized across the hospital, the school and the court (Foucault 1995: 184-194). Foucault’s point is not to detect direct causalities in the affinity between the examination at the school and the court, but to detect how one several elements are re-grouped from one (or several) realm to another, invoking a practice such as the examination as a necessary and self-assuring conduct in the assessment of patients, pupils or witnesses. The purpose with the detection of such repetitions is not to reaffirm or impose new notions of progression that can break with the old: “*Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it*

continues secretly to animate the present, having predetermined form on all its vicissitudes” (Foucault 1991a: 8). Rather, this analysis is centered on identifying and following the dispersion of a certain gaze, a mechanism or a conduct and the elements that are joined, separated or re-joined throughout its lineage and descent.

With this in mind I will move the point of observation from a conceptualization (in occupational health) to a problematization of a self-relationship, guided by a systematic tracing of the “problem of stress”. The point is to situate the “stress symptom”, not primarily as a concept, but along the axis of “problematization”: *“how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) became a problem (...) how and why were very different things in the world gathered together, characterized, analyzed, and treated as, for example, “mental illness”? What are the elements that are relevant for a given “problematization”?”* (Foucault 2001: 171).

We can therefore summarize the semantic analysis thus (Andersen 1999):

Problem:	Point of observation:	Strategy:	Guiding difference:
Concept (illness)	Occupational Health	Concept	Concept/ counter-concept
Subjectivity (stress)	Stress Management	Genealogy	Continuity/ discontinuity

Third analytical strategy: coupling analysis

The coupling analysis is guided by the difference between coupling and differentiation in communication (Andersen 2006: 42). This analytical strategy proceeds from a specific condition of communication systems, namely their operational closure and functional differentiation. I will therefore give a brief introduction to the functional differentiation of communication systems, before I move ahead to elaborate the strategic position of a coupling analysis.

The systems theory formulated by Luhmann offers its own take on modernity, linking its key feature to the *functional differentiation* of different systems across society, such as art, pedagogy and law. In this account, there is no unity holding society together *above* its differences, such as “solidarity” or “integration”; there is no “glue” enabling society to persist despite of its injustice or suppression. Society simply *is* and has no manifest or latent *purpose*. Whereas Marxist accounts often assumes the difference in possession between groups as a defining feature of society, systems theory proposes that modern society can be assessed according to the unity of its functional differentiation, that is, a society assumed to contain a multiplicity of system-environment differences structurally reproducing themselves *as* differences. Therefore, instead of trying to locate a generalized mechanism of modern society in one place, in the way “class” typically denotes economy, functional differentiation designates a situation in which differently coded fields – *systems* - can co-exist independently of each other, with no rank or dominance between them. Systems can emerge as functionally differentiated exactly *because* there is no overreaching pyramidal order in society, that can allow for directives from above. Phrased differently, economy, love, art, politics, education, law and science are all systems unfolding non-coercively of both each other and society as a whole, since there is no centralized societal agency that can overrule and take charge of its different parts.

Even though economy and politics often, within social sciences, are being privileged as the steering “engines” of change in modern society, the differentiation of systems entail a de-centering of such assumed unities. Although the political system, for instance, allocates means to and thereby regulates a number of different societal institutions like the school or elderly care, it does not enable a political control of the direction of society. The political system continuously makes collectively binding decisions, in the form of laws and

regulations, concerning priorities of elderly care and schooling, but it does not itself take care of the elderly, educate schoolchildren or, for that matter, reduce the number of fatal accidents in traffic. The political system is cut off from intervening in its environment and relies on governing via other systems' self-governance. On a practical level, this is often dealt with by way of proposing general guidelines to which schools or centers of elderly care are held responsible, rather than formulating direct orders that welfare institutions must comply to (Cour 2014: 109-111). Neither money, power, desire nor law hold exclusive access to society's change and stabilization, just as no center or periphery can be pointed out for the whole of society. Each function system is simply at the center of itself, implying that society hosts a range of varying meanings across different systems, of which no one possesses an ultimate key. Briefly summarized one could say that the meaning of social reality is ultimately unstable, due to lack of a center from which society can observe itself.

Accordingly, the functions of pedagogy, economy, law, politics etc. cannot be generalized to other parts of society; science does not have to obey the rules of the market in order to accomplish its research – even though it needs funding; medicine performs its treatment independently of political differences on which groups that are to benefit from health services; art can maintain its shock and innovation without any regard to the pedagogical implementation of its works in museums or art history books. A system can ignore the vast number of demands and challenges that is produced among other systems elsewhere in society, because it is able to *distinguish* itself as a system set apart from other systems; systems consequently observe their environment on the basis of their own operations and not anyone else's. They are, as such, *operationally closed*. This does not mean that a system like economy only can perceive economy, but that economy only can perceive economically, in the form of an economic *code*, fleshing out a world consisting of either payment or non-payment. For instance, a crucial aesthetic event in the system of arts cannot send shock waves to or alter the economy, but will, in an art market, be observed as a potential investment, assessed according to possible profit or loss. The court can likewise forbid a research project to continue if it breaches the law, but it does not concern itself with whether the scientific output lacks references to crucial works in the field of its topic or depends on outmoded theoretical models. The binary logic of the political communication system, between government and opposition, is distinct from the scientific communication system, whose difference is constituted through true/ false, or the religious system, which maintains itself through the distinction between immanence and transcendence and so forth. These two-sided

codes restrain the criteria of observation in such a way that it enables systems to strictly supply themselves with their own meaning when observing their environment. The consequence is, however, that they cannot adapt to or acquire the meaning produced in other systems.

The different function systems (Andersen 2006: 121):

Function system	Symbolically generalized media	Code
Law	Abiding law	Right/ not right
Pedagogy	The child	Learning/ not learning
Science	Truth	Truth/ false
Art	The work of art	Art/ not art
Politics	Power	Government/ opposition
Religion	Passion	Love/ not love
Economy	Money	Payment/ not payment
Religion	Belief	Immanence/ transcendence
Health	Treatment	Healthy/ sick
Mass media	Information	Information/ not information

Just like human beings are unable to communicate with each other, so are communication systems. The reason is, as already stated, that there is no “meta-level” available in society, wherein communication systems can offer their multilateral perspectives and reach some form of “common ground”. The question is, if communication between systems is impossible, because this would cancel out the differences between them and thereby set off their collapse, how are they then able to notice each other? This is where *structural coupling* comes in. Communicative systems cannot understand one another but are geared towards a misunderstanding of each other’s communication. There is always an element of dissonance when systems perceive other systems. *Misunderstanding* refers in this case to how systems consequently interpret and understand their environments on the basis of their own codes, so that different forms of meaning can be extracted from the same event, like the “divorce” mentioned previously. Structural coupling designates the situation in which a system observes and lets itself be irritated by another system, when it becomes faced with a problem posed externally that must be dealt with as an internal problem. One example could be when a political communication system imposes increased taxes on flights in order to reduce the emissions of CO2. The economic communication system responds by hiring in flight staff from a country with lower wages, in order to keep the prices on a “competitive” level. The

political decision to intervene is perceived, in the economic system, as a market obstacle requiring economic adjustments; it does not adapt to the political codification of the problem yet cannot ignore it and proceeds to handle it economically (Borch 2011). In this way, structural couplings enable a continuous stream of disturbance and irritations between systems in society, to which they have to adjust themselves. It should be noted that structural couplings always happen internally, as the result of an actualization of a difference between the internal system (self-reference) and the external environment (other-reference), which has been provoked externally. The irritations conscripted from this dynamic between systems is an ongoing “translation” of other-references into self-references, on the condition of systems that are mutually excluded from understanding and intervening into each other: *“In any case, the environment gains influence over the structural development of systems only under the condition of structural couplings and only within the framework of the possibility of self-irritation they channel and accumulate”* (Luhmann 2012: 67). Accordingly, structural coupling does not imply systems who provide each other with meaning, but with constant uneasiness.

Against this backdrop, the coupling analysis is oriented towards the relational character between systems that are drawn to each other by way of mutual irritation. The point of departure is, from a systems theoretical position, the question of how systems, unable to share a “common ground”, relate to each other? How do couplings with other systems emerge, given their own closure? *How* this happens are always empirical questions, which cannot be provided from the “desktop”. Structural couplings must be observed in their momentarily specificity, because couplings between, for instance, science and politics – seen in programs of “evidence-based policies” or when statistical prognosis is used to support prioritizations of welfare – is different in its *relational* character from structural couplings between law and politics or religion and health etc. Theory itself does not grant us with any answers to their specificity, but it grants us with a specific attention towards how the relations empirically are folded out, enabling us to follow the concreteness of their relation.

The coupling analysis, as with the other analytical strategies, is prompted by a “twitch”, in this case a puzzlement of how stress, as mentioned previously, both can appear as a “pathology” *and* a resource? How are different communication systems coupled in the programs and policies directed towards sick or potentially sick employees?

Sources

The expressions, themes, sayings or words that are used to perceive and express the variety of experiences in the world, are not simply identical with the experience as such (Koselleck 1989: 311—312). Words in themselves does not contain realities, the language used to express grief is not the same as the experience of this grief (the shortcomings of which is a common denominator and theme in the literature dealing with experiences of loss and atonement). When venturing into a historical account based on semantics or when contemporary “cases” are assessed, it also involves taking an epistemological position concerning how and what kind of knowledge it is possible to retrieve from the reality of written sources and the world at large. The cases are not cases in themselves but appear as such once they are invoked as objects in an analysis. The same goes, obviously, also for the sources that appear as “historical material” – they become “historical” at the moment when they are pointed out as a part of an archive.

This means, among other things, that the various sources making up the archive of this study, ranging from sanatorium reports to self-help literature and human resource-strategies, do not themselves possess or grant us with a privileged reality, that can explain and reveal to us how things actually were. Neither can they disclose, for instance, the hidden mechanisms of an economic order of our present or a previous era. The texts are simply read as expressions of a semantics, that evolves and attains a variety of temporal, factual and social meanings *as it evolves*. The criteria of observation that has been described in the semantic strategy is what enables us to detect *how* this development comes about, but not *why*. Such a strategy poses certain requirements on what kind of historization that can be tapped from a problem such as “occupational health” and the concept of “illness”.

For example, there are traces of various other histories in the semantic analysis. Another history could have been written taking its cue from the struggles between different professions seeking to define the “health” and “illness” of workers. Such a history would, however, terminate the observation of organization’s observations of employees and instead become an account of the contradictory interests held between, for instance, actors in the realm of medicine opposed to psychology. The professions are not insignificant but here I will only be concerned with them to the extent that the semantics they offer are made relevant by organizations themselves, to describe and handle the problem of health and illness among employees. The semantic struggles found across the field of “occupational health promotion”

are not corresponding with the *self-descriptions* of the various professions struggling to define the same subject matter in contradictory ways. Again, we must turn to the accuracy afforded by a semantic analysis, by considering what the point of observation is (“occupational health”) and how we can observe it (on second order): One cannot, before the analysis get going, decide where exactly the tension of a concept is located or to which counter-concepts it is attached. The whole point is to question the axioms wherein the problem of illness and health attains its obviousness and immobility today.

The semantic strategy points, as already mentioned, towards two semantic analyses. The first will be centered on the concept of illness/ health found in occupational health promotion from 1920 until today. At the beginning of this period, “occupational health promotion” or “occupational health” does not in any regard designate a set of institutions or a given field and are not even terms in common use. When I refer to “occupational health” I do it with an intentional anachronism and simply mean the sum of thematizations, whereby organizations actualize illness and health at work. A total of 390 articles make out the archive of this study. They are mainly gathered mainly from two sorts of journals, management journals and occupational health journals, the latter of which is also a form of management journal. In addition, I have also included approximately 30 books on the topic, also spanning from the 1920’s onwards. Even though I look largely at Norwegian journals and in a few instances Scandinavian, the semantics has an international orientation throughout the whole period, where a considerable number of articles originally published in English or German are translated into Norwegian or other Scandinavian languages.

Most of these journals have a life-span that is markedly shorter than the hundred-year period made into the object of investigation here. Various journals are at the center of debate at different points in time and the semantic analysis follows the semantic struggles themselves, as they are unfolded in their concreteness, and not the constancy of other, external variables, such as that of specific journals (which would easily meet a dead end once the journal ceases to exist). In 1920, for instance, there are no journals exclusively dealing with “occupational health”; it is mostly debated in the traditional management journals, such as “Management” (Ledelse). During the middle of the 1930’s, however, a whole new journal genre emerges, dealing with “health” as both a vitalist imperative and management issue (among these are “Life and Health” (Liv og Helse). In this concrete example, these new journals can perhaps be seen as an indication of a semantics that is in some form of transition, but that must

obviously be investigated semantically and cannot be decided causally (“new journals appear, hence a new semantics also appears”).

The continuous selection of sources to this study has followed what is sometimes referred to as the “snowball-method”, in which the sources are tracked down according to how they point towards other sources. When I find, for instance, a debate on “the humanness” of employees emerging in the material, I look at the themes and conflicts that are continued or left to lie fallow during this debate’s rise and aftermath. In this case, it turned out that this debate was a crucial event and I continue its mapping by, among other things, taking a closer look at both the implied “enemies” and advocates of this newfound humanness. When I have found that certain articles become very relevant to the field of health and occupation, I have chosen to systematically review the complete editions of the journal. Among these journals are Management (Ledelse), The Employer (Arbeidsgiveren), Occupational Management and Technology (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk), Life and Health (Liv og Helse), Life and Healthiness (Liv og Sundhet), The Daily Manager (Arbeidslederen), Protection and Welfare (Vern og Velferd), Staff and Management (Personal og Ledelse) and Working Environment (Arbeidsmiljø).

I have chosen to deal with texts that in different ways point towards a practice, in the form of problems that should be acted upon; texts that reflect how illness and health is made into a question of long-term planning and strategy or an object of “uneasiness”; evaluated, re-assessed, deliberately ignored, etc.; how illness is prevented, mapped and requires treatment; how health is sought improved and so forth. It does not follow of this, however, that I thereby can acquire access to the history of practices as such, because it remains unknown how this semantics has been translated into practice.

The second semantic analysis sets off from the preceding semantic analysis by tracing the “problem of stress”. This introduces several other sources that are far beyond the management journals underpinning the first semantic analysis. Three lineages will be investigated; a) the concept of neurasthenia emerging in medicine in the 1880’s, b) a branch of physiological research starting to appear in the 1910’s and c) the self-help literature on stress established and developed from the 1970’s onwards. In line with the analytical strategy of genealogy, these different realms are not considered to eventually cluster into a united wholeness, they do not represent a direct line of succession or a progressive series of events that orchestrate the singular coherency of our present. Instead, they all host and re-address

certain elements that point towards the subjectivity and management of stress. The sources consist of a) medical literature and sanatorium reports on neurasthenia from 1880-1914, b) physiological research on the concepts of homeostasis and stress from 1915-1980, and c) Scandinavian and international self-help literature from 1970-present. The sources are actualized according to their thematization of a self-relationship - which will be explicated once we reach so far – and are, as the entirety of the semantic analysis, understood as *monuments* in a development of a problem and not as documents of the past.

In addition, I also make considerable use other sources, most notably cases, observation and interviews. The background and selection of these will be elaborated along the way.

CHAPTER 3

Health and the form of illness

In the following pages, I will outline the form of illness. The aim is, as already stated, to pin out a sociological inquiry that is detached from the conception of health and illness found, for instance, in health care, medicine or psychology, and thereby provide a framework that can enable a further analytical accuracy unfettered by the commonplace notions of health and illness that we all share to greater or lesser extents in our daily lives.

The form analysis is concerned with how the world appears, when it is folded into a communicative form and ask, as a starting point, how this form brings together the two sides, which makes the communication possible. How does illness distinguish one side from another?

Health and non-illness

Before I move on this question, I will say a few words on why illness and not health is made into the point of departure here. Three aspects will shortly be entertained, before I turn to the form of illness. 1. Health as a concept that cannot be conditioned on its own terms, but serves to negate the appearance of illness. 2. The binary code of medical communication found in the differentiation between ill and well. 3. Illness as devoid of any specific content, which is successively ascribed its meaning through procedures of assessment, diagnose, treatment and so forth.

In a letter to his brother, Thomas Mann states that “*the problem of what “health” is, is not a simple problem*” (Mann 1987 [1918]: 314). Mann’s postulation very accurately points towards the endless grapples, which can be detected from the emergence of modern medicine to present day health care, with the efforts to afford “health” a positive gist. Perhaps Mann’s novel, *The Magic Mountain*, can be said to entertain this not-so-simple problem, approached from the sanatorium and its manifold intersections between life and death. The protagonist, Hans Castorp, arrives there for a visit to see his cousin, but is no sooner diagnosed himself according to symptoms that host endless possibilities for treatment, yet his illness remains conspicuously vague. The sanatorium cannot provide for his health unless something can be marked clearly as sickness – the protagonist must be identified as a patient so as for the sanatorium to make itself relevant for handling his “condition”. To all fortune, a doctor

cannot but notice Hans Castorp's feebleness and eventually locate a peculiar "spot" in his lungs; death is actualized, and treatment can set in (Mann 2014 [1924]).

The notion of health seems to be slipping away from most attempts to constitute it as a problem, and surfaces usually through its own negation, that is, illness. Nevertheless, many efforts have been made to find a solution to how health can be explicated as a paradigm on its own terms. Claude Bernhard, among the originators of physiology, sought to expound the difference between illness and health as the principle distinction between a physiological and medical gaze: "*Knowledge of causes of the of the phenomena of life in the normal state, i.e., PHYSIOLOGY will teach us to maintain normal conditions of life and conserve HEALTH. Knowledge of diseases and their determining causes, i.e., PATHOLOGY, will lead us, on the one hand, to prevent the development of morbid conditions, and, on the other, to fight their results with medical agents, i.e. to cure the disease*" (Bernhard 1957 [1887]: 1-2). However, once rules of steadiness and regular "order" are mobilized to assess the body, it is uncertain whether "health" or "mechanics" serves as the underlying reference. Already here it becomes clear, as Bernhard also points out, that the knowledge of a normal state only can conceive of the "normal conditions of life" as long as a deviance of some sort is made present. For instance, when a possible symptom of illness appears, such as a swelling or fever, "health" typically designates a condition found prior to the arrival of the symptom. Alternatively, health can be determined as the possible outcome of a treatment or it can serve to differentiate between different degrees of suffering if a patient is faced with the prospect of a fatal or permanently ill condition. In other words, "health" tends mostly to take care of the purpose of attaining a "before" or "after" the occurrence of an illness and to manifest variety and forecasts of treatments of disease. This strong primacy of negation has led Luhmann to ascertain the concept of health as "empty" (Luhmann 2008: 20). Health is merely a negative reflection strictly derived from the positive appearance of illness, which refutes the efforts to condition it on its own terms; illness negates health, but health does not negate illness. For this reason, in the absence of disease and deviation, health does not find any proper foothold. Luhmann compares the inadequacy of the scheme ill/ healthy to that that of risk/ security. As an unmarked side of risk, security does not provide a counter-concept, but merely a taken-for-granted - and mistaken - assumption of there being a safe alternative to the risk in question. One could also compare it to the problems of conditioning "peace" as a positively marked phenomenon (as opposed to war), which a lot of peace research tends to run into. In a similar fashion, the notion of health can neither acquire a positive emergence nor, for the purpose of

this analysis, a sufficient analytical accuracy required to locate the “blind spot” in its communicative form, it is simply “form-less”.

One might seek to contest this position empirically, by pointing towards seemingly “positive” practices such as health authorities’ campaigns directed towards the general improvement of the population’s “well-being”, typically concerning eating habits, exercise, alcohol consumption, sexual conduct and so forth. Or how pregnancy and “reproductive health” in health care likewise revolves around governing life as such. The question is, however, what “health” looks like when these practices and campaigns devote themselves to health. In all these instances, I will claim, “health” simply designates different variations of “non-illness”, or phrased differently, health is observed according to potential illnesses, such as obesity, heart- and lung-diseases, psychic illness or child mortality. Health is thereby made visible via patterns of pathological deviances.

A medical code

Anyone who opens a medical textbook from the 17th century will soon find a number of seemingly familiar concepts, attached to connotations that to us seem uncanny or bewildered, such as the concepts of cure and treatment, for instance, which at this point still revolves around the possibility of a universal remedy, the magic panacea (see for instance Foucault 2006: 300). Even though the images of disease, the cause of their infliction and required cure obviously has undergone a number of substantial changes since the beginning of modern day medicine, the modelling trinity of health, illness and treatment can be dated back to antiquity, with Hippocrates among the most well-known examples (Hippocrates 2010). Today, the enactment of localizing illness to facilitate treatment is a primary function in what Luhmann calls the medical system, where “*only one distinction for this function of binary coding is relevant – sick or well*”⁴ (Luhmann 2009: 179). In other words, the medical system does not respond to criminal offenses, infidelity or the rapid growth of derivatives in the financial sector, but only reacts to disease, primarily found in the human body and mind.

There are, however, seemingly few limits to what can be made into a sick or deviant physical condition, behavior or thought pattern. Happiness and depression alike offer possibilities of pathologization. Illness just as health can, in continuation of this, be viewed as “empty

⁴ Translated from German

signifiers”, which are successively sought attached to and filled with different forms of meaning (Laclau 2007: 36-46). Illness is not a condition that in any regards can convey its own meaning. Our bodies, for instance, do not actually communicate illness themselves, no matter how counter-intuitive this seems. What makes us feel dizzy or at unease, the strange rash or haunting insomnia that eventually takes us to the doctor’s office is not our bodies conveying alerts of possible ailments that might require treatment. It is rather a psychic system alerting itself based on perceived symptoms, whereby we might or might not choose to seek professional consultancy. For the body to be determined ill we rely on procedures of assessment and techniques and prospects of treatment, among other things. The body’s point of view cannot actually be reached, as to whether it is ill or not, but is determined via the stethoscope or thermometer, the progress of the medical treatment, our successive self-evaluation and so forth. Illness can therefore not be seen as the body mediating signals and alarms to its environment. As Luhmann states, “*no exchange of cells, no process of digestion, no nervous twitches, no intentional actualization of consciousness is communication as such*”⁵ (Luhmann 2006: 57-58). When the medical system treats its patients, their bodies and minds rather make out the environment of the system, which can irritate and disturb the “medical gaze”, for instance, when treatment fails, or the improvement is ambiguous. The medical system does not communicate with the body or mind (or vice versa) but is nonetheless completely reliant upon having a body or mind “at hand”, which can represent the patient and allow for the articulation of symptoms and diagnoses. To this environment (the body and mind), however, illness is not a problem; it does not observe itself as ill, its irritation in the medical system does not correspond with an irritation in the environment. Illness is purely the outcome of symptoms and diagnoses (Luhmann 2013a: 118). Fritz Simon describes this followingly: “*Distinguishing between sick and nonsick with respect to particular corporeal reactions and the constructions of “disease entities” hence is not determined biologically but socially. The distinction is a feature of observation (of the “map”) but not of the phenomena observed (not of the “landscape”). Moreover, the localization of causes for those observed phenomena in a biological, psychic, or social system or in one of its environments is a socially determined “punctuation” of the corresponding system/ environment interaction*” (Simon 1999: 186).

⁵ My own translation

Illness as form

We have, so far, pointed towards the “hollowness” of health as a counter-concept of illness, and briefly sketched out a medical code, found in the application of the scheme ill/ healthy. I will now go back to the initial question of how *illness* appears if we take it into account as a communicative form itself.

Leaning on Georges Canguilhem, I propose to examine the form of illness with the help of the distinction between pathology (or deviance) and normality. Disease is, as previously pointed out, equated with a positive value in the medical system, because it incessantly scans for illness rather than health and deviation rather than regularity in the assessment of a patient. This relationship (between illness and non-illness) has been described as “parasitic”; in order to be observed as ill one always has to display a certain amount of “non-illness” (Pelikan 2007: 78). The state of illness therefore always entail a certain requirement to also display features of a normal, regular state. A dead body, for instance, cannot be observed as ill: death cancels out possibilities of treatment and terminates the difference found between ill and not ill (Esposito 1996: 603). However, I think that the “parasitic” quality of this relationship can be expounded further, as an elemental tenet of illness itself. Canguilhem has outlined how, within disciplines such as biology and physiology, different forms of deviance is not only constituted by regularity, but also how this relationship remains unfixed, so that deviance can mitigate and even reappear as regularity and regularity can make a similar reversal. A well-known example is how masturbation during the 19th century emerges as a central problem of deviant sexual practice, assumed to host the causes of a range of severe physical ailments, such as loss of sight and heart diseases. A variety of “preventive” measures appears in response to this pathology, targeting, among other things, the arrangement of the adolescent body while resting in bed at night, wherein the hands at all points must be visible and possibly locked to the bed. During the 20th century, the practice of masturbation is transferred to a domain of normality, increasingly called upon by psychoanalysts and psychologists as a crucial passage of sexual development and self-knowledge (Foucault 2003b: 237-259). Canguilhem refers to these two axes as the normal and the pathological. He writes: “(...) *every conception of pathology must be based on prior knowledge of the corresponding state, but conversely, the scientific study of pathological cases becomes an*

indispensable phase in the overall search for the laws of the normal state” (Canguilhem 1991: 51).

If we apply Spencer-Browns calculus of form to Canguilhem, the observation of disease appears as the unity of the difference between a deviant pathology and normality. Illness then, does not only rely on means of pathologization, but simultaneously also on normalization. One cannot exist without the other.

Illness as form:

pathology \neg normality

The question is not so much whether illness observes on the deviant side of the distinction at some points in time and at other points observes on the normal side. The question is rather how the two sides exist simultaneously. Illness is indicated when “obesity” is made into a problem, concerning threats towards the life expectancy of the population and sequelae’s following from this condition. At the same time, it is only able to reach such a problem by invoking a pattern of regularity, such as “ideal BMI”, notions of “quality of life”, frequency of heart diseases etc. The pathology at once appears where the foundation of a “normal” life is threatened *and* makes it possible to constitute what normality consists of. Illness can thus appear only as the boundary between deviance and regularity.

This distinction can also be continued into realms beyond the “body and mind”, so that a wide number of issues and relationships can be assessed in light of deviance/ normality. In the ever more common management of “healthy lifestyles” and ardent pathologies (related to alcohol consumption, eating habits, exercise, “well-being”), a patient will typically be asked to evaluate his or her own possible pathology according to how it effects economy, family life, personal relationships, work or self-esteem. With “obesity”, symptoms and diagnoses can be continued from the body to the ability to pay bills, ability to take care of the children, frequency of sexual intercourse with partner etc. The pathological condition can then be localized and indexed within the possibility of living a normal, “healthy” life, in which the disease is embattled through a normalizing conduct of “personal relationships”, “economy”, sense of ease and so forth.

However, the distinction between pathology and normality cannot find assurance for this distinction outside of itself, it does not have an ultimate reality to which it can attach itself

outside of the boundary it marks. As Luhmann states: *“The distinction of normal and pathological does not say clearly where the boundaries are to be drawn. The fragility of this distinction, its capacity to be transferred into ever new terrains of suspicion, exactly reflects the functionally necessary ambivalence of the understanding of reality. Psychiatry itself cannot do without a reality somehow guaranteed by the world; otherwise it would have to cease its own activity. In other words, it cannot really accept that it is pursuing its own projections with the assumption of pathologies”* (Luhmann 2000: 93). There is no “normality” outside of the distinction between normality and pathology that can govern its boundary. Illness-communication is incessantly concerned with detecting pathologies, but it cannot find a solution, or even reassurance, outside of itself as to how it takes upon itself the commitment to detect and respond to ailments, deviation and suffering of all kinds.

CHAPTER 4

The semantic history of health and illness at work

In the following chapter, I pursue how the notion of health and illness has been applied to employees from the 1920's until today. The analysis takes its point of departure in 1920 mainly because this question is only occasionally and very scarcely discussed in management journals previously.

1) The embodiments of illness. 1920-1944

During the 1920's, health and illness at the workplace is incessantly discussed from the position of safety regulations and preventive measures. What safety consists of and how it is obtained, almost grows into a branch of its own in the management literature of the 1920's.

Throughout the decade, several campaigns are launched with the purpose of enhancing safety at the workplace. One such campaign, the "Safety First"-movement, emerges in both Norway and several other countries as a response to the prevalence of work-related accidents that occurs, above all, in the industrial sector. A lot of the work conducted under the varying paroles of safety revolves around minimizing risks related to open fire, engines and heavy loads or the use of tools like scissors and bolts in addition to providing the necessary equipment for each and every worker, such as helmets, gloves and spectacles. The investigation of hazards and dangers towards workers are mainly centered on the physical environment of the employee, such as the arrangement and design of the workplace, the proper use of clothing and equipment, and exposure to emission gases. In management journals, the medical expertise encourages organizations to examine, among other things, the relation between frequency of diseases and exposure to gas and dust, the need for specialized equipment or lighting, the wear on various parts of the body, due to repetitious body movements, lack of movement, lifting heavy loads etc. Different branches of work are, so to say, delegated different correlative problems between potential ailments and specific work conditions. Among foundry workers, for instance, the problem relates to the occurrence of zinc fever and combustion, while bakers display a similarly high frequency of eczema and asthmatics. Among so-called intellectual workers and office workers, on the other hand, the physical ailments are through to consist largely of myalgia and writer's cramp (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], no. 5-6: 1936). To a large extent these concerns revolves around the same problems of cause and effect that was proposed by the Italian doctor Bernardino Ramazzini,

often referred to as founding father of occupational medicine, in his seminal work on occupational health published in 1700 (Ramazzini 1940 [1700]).

The theme of safety poses, however, a pedagogical problem. Safety is a trait that must be nourished and developed within the current workforce as well as the strategized workforce of the future. This is sought regulated through “*safety conscience*”, in which the discipline of each employee becomes a key subject. The following is a set of proposed safety regulations, on the “*significance of “safety conscience” intended for the prevention of accidents*”:

“1. One must at all costs bring into clarity the number of times a candidate has lost work hours due to accidents during the last two years, and how many times he has been exposed to accidents in previous employments.

2. The candidate is notified that the organization only takes interest in careful workers, because it has recognized that those who are not careful with their own safety neither takes care of their work.

3. One must not hire anyone that seems to lack “safety conscience”.

4. All recently employed individuals must be explained the dangers of the work he undertakes.

5. The recently employed individual must be inspected within two weeks and it should within no more than six weeks be clarified whether or not he submits to the safety regulations and understands the specific dangers attached to his work. Furthermore, it must be clarified if he has the sufficient understanding of the significance of safety.

For the current workforce, the regulations are as follows:

1. Only those who have “safety conscience” and make an effort to perform their work cautiously and avoid accidents can be assumed to submit to the safety regulations, and those are the ones who will be put into use in the organization.

2. Safety measurements have been taken care of in order to prevent accidents. However, the will to work in a safe and secure manner must come from the employee himself, and he must use it and develop it in such a way that it is clear that he submits to the instructions announced by the chairmen, and that he does his outmost to prevent himself from harm.

3. If the worker seems to lack this “safety conscience” and continues to be harmed, it will be necessary to dismiss him in order protect himself from further accidents.

4. *All chairmen will be supervised in how to fulfill disciplinary action onto those employees who fail to submit to the safety regulations.*

5. *All workers must be cautious and believe in the safety measures”* (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 12, 1926: 12).

Illness is here located in the bodies of employees; they are potentially ill or damaged, exposed to dangers of both disease and accidents. The employee himself incarnates these dangers, he is a possible menace to himself and colleagues, and must be continuously guided and instructed to conduct himself in such a manner that he does not put himself or others at risk. The purely negative appearance of health and safety, as the lack of harm and misfortune, is undertaken as a tautological assessment: The health of an employee is demonstrated by the fact that he is and stays “healthy” (avoids accidents) and an “unhealthy” employee is accordingly one that fails to do so (exposed to accidents). The status of an employees’ employability is contingent upon this tautology, insofar as his health – *as safety* - is measured as economically viable or non-viable for the organization, and is directly linked to a moral character found in his efforts and will to work. As it is stated in the regulations quoted above; an employee who does not take care of his health neither takes care of his work. In other words, the health of the employee spills over into his character, because the state of his health is viewed as emblematic for his will to work. The condition of his vigor and stature mirrors not only the negative prospect of a possible loss (illness, absenteeism, accidents) or danger to the organization, but it mirrors his complete moral foundation, related to his readiness and will to work.

The facilitation of safety thus requires an assessment of the employee’s awareness and attitudes, targeted as a site of normative regulation, wherein the ideals of a safe work environment can be realized. The regulations are directed towards changing or expanding the awareness of the employee, in his everyday conduct of work. In other words, these are regulations that seek to enhance the discipline of workers, so that their bodies can converge smoothly with the environment they reside in. In this process, the dangers located in the physical environment can be projected to the individual awareness and discipline of each worker. Typical examples of this is found in illustrations, plates or folders on how to avoid accidents or bodily wear or how equipment is properly handled. As it is characteristically stated in an illustrated piece: *“On all accounts it is a matter of avoiding positions of angulation and curved backs. By a natural upright position, one will be able to rest and the*

work can be conducted more easily. Study these photos and learn from them!” (Liv og Sundhet [Life and Healthiness], no. 11, 1935: 253).

Illness as a mutual vulnerability

The employee’s obligation to take care of his body is both owed to himself *and* due to the body’s utility to the organization – and the employee and employer are unified in their common interest in the avoidance of loss and harm: *“To make the parties cooperate more efficiently in the effort to avoid accidents, is in itself the most practical and obvious path to mentally reach a common ground, in a domain where both parties are victims of loss and suffering, even though chairmen and in particular the workers are alone in exposing their bodies”* (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 3, 1934: 54). There is in other words an idea of solidarity and communion proposed here, that can reach beyond the otherwise so dividing lines found in the division of labor and class interest. The body of the worker *carries*, quite literally, the possibility of this union, as his body is at once uniquely his own *and* hosts a direct bond to an employer, who sees in him an asset that is just as invaluable to the organization as it is to the employee himself. From this angle, the distinction made between the loss of life and health of one part and the economic loss of another is somehow balanced out in a joint effort and interest, taking its point of departure in the protection of the employee’s physical wellbeing. One might speak of the worker’s “two bodies”; on the one hand, the physical and prosaic body exposed to accidents and illness, which must be protected and kept from harm⁶. On the other hand, there is a body that holds a direct link to the organization’s economic interest and contains thereby also the realization of a mutual vulnerability. The body – in the form of the health of the body - is, as such, portrayed as a site of shared concern that prevails other dividing interests and disputes. The efforts to enhance safety do not therefore merely revolve around calling upon the docility and compliance of the worker, but also seek to re-charge the employee’s relation to his employer. In relation to this, the worker’s experience and enactment of work is similarly sought re-charged as something more than just an economic relation. In a sort of alienation-thesis launched “from above”, the employee is assumed to be detached from the appraisal of work as a reward itself. As far as he only remains motivated by the incentive of an upcoming payment, he also endangers the health of himself and others. Managers on all levels are, for instance, encouraged to represent

⁶ The notion of the «two bodies» holds a reference to Kantorowicz’ (2016) analysis of the “king’s two bodies”.

and gratify the *value* of work to augment the “conscience” among ordinary employees. John Oxaal, who is among the initiators of “*Safety First*” in Norway, states that: “*the essential matter for the “Safety First”-movement is that the managers of the industry become interested in this enterprise, and that they, through their stab of functionaries, department managers and chairmen imparts the common man the significance and value of work, so it gradually is included in everyman’s consciousness*” (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer], no. 6, 1929: 62).

We can summarize the difference between safety and illness in the following figure:

concept	counter-concept
mutual vulnerability	economic burden
disciplined	dangerous
conscientious	morally suspicious
employable	unemployable

The gaze of recruitment

Recruitment makes out another position in the same period, wherein health and illness are actualized. More accurately, recruitment is in various ways proposed as a solution to the prevailing number of accidents and diseases among employees in general. Health is, as such, closely interknit with the measures provided to analyze the psychological and physical fitness and vigor of the worker, composited in a variety of techniques that can enable an examination of the entirety of his character.

Hence, in the beginning of the 1920’s, a number of programs start to appear, targeting the *suitability* of individual workers. In addition to function as a tool to ensure and enhance productivity in the organization, these programs are also regarded as an instrument to support a scanning of the physical and cognitive state of *future* employees, in order to keep in with a healthy and strong workforce. The so-called “*Taylor System*”, protracted from Frederick Taylor’s principles of scientific management and, in Germany, the “*Dauerprüfungen*”, revolves around measuring the relation between a specific task and the time it takes to solve it, so as to scrutinize the energy and skills contained in a given excerpt – a *candidate* - of “*the*

human material". The use of intelligence tests, such as the *Binet-Simon Intelligence Measure*, is another example of the efforts to map the weaknesses and strengths of a potential employee. A carefully composed system, initially developed in Germany under the heading of "*Priifung-Befund*", seeks to detect a comprehensive totality of the worker's suitability for the position. The data of such an analysis should include:

"The senses. Sight. Hearing. Limbs and muscles. Pressure. Handiwork: a) Force. b) Levelling ability. c) The balance and ease of the hand. d) Control of impulses when using a hammer. e) Double handiwork. f) Skills of handicraft

Attention and will. Span of sight. Performativity. Repetition durability. Reaction.

Intellectual skills. Cognitive readiness. Memory: a) of a succession of events, b) of random forms and figures. Mental ability to combine and put together. Observational skills.

Technical-constructive skills. Sense of perspective. Detecting patterns. Technical readiness. Ability to combine and put together technical arrangements" (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer], no. 21, 1924: 142-143).

The organization of "*vocational selection and guidance*", inherited in these programs are considered to make out a "*social-moral factor of quite significant importance*", as far as the welfare and health of workers are concerned (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer], no. 20, 1924: 115). The body of the candidate almost reads like a horoscope for the organization, looking for subtle signs and hints of fortune or disaster; it takes the complete body into account, mapping its slightest deficits and measures its general constitution as an estimate of the organization's future prospects. The whole range of bodily and cognitive abilities and functions therefore posits an absolute relevance and should be assessed accordingly, from the rapidity in the movement of fingertips to the time used to solve puzzles and intellectual tasks. By and large, the body of a candidate is, as such, directly inserted in the organizational space of production in the selection programs, seeking to find the piece that most seamlessly will fit into its machinery. These programs splits up the body and mind into a number of different functions and qualities, in analyses carried out according to detailed procedures, so that "fitness" and "health" becomes multiplied and varied; attention, reaction, muscles, memory, sight, strength, endurance and so forth. It is not just a question of if he will be able to perform, but also how his body and mind will respond to the specific conditions in the organization; what is the variety and strength of his physical and cognitive state; can his apparent fitness be thought to conceal a critical weakness; how will his health develop in the

future. Although varying with the different lines of work, the physical examination will typically cover different optical and audible tests, while the assessment of cognitive abilities revolves around language and memory skills as well as the ability to solve problems. For an office worker, for instance, the physical examination involves assessments of the steadiness and power of the hand (while, for instance, typing), in addition to a general health examination. As it is stated in one article on the subject of preventing myalgia among functionaries: *“The prevention starts already in the recruitment of functionaries”* (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], nr. 8, 1944: 62).

In other words, one finds in these programs of selection and tests, a state of the body as well as the mind of the potential employee being directly linked to and inspected on the grounds of the machinery of labor. The organization knows exactly what it needs, in terms of its needs of human workforce and the challenge is to find the ways and means that allows it to localize the exact piece of “human material” suited to perform the specific function that must be covered. The “recruitment-gaze” is geared towards perfection, looking for its most flawless candidate to enroll in the arrangements of machines, as if the body itself is in direct continuation of this machinery. It aims at regulating the “capacity” of (present and) future employees; *looking* for the employee who can fulfill his or her tasks most efficiently, in terms of time and physical energy spent on each tasks. The purpose is to *“place each employee in a position in which the least amount of energy and time is spent at the specific tasks that should be solved, at the same time as he finds himself at ease and well-adjusted to the work. It makes no sense to place a highly intelligent man to perform monotonous tasks, where he can not make use of his skills and knowledge. We should not only consider his abilities and endowment, but also his field of interest and temperamental attitude. A man should have the necessary qualifications to fulfill his job, no more and no less. Too much can be just as unsound as too poor in this regard. If a profession contains a high level of specific demands, it requires a specific bodily and spiritual constitution”* (Waler 1935: 26).

The future promise of recruitment

“Health” is in these efforts temporalized as the future provision of a strong workforce, pinned out according to the scientific achievements of the emerging psycho-technical methods, through which organizations will be *“saving dollars and energy by personnel research”* (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer] no. 20, 1924: 115). The economy of the organization

coincides with the health of each single member of its workforce: An employee with a weak constitution holds, for instance, the danger of insufferable expenses to the organization. Organizational psychology is born at this point, by which economic assessments and the employee as a source of knowledge and scrutiny is molded together anew; employees are typologized according to their cognitive and physical readiness, their behavior is studiously examined and their *potential* becomes a center point of attention. The advent of “*personnel research*” therefore marks the point in which economic analyses becomes entwined with an individualizing analysis of the employee, which is an enterprise set in motion *not* by inspecting the employee’s “inner life”, but through the use of intelligence tests, physical examinations and trials. Symptomatically, the Psychotechnical Institute is established in Oslo by the early 1930’s, to assist an array of public and private employers in developing assessment tools directed towards both present employees and applicants. Throughout the preceding decade numerous voices have been decrying the lack of a proper and scientifically reliable method, through which the health and “fitness” of the employee can be completely assessed in a uniform and systematic manner, in advance of hiring. The psycho-technical methods are formulated as an answer hereof, by addressing the complete physical and cognitive assumptions of a potential employee⁷; are they fit to work in an office; do they have the endurance to keep up at the factory floor; will they be able to avoid overexertion etc. (Eng 1935: 15-17).⁸ The selection programs and tests allow for a systematic sorting of “*the human material*”, into which bodies and minds are suitable and which are not: “*Through the application of these psychotechnical tests, we have, for the most part, succeeded in avoiding the appointment of inferior employees, while we also to a great extent have accomplished the recruitment of several people on the “right side” of mediocracy, that is the good and excellent achievers*” (Waalder 1935: 25).⁹

Like we previously saw with the question of safety, there is also a “bond” proposed here, between employers and employees, albeit of a different kind. Across the various selection programs and tests, one can see that the “health” of the organization and the health of the employee is unified in the “evolutionary” efforts to trim and strengthen the workforce, through physical and cognitive examinations of candidates. The “health” of the organization

⁷ These tests also go under the name of “vocational tests” in the English literature

⁸ The test first appears in Norway during the 1920’s as an assessment tool in relation to apprentices and students seeking hire or admission to vocational schools. The psychotechnical tests derive from Germany and were first introduced by the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg. See Münsterberg (1916): *Psychologie und Wirtschaftsleben*. J. A. Barth. Leipzig

⁹ Initially the tests cover an evaluation of the physical condition of the potential employee, but towards the late 1930’s a number of tests are applied to assess attitudes, determine cooperation skills and maturity.

can be maintained and improved by the effective prevention of unhealthy candidates entering into its workforce, and this health can likewise also be reinstated when unhealthy employees are excluded. The fitness and the cognitive and physical stature of the worker carries the aptitude and prognosis of the organization as a whole in the future; how it will be able to keep up with the demands posed by markets; how the productivity can be fortified and how loss can be prevented. The assessment of the employee thus doubles itself as an assessment of the whole organization, insofar as the question of the health of the workforce is precast with a future viability of the organization's market value. The health of the individual worker is therefore at once both positively and negatively connoted, as the embodiment of the organization's destiny. In other words, the question of recruitment now establishes a perceived symmetry between the organization's "fate" and the physical and cognitive state of the employee.

We can summarize the differences installed by the "recruitment-gaze" in the following figure:

concept  **counter-concept**

perfected (human) material	raw (human) material
competitive advancement	competitive obstacle
future surplus	present loss
vigor	weakness

The body-environment axis: nutrition, sleep, exercise, light, aeration

From the late 1930's, the body of the worker is actualized anew. The workers eating habits, the length and quality of his or her sleep and the frequency and physical nature of leisure activities are invoked as central topics. The employee's body is compared to a machine, wherein diet, rest and exercise supplies the energy, through which it can regenerate and strengthen. To a large extent, these issues are addressed by medical doctors, who often propose a form of indenture, wherein the worker is encouraged to take responsibility for his or her own health on his time off work, while the organization facilitates "healthy" environments that enables the worker to rest and rejuvenate. The vitalist concepts of energy and rejuvenation are, perhaps not surprisingly, guided by strong notions of productivity; a healthy and rested employee is obviously considered more efficient than one that is tired and weak. At the same time, however, the health and illness of the employee now starts to appear as a problem that resides as much outside of the workplace, as it does on the inside of it.

The advice and instructions forwarded by these doctors are often strikingly specific, and I will provide a few examples. The questions of how much, how often and what to eat are specified in detailed accounts, and does not only concern the food eaten during the work day, but the total food consumption of the worker. For example, a functionary or intellectual worker is recommended to settle for an intake of about 2400 calories each day, while workers holding up more physically demanding jobs like carpentry and painting are suggested an additional intake of about 600-1000 calories (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], no. 2: 1944). The employee is encouraged to study tables displaying the energy contained in each foodstuff and to consume the recommended amounts of meat, fish, milk and vegetables to strengthen the body's immune system. The steady and correct intake of vitamins, minerals, fat and carbohydrates is not only a matter of staying hale and hearty, but also functions to obtain the ideal level of energy, which the employee needs to fulfill his or her work. While a varied and wide-ranging diet is considered a key element in the maintenance and improvement of the employee's general health, the necessity of regular eating habits is also underlined as a means of avoiding tiredness and exhaustion during work. The importance of a solid breakfast and a steady, but not too frequent consumption of meals throughout the day is addressed to all employees, disregarding the specific character of their work.

Like with the diet, the amount of rest is considered to have an indispensable impact on both the ability to perform at work and the general condition of the employee. The theme of rest and restitution is not only a “extra-social” problem but is similarly actualized *within* the workplace; organizations should facilitate regular shifts between activity and avoid repetitious tasks, to keep a steady state. The doctor Einar Øxnevad states it in the following way: *“If the worker keeps it going too long without the necessary breaks, or if the work is heavier than he can handle, it will lead to a lasting tiredness. This kind of overexertion is a very damaging and troublesome condition. When tiredness occurs, the ability to work is reduced, the work becomes less accurate and accidents are more frequent. The worker becomes touchy, unsatisfied and nervous, with bodily pains and headache, so called fatigue pains, and gets no rest”* (Øxnevad 1944: 22). However, it is also underlined that employee also needs to take responsibility to avoid becoming all too consumed by the work itself. The misuse of one’s own capacity to perform at work is a threat to the health: *“[But] also without a situation in which the worker has been injured or fallen ill, his work performance and joy of working might be reduced by way of bringing himself to exhaustion, overspending his own work force, so that he becomes overstrained, always tired”* (Øxnevad 1944: 9).

All employees are recommended at least 7-8 hours of sleep between each day at work, as a tired and exhausted employee is perceived as a danger to both to himself and to his colleagues. It is important that the employee spends his days off, during the weekend and holidays, correctly and according to the work, he or she upholds, for instance, for people in working in offices, often in stationary positions, it is recommended to get out and get a feel of the fresh air up in the mountains. This is related to how, unlike other occupational ailments, the illness of the “intellectual worker” is assumed to often remain hidden from him- or herself. He must, with the aid of a doctor, discover it under layers of “disguised” or misleading symptoms. This relates specifically to how the office worker, functionary or clerk is considered disposed for overexertion: *“Intellectual workers will more often become overexerted than manual workers. This is because physical weariness most often will appear very strongly for the worker, while intellectual workers might not even notice it at first sight, since it appears in disguise, in the form of insomnia, anxiety or irritability. After experiencing physical weariness, the body will recover after a short period of rest. In the case of intellectual overexertion, it will last for a much longer time. Overexertion among office workers might have a variety of causes. It might be due to a lack of sense of one’s own exhaustion and the need for more rest, in the form of sleep, more outdoors activities and*

recreation” (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], no. 4: 1936: 32). Apart from the potentially hidden character of his or her disorders, the “intellectual worker”, with his or her specific ailments and needs for recreation, does not differ notably from other groups of workers in these inquiries. On the one hand it concerns the management of the body and on the other hand the physical elements surrounding the enactment of work in the office, such as poor ventilation and lighting as well as the physical position and bodily movements of the worker, all emphasized as sources of possible ailments.

The so-called “*personal hygiene*” of each employee, concerning his eating habits, rest and exercise is invoked as inevitable for the mapping, prevention and control of illness. As such, the ambition of safeguarding the health of employees does not any longer only consist in enhancing “safety-conscience”, diminishing potential hazards of the workplace and making the employee disciplining his conduct at *work*, but also of making the employee responsible for his health when he is at home and absent from the social and moral constraints provided by the workplace. We see that these questions of diet, rest and exercise interlinks the productivity of the organization and the body of the employee, by a) invoking the employee’s body as a vital domain of self-regulation and b) by confronting the boundary between work and spare time. Both efforts revolve around establishing a form of continuity of disciplined self-conduct, that can remain intact throughout the workday and spare time, weekends and holidays of the employee, so that his “healthy” practices at work can be continued into his home and private life.

The actions and habits of employees, with an emphasis on their specific conducts outside of the workplace, is thus perceived as a challenge for the organization. In the pamphlet “*Health control of adults by corporate doctors*”, published as by a team of doctors as an initiative for general examinations of employees, the problem of “personal hygiene” is formulated as such: “[But] *if the working environment is ever so excellent, the personal hygiene of the workers will never be superfluous. A great part of what the occupational hygiene is building up can be torn down by the unhealthy lifestyle of the individual. This is why the modern occupational hygiene also must include conditions outside the regular working hours of workers, such as their housing, diet, outdoor activities etc.*” (Natvig et al. 1944: 19). The employees’ own behavior and customs *outside* of the workplace is here framed as both the basic precondition for enabling a “healthy environment” but also the greatest menace against it. Einar Øxnevad formulates a similar notion, on a more positive note: “*Everything that can be ascribed to the concept of hygiene, that is entirety of conditions at the workplace that can help prevent*

accidents, and which improves the well-being of the body, enables us to improve the performance and satisfaction of work. This is why the employee needs to keep in mind the demands of personal hygiene he must make to himself, with the right diet, sufficient rest and sleep, a reasonable use of leisure time, vacation and personal sanitation” (Øxnevad 1944: 12).

The health and illness of employees appears at first sight to be re-situated, so to say, from the specific workplace to the general self-conduct of the employee. However, this movement is far from unambiguous. There are simultaneous efforts which seek to reinforce a medical surveillance and control of workers *within* the organizations and these two movements, the generalized responsibility of the individual employee and the enforcement of regular medical control at the workplace, seems rather to support than to contradict each other. In 1944, the medical doctor Eiler H. Schiøtz is among those who call out for a regular examination of the employees` health. While infants, children and pregnant women at this point undergo regular medical examinations and control, both at private and public initiative, only a minority of workers undergo such examination by authorized medical expertise. According to Schiøtz, a lot of workers come from “less good” environments, with a poor diet and living conditions, which leads to increased risks of contamination, accidents, occupational diseases or a generally weakened health condition. He therefore suggests that all organizations impose a regular control of workers` physical condition. These suggestions also find their way into “*Guidance for Corporate Doctors*”, in an edited version, published by *The Norwegian Council of Medical Doctors* the same year. Schiøtz points towards three overall problems, which should be at the center of the medical control and supervision of employees:

The first problem relates to the challenge of gaining a strong stock of workers and create an organization consisting of healthy and occupationally able employees, which in his opinion relies on the means of medical judgement. This is, among other things, connected to measures on how to avoid contagion of diseases such as tuberculosis between the staff and furthermore, to make sure that the employee is suited for the set of tasks encompassed in the (vacant) position. To assure the quality of such a process, both a medical examination and tests of the cognitive and technical abilities are needed. In other words, this is a variant of the “recruitment-gaze” described previously. The second problem relates to the surveillance of the health of the current stock of workers. A medical doctor should regularly examine all employees, at least once a year. Such a surveillance serves the twofold purpose of preventing diseases to evolve and to assure medical examination of employees who, for some reason or

another, otherwise would hesitate to see an ordinary doctor. During these regular examinations, it is important that the doctor acquire accurate and well-informed knowledge on the occupational and medical history of the employee, if the current position involves hazardous tasks of any kind as well as obtaining the employees' genealogy, not least the record of illnesses in the immediate family. However, Schiøtz makes it clear that a corporate doctor should primarily trace conditions of illness among the staff and not conduct treatments as an ordinary doctor otherwise would do. In cases where a corporate doctor suspects a condition of illness, the employee must therefore be referred to a private doctor. The third problem relates to the inspection of the conditions at the workplace. By carrying out regular inspections, the corporate doctor will be able to investigate and possibly improve the sanitary conditions as well as the specific health risks that might be at stake in the organization. The sanitary inspection is comprised of measuring conditions like the air, temperature, moisture, illumination and cleanliness, while the investigation of risk will consider conditions like dust, poisonous material or radiation (Schiøtz 1944: 130-134).

Medicine, or rather, the doctor's competent presence, offers itself in this specific case as a totalizing knowledge that can afford organizations both an improved "human material", enhanced work conditions *and* a strategic sorting mechanism of potential employees. The striking thing in Schiøtz' text is not only how strongly medical knowledge and productivity is molded together, but how it, by doing so, also invokes ordinary medical treatment as a hetero-reference, placed beyond the principal assignments of a corporate doctor. A corporate doctor should not treat illnesses, but rather *inspect* employees, and supervise and facilitate their work environment. In other words, the employee must not be observed as a *patient* as such but is distinguished as a composite part of the *workforce*. Both in the case of the medical examinations (of the body and its environment) *and* the vital imperative of rest, diet and exercise, the questions revolve around scanning the body and enhancing bodily conducts; how can the body strengthen and re-adjust; how can its environment improve rather than endanger the body; how can ill, weak or contagious bodies be detected, safeguarded and replaced.

This body-environment axis is articulated as a vital social experiment, that also aims at making work bring health in itself. The physical design of the workplace is set in direct connection with the employees' sense of comfort, welfare and safety, which again can provide a sense of "health-enhancement" in the enactment of work. As Håkon Natvig, a central figure within the occupational "hygiene"-movement, phrases it: "[But] *the*

occupational hygiene has a more constructive task than that of just preventing damage, namely that of making work itself healthy. In a factory where there are big, bright areas with a pure, good aeration, where there is an appealing dining hall (...) and where there are sufficient pauses in between work, there will also be a brighter mood among employees, the performance will improve and the work will go more steady than in places where the opposite occurs. In all regards, work will be less exhausting and healthier. In the widest sense, one might say that the purpose of occupational hygiene is to provide the proper balance between performance on the one side and consumption of human workforce and health on the other side. This is a task that both the employee and the employer should have an equal interest to realize.” (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], no. 3, 1936: 11). At the same time, one can also see that unwillingness to work is framed as thoroughly unsound and unnormal, and a source of serious ailments: *“Let us begin by asserting that all normal people contains an inherent urge and desire to work. If this urge cannot be fulfilled, the organs of the body will feel at unease, not at least the nervous system. Work is the life line. It is healthy to work. The work has a great value in itself and each and every one of us depends upon it.”* (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 1, 1944: 31).

On the one hand, we see a medical knowledge which seeks to constitute itself as a technology of bodily conducts, by at once trying to regulate and examine the employees' bodies (Foucault 2008: 27-30). The knowledge and competence provided by the doctor is presented as an opportunity to simultaneously enhance both the organization and the body of the employee, through regular examinations of the workplace and the employees. It installs a simple difference between medically competent supervision and health:

(medical) supervision \neg health

This whole discussion, on how medical knowledge can provide for the health of workers, flattens out by the middle of the 1950's, at the same time as an increasing number of both public and private employers signs up for the Corporate Health Service, established in the previous decade.

On the other hand, the worker and his or her body is not only a productive element that needs to be protected against accidents or diseases, neither is illness and health no longer perceived as a problem strictly contained within the workplace. The employee is now also instructed to regulate and take care of his or her own health, according to notions of a “healthy lifestyle” and attitudes, which at this point largely revolves around rest, nutrition and recreation. These

instructions are not usually presented in the form of strict requirements and prohibitions of behavior, but rather seeks to enter into an alliance with the worker, through the supposedly common interest of enhancement, of both the conditions of the individual worker and the work environment. The alliance offers to improve the possibilities of the worker to improve his or her own health, while the performance and effectivity at the workplace also might advance. The health of the employee becomes intertwined with the productivity of the workplace, through a series of moral tactics that relies on making the employee responsible and knowledgeable of his or her own body. The prospect of illness is differentiated according to a variety of bodily conducts, that are endowed with the self-discipline of the employee. It's guiding difference, between discipline and health, re-enters into itself, because the specific discipline of the worker must reflect itself in a general and continuous conduct of the body, beyond the physical workplace:

discipline \neg health

discipline \neg health

The theme of discipline and health is not new as such (it is, as we have seen, already introduced in the themes of safety and recruitment), but the novelty lies primarily in the temporal dimension through which this discipline is thematized. The discipline now means to take charge of a rejuvenating conduct of one's own body throughout all hours of the day. In the factual dimension this is thematized according to the use of spare time and vacation, which should happen *strategically*, by strengthening the body's "vital capacities" and general constitution. In other words, the self-discipline of the body, its strengthening and rest, must mirror itself in the needs of the organization. Lastly, we see also the social dimension which is thematized in the identities forwarded under captions like "lifestyle". The social meaning lies markedly in the efforts to install a rationality in the employee, which can generalize his bodily self-conducts in such a way that it is kept up and maintained across the domains of private life and home. With the theme of safety, illness is perceived as the range of ailments that could be detected as the outcome of the employee's interaction with the work environment and with the gaze of recruitment, illness is conceived as the outcome of a failure to sort the "human material" in advance of hiring. With the actualization of the body's vitality, there is a new difference installed in the preexisting themes of discipline, character and moral, through which illness can appear as the lack of a disciplined self-conduct held by the individual.

2) The “human problem” of health and illness. 1944-1980

During the first two decades of the postwar era, a new problem is coming into appearance: the “humanness” of the worker is discovered and framed as a crucial precondition for the productivity and organization of work. It is assumed that “*the human factor*” of work up until this point has been a severely neglected question, with vague, but catastrophic consequences. This question tries to invoke itself as what Kosselleck describes as a *collective singular*: Everything that concerns the workplace must be assessed according to the fact that we are all, first and foremost, human beings and not, for instance, machines (Kosselleck 2004: 50). No task should be solved and no strategy pinned out without this in mind.

From “human material” to “the human factor”

Among the most remarkable things about this communication is the way in which it presents itself as a radical break with the past. Before, we took only the formal and technical aspects of work into account, it says, but now we know that we have overlooked its most crucial and valuable asset, the human being. Nothing can be separated from this fact, accordingly. The process of production must be viewed as a *human* process and the employee must above all be regarded as a human being, who, for instance, also has other concerns and joys in life than just those of his work. The future of all places where people come to work are entirely dependent upon a transformation of the whole of its organization, drawn from this discovery, because the “*very basic outlines for economic activity is about to change, as far as the human being and its management is concerned. They have become the key factors of productivity and problems of such implications and scope no one in previous generations would have been able to imagine, and it takes a firm decisiveness to take this change into account*” (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], nr. 1, 1955: 21).

In addition to present itself as an abrupt end point from the previous tradition of neglects and misconceptions, the human semantics therefore also points out a future that must be revised according to the “human factors” of work. In line with this, it is a communication that seeks to filter out a new imperative of productivity, wherein the “human factor” is invoked to critically re-assemble all questions concerning measures to enhance the productivity and

strengthen the organization. This is directly woven into the how the assessments of and interventions into employees' health should and can be made.

An article in the journal "Protection and Welfare" discusses this question at length, proposing that "*the prevention of accidents by and large is a matter of mentality*". The author, Ragnar Blomvik, goes on to assert that "[...] *there is a limit to how far we can reach with perfected technical equipment and organization. If one seeks to move forward – and this is possible – we must start to involve ourselves in the human beings that are standing by the machines and the relations between all humans beings at work. Their attitudes to the problems we face and to the goals that are staked out, are completely decisive. In terms of the technical utilization of equipment and the organization of work, many people will have made the discovery that it will often be appropriate to start with the human beings we are dealing with. Is it not often the case that the results slip away despite the fact that the equipment is state of the art? Because human beings, the human factor, was not taken into account*" (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 3, 1954: 50). In this excerpt, we find the solution to a wide range of problems encountered in the organization in the insight that the organization always is faced with human beings. Even though the article initially appeals to "*prevention of accidents*", it proceeds to address a variety of issues, such as economic viability and technological arrangements, which are all sought re-evaluated in light of the "humanness" of the workforce. The article seeks to adduce an alternation of a contemporaneous management narrative, which is that of the more or less perfect organizational machinery driven by technological advancements opposed to the casualties caused by human errors and weaknesses. This problem is somehow turned upside-down, by pinpointing the lack of attention towards the "human factor" as an error and weakness itself, because it assumes an organization that - with the proper methods and technical means - can arrange for a flawless machinery, if it only succeeds in elucidating the "weak links" of its workforce. The author indicates that the assumption of such a machinery itself makes out a considerable limitation and endangerment to the organization, as it fails to take into consideration the cause and effect derived from the variety and inconsistencies found in the "mentality" of its different employees. The author expounds what the newfound "human factor" of employees consists of, in the following manner: "*There are all those disturbing elements of personal matters coming from the environment wherein one resides and the conditions found there. It is about the conditions in the home, the relations between its members, the attitude of those members in addition to one's own attitude. Furthermore, there is the environment found outside the*

home, in the wider circle of acquaintances and friends. Everywhere there are impulses, which at any minute can sparkle or deteriorate the activities and thereby the effort provided by each and every one of us, whether we are owners, managers or employees. To decisively reach into and change this domain of conflicting and harmonious impulses is a matter of will, effort and belief in the possibility of such a change. Last, but not least is it a question of cooperation” (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare] no. 3, 1954: 54).

Blomvik does not state how to realize such changes or what it would mean to do so. Instead, he points to the relation *between* employees, their individual attitudes, the specific course of their everyday lives and the conflicting impulses contained in all human beings as questions the organization no longer can ignore, if it wants to “move ahead”, enhance its productivity and safeguard the health of its staff. It is a perspective that points towards a future set apart from the “technocratic” reign of organizations in the past, which completely ignored how illness must be prevented and assessed in accordance with the specific mentality of the individual employee. As a matter of fact, the interlinking of productivity and the “human factor” is articulated as a new common ground, in which employees and employers can join forces to enhance the organization:

“One thing is the fact that we need to make both parties of the workplace recognize that it is themselves, and only themselves, who are in control over the means to realize the fulfilment of their own wishes and desires and, accordingly, only themselves who can bring about the conditions to increase the surplus provided for the common good. Moreover, another and more advanced cooperation than what so far has been the case must be presupposed, targeting the realization of these desires. This again, demands – quite right – another mental attitude, a changed attitude with both parties. This also depends upon the fact that our interest for each other’s wellbeing must go beyond the workplace and into the homes and leisure time and the nearest community” (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 3, 1951: 56).

There is a puzzling statement conveyed here. First, it is a statement that brings together the desires of the employee and the employer as two sides of the same coin. They are united in their strive to realize their wishes and desires, unknowingly what these exactly are comprised of, but which nonetheless can be applied to induce an enhancement of the organization, in the form of an economic achievement, as a “surplus”. Hence, employers and employees both have desires, and they can realize these desires in a mutual commitment to a “common”

good. Their wishes and desires are at once unified *in* the organization *and* equated with the desires *of* the organization, so that, in this sense, the “human factor” evens out differences between managers and the managed in a supposed communal relationship (Weber 1964: 136). Second, we see the contours of elements being ascribed to the relevance of the employee’s health, that are far from the “docile bodies” called upon in the programs of selection and safety measurements of the 1920’s, as described previously. These elements seek bring together an extra-social domain into the domain of employment, in the form of leisure and family life, on the one hand and the social life of the workplace, on the other hand. The employee carries with him a continuum of experiences that cannot be divided alongside his work scheme; hence, this continuum must be assessed and governed in all its range and diversity. To take these questions into consideration means that the employee must be *cared* for, just as the employee himself must be expected to engage caringly in his own work environment. The environment of home becomes relevant to the environment of work, as do collegial relations, possible disputes as well as the employee’s contentment and upheaval. In continuation of the new equivalences of care and interaction (family - personal life - work), there seems to be a further affinity underlying these considerations, between the family and the organization. The organization should host its members, as would a family do, one should care for one another as one does in a family. A workplace should therefore not be equated with a variety of simple material and economic relations but is dependent on the mutual understanding and care between its different members.

The novel problem of “human factors”, “inter-personal” relations and the social life of work is, at this point, primarily posed by employers and not, for instance, by labor unions. In 1945, a book appears on the topic by the Norwegian director Rolf Waaler, entitled “*The Organization and the Human Being*”, pointing out that the organizing of work must seek to furnish a “*harmonious and satisfied personnel*”. Waaler is concerned with what he calls the “human problem” in light of the recent automation of previously manual tasks throughout different domains in work life. While the focus on technological advancement and streamlining of production has led to a decrease in accidents and wear on the human body, it might also have led to a neglect of the human beings at work, according to the proponents of a work environment more attuned to the “*human problem of work*”, with whom the author shares his concern. He writes that “*business has become more complicated and unforeseeable. We are losing the interaction, because the organizations are taking charge of tasks that previously were undertaken by the individual. This development, making the human*

problems more severe, has been accompanied by another development contributing to the solution of these problems in a rational manner. Our knowledge in the field of psychology has expanded, and a lot of work has been conducted in order to utilize this knowledge in the practical realm of work life. For some time now, managers has sought to solve their professional problems in an objective and factual manner. At the present time, we have seen how this will to objectively and factually solve issues is about to proliferate to questions concerning the personnel. One has realized that the human being plays a significant part on all matters, even though this might not seem the case at first sight. If people are managed reasonably and are offered a chance to develop and make use of their skills, their work will also be thoroughly conducted and their efficiency will be vast. The very conditions of work must be organized in such a way that people thrive, so that a harmonious and satisfied personnel can appear. This will only be possible when we take into account the recent inventions within psychology. This increased knowledge, alongside the enlarged complexity of work is what necessitates a more comprehensive assessment of the problems faced by the personnel management” (Waalder 1945: 27).

Waalder lists up what he calls six critical variables for the organization inclined to assess the “human problem”:

- 1. The need for a workforce and the characteristics of this need*
- 2. The human material, the size of individual varieties and the possibilities contained in this*
- 3. The development of applied psychology and its use in work life*
- 4. The principles of training and the adaptation of human beings in the workplace*
- 5. The best methods to utilize the human energy under various conditions*
- 6. Analyses and control of the forces that affect the harmonious cooperation*

Just like Blomvik, Waager actualizes the organization as a form of community based on a shared “humanness”. In this framing, the manager becomes someone who can nourish a sense of development and belonging among employees; employees must be seen and heard and experience a sense of companionship, whereby they will thrive and become motivated to work more efficiently. Unlike Blomvik, however, Waalder does not really refer to health or illness directly in his book, but introduces a number of themes derived from psychology that

becomes connected to the realm of health promotion, such as *thriving, community and satisfaction*.

Pathological management

In the midst of the “human problem”, a new source of pathological intrusion starts to appear, namely the boss. The concern raised here revolves around how managers hold a direct and decisive impact on the employees’ sense of satisfaction and thereby their ability to perform, but rarely are held accountable for this. Managers can ignite fear, nervousness and anxiety and even become a source of severe physical ailments among employees, in which they - the managers - might turn out to be the actual cause of the spiraling numbers of absenteeism and decline in the organization.

This theme coincides with a noticeable rupture in the postwar era, described above, wherein the ideal of the rational, streamlined organization is being questioned, not only within the social sciences, but also by the organizations themselves. Some critics posit concerns about the diffusion of the “assembly-line” organization of Taylorism, which, they claim, revolves around strict technical principles, at the cost of adjustments and consideration for those actually employed to fulfill the job. Among them is Per L. Brantsæter, who in a review of recent studies of employees’ health and management, holds forth that Taylor and his descendants wrongly assumed “*that it first and foremost were factors of physical movement, tiredness and the physical conditions of work that made an impact on the effort of employees*” (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 12, 1956: 207). The author considers this misassumption to have consequences for the *well-being* among employees and asks at which cost the authoritarian and technical modes of management has been paid for in the currency of “*human health and happiness (yes, life)?*” (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 12, 1956: 210). Brantsæter goes on to answer by alluding a passage from a textbook article entitled “*Work, its nature, condition and motivation*”¹⁰: “*we can see that the neurotic manager, or factory manager, operational manager or senior manager can spread disease amongst his co-workers as if he carried typhus or smallpox. He will not spread the same disease every time, as with typhus or smallpox. One employee might become neurotic, another gets an ulcer, a third dies because of a cardio-vascular suffering, while fourth might*

¹⁰ Referring to Brown in “Arbets sociologi” (1955) by G. Boalt and G. Westerlund.

simply get depressed – all depending on the personality of the employee” (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 12, 1956: 210).

The critical assessment of Taylor had started to find its way, albeit in tiny increments, into the field of management in the 1930s, not least after the Hawthorne experiments had been conducted in the preceding decade. The most remarkable part of Brantsæters small text is not the critique of Taylor, however, but the way it directly juxtaposes health and management by directly linking ailments to poor or failed management. Brantsæters proposes a direct relation between the lack of proper management or simply the lack of sufficient social skills among managers, on the one hand, and a direct (negative) impact on the health of employees, on the other. The manager is marked as a direct or indirect source of ailments at the same level as pollution or hazardous work tasks, potentially thought to cause severe harm by poisoning the work environment or cause unnecessary worry among employees. However, the connection between (lack of good) health and (mis)management is not a completely novel conception when the article is published in 1956. The theme is first introduced a decade earlier:

“A manager, who has acquired a certain amount of fear among his subordinates, is completely off course and can cause severe harm both to himself and the organization. A common mistake among many well-meaning manager’s is to enact their impatience in such a way that it comes across as very hectic and disturbing on subordinates, resulting in feelings of being very restricted due to the psychic pressure. A superior must know his audience, especially when it comes to people with a certain anxiety, who often are cautious and easily react with tension” (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], no. 10, 1944: 75).

“Overtime and additional work should also by all means be dissuaded, as it is very unprofitable in the long run – and one has found examples of simple extortion of the workforce. If one were dealing with a skilled and vigilant functionary who “commits” in great pains to fulfill his duties, the only proper solution would be to hire an assistant. The significance of avoiding the psychic pressure and the tension caused by this has been noted previously. It will often be important for a manager to pay attention to how these symptoms start to appear at the outset of a disease” (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], no. 8, 1944: 63-64).

These managers are often associated with a lack of the subtle *“human skills”*. Yet, this is not a communication that strictly pinpoints the pathological traits of “bad” management, but seeks simultaneously also to assume a new understanding of what management entails, when

the newfound condition of management as managing *human beings* is brought into the centerfield of attention. For instance, all managers are encouraged to take notice of how they influence their subordinates and how they can improve the work environment by the means of a psychological awareness. There is, accordingly, a variety of psychological profiles and typologies on the offer, targeting such heightened awareness on the difference in personality, mindset and fragility across the workforce (which I will describe later). The decisive point in this case is, however, how a new form of pathology is articulated with the “human semantics”, which seeks to install a number of pathological risks - and symptoms hereof - in the relationship between the management and the employee.

“If the management does not care to hear anything but its own voice, the number of people who takes initiative and who are energetic and skilled will ultimately mitigate. And the workforce remaining in the organization will consist of people who have become so polished that their energy and will to work has vanished” (Liv og Helse [Life and Health], no. 1, 1955: 21)

“ [why] are some organizations in such a good shape? The answer is that the executive managers are tolerant and caring people, and open and heartfelt. This does not in any way need to endanger the efficiency of the organization. It rather implies a manager who can be honest about mistaken that have been made and openly discuss these mistakes with others. It gives the subordinates a sense of openness and cordiality. The ideal thing would be a manager who is open, warm and tolerant and who does not become a complete “stickler” when mistakes are made” (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 4, 1962: 93).

These statements are often accompanied by dire warnings against a work environment becoming absorbed by joylessness, suspiciousness, negativity and conflict, to such a degree that it can bring about a demise of the entire organization. In other words, management discovers itself as a potential threat towards the organization in an entirely new fashion, as it can “poison” the work environment of the organization, through its own appearance, with its behavior, “attitudes” and lack of understanding of the individual employee. A repertoire of almost paternalistic qualities is invoked to contrast these caveats of the “pathological” manager poorly equipped with social skills, with notions like *confidence, trust, understanding* and *openness* being framed as solutions to the “human problem”.

“An organization for well-being”

This whole semantic register becomes intensified by the proponents of a new era of “*human engineering*”, who seek to develop methods and tools for the modern organization who can no longer ignore the questions of how employees experience their own work; how they thrive and how a sense of belonging and community can be established and strengthened. Among the most prolific peers of this enterprise in Norway is Sverre Lysgaard, who in the 1950’s and 1960’s conducts pioneering research on the relation between well-being and work at several Scandinavian workplaces. Lysgaard, who is a sociologist, also carries out courses, holds lectures and designs educational material aimed at both regular employees and managers on the subject of well-being at work. He holds forth that “*in order to thrive as a human being, we have to feel that what we do at work is related to our own objective. What we do must give us a sense of meaning in our lives and we have to be able to unfold our possibilities. We must have a sense of being in growth, or face challenges and feel that we might learn something new*” (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 4, 1961: 60). Lysgaard argues that the traditional concern for health, as a matter of avoiding accidents and a hazardous work environment, is no longer a pressing issue for organizations: “*At least in the modern industry we have passed the phase when employees worked under threatening conditions or languished. What we can do now is to go further and enhance the opportunities of the employees, more broadly speaking*” (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 4, 1961: 61). This also implies that that organizations must start to investigate what is referred to as the “social life” of work: “*Why are some people at ease and enjoy themselves? Why are some upset? Is it related to their situation at work? When we have the answer to this, we are better equipped to act upon the matter*” (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 4, 1961: 61). The text draws up a boundary between illnesses that are deemed relevant for the modern organization and those who are not. In the latter case, there are the “old-fashioned” ailments strictly derived from the material conditions of work, the relevance of which have been mostly surpassed by the modern and technologically advanced standards of work life. Illness and health cannot really be dealt with as a matter of physical and material conditions any longer. Instead, organizations should gear themselves towards the emotional challenges and difficulties faced by managers and employees in their continuous strive to realize themselves.

The call for a renewed perspective on health seems to resonate strongly across the management sphere, and the question of how management should provide for a work

environment where the employee can thrive finds a strong foothold throughout the 1950's and the following decade, where the theme keeps resurfacing with increasing frequency in articles, books and as course material. Among the most persistent concerns are how organizations can productively enhance a sense of well-being among employees, which is a question that sprawls across the management literature by the early 1960's. In 1962 there is even a Scandinavian conference organized on the subject of "*well-being at work*", with a number of participants from different areas of research, management, employer federations and unions. It is evident from the lectures, debates and talks held at the conference that a wide range of proposals are offered to deal with it. According to Erikh Orth, an assistant director at the Danish Federation of Employers, there has at this point been "*a significant development within the sphere of management in order to solve the problem of well-being during the last years*" (Arbeidsledelse og Tenkikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 5, 1962: 86). Not everyone agrees on this. In article entitled "*An organization for well-being*", the psychologist Peter G. Lindeberg argues that organizations up to this point completely has neglected the well-being of their employees due to their "material obsession". He writes that "*[w]hen it comes to the organization of work in the garage or in the office, the measures of material nature are conspicuously overvalued. The individual psychological factors, which to the greatest extent are decisive for the efficiency of production and wellbeing, are on the other hand less emphasized. When the individual corporation seeks to do something for the employees, it usually revolves around measures of material nature, often targeting physiological conditions, such as hygiene, the use of colors, cafeteria etc. If the corporation tries to go beyond the restrains of regular working hours, the measures are still oriented towards material aspects, such as vacation homes, sports and so forth. These are excellent measures, but they impose on areas which perhaps should be restrained to the privacy of each individual*" (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer], no. 17, 1963: 265). On the one hand, privacy here indicates a material privacy, provided by economic inducements and support, from which the organization is encouraged to consider its withdrawal. Regarding the "position of the individual", on the other hand, Lindeberg goes on to note that it is "*not sufficient that the employee has a clearly defined task and understands the context of his work. He also needs a position that gives him the necessary sense of appreciation in order to thrive and feel at ease*" (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer], no. 17, 1963: 267).

Another psychologist of note, Sverre Kile, who becomes one of the première advocates of a new program of health, lays claim to a similar view and asks, “*what does it gain a human being to conquer the world, when his soul is injured?*” To which he goes on to answer that “*we should more than ever safeguard the health of the mind and combine this work with our knowledge of how a solid economical foundation is achieved*” (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 4, 1962: 93).

The excerpt is taken from the report of a speech held at the annual congress for Prevention in Work Life in 1962. In this speech, Kile assumes the notion of *well-being* as a crucial precondition for a health of the mind. At the same time, he contends the commonplace notion of well-being, which, he claims, too often is misconceived as a pure demand *from* the individual *towards* its surroundings, associated with comfort and idleness. Such inclinations should not be tolerated. Instead, well-being must be put into active and vital use to furnish a strong community in the organization, provided by the united efforts of each single member:

“Well-being is far from only passive gratification, in terms of an employer or a society providing for our needs. Wellbeing is active self-realization. Believe me! Everything else is laziness, dependence, a mentality of demands. The person who acquires a sense of wellbeing only on the occasion of abundancy, finds himself in a house of disarray. The individual needs to actively enter into the community and contribute - and not just passively receive. Well-being and the sense of ease is too often mistaken for simple gratification, but to work is a blessing and a duty. This involves an organization where we both come to provide and receive, but we cannot receive anything beyond what we have deserved. The speaker went on to underline that the inclination to realize the self, implicates the unfolding of something that is within the self. Here we will find that it is not just the nature, but also the environment of the individual which is influential. He points out that the healthiest form of well-being is that of performing and the most dangerous one is to expect something for nothing” (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 4, 1962: 92-93).

Well-being is here strictly juxtaposed to a passive position, from wherein demands of comfort and gratification can be posed. Contrary to this passivity is an active realization of the self, realized in the best interest of the community, e.g. the organization. While the problems of the “human factor” and “well-being” appears to attract a heterogeneity of expectations towards both its content and possible solution, it is evident that the proponents of a more “human” organization find the material and bodily conditions of work less relevant for health

than the “psychological factors”, such as the employees’ self-assessment and individual experience of the workplace. Even though few voices express it in the same dramatic vein as Kile, there is a notable regularity of expressions folding out in this period, on the need for a transformation from the “material” to the “social” and “relational”. The report “*Human Relations in Norwegian Corporations*”, published in 1958, also underlines the non-material character of well-being: “*We should not assume that measures of welfare will have any decisive influence on the well-being or efficiency in the corporations of a modern industrial society. Measures of welfare should not by any circumstance become some sort of substitute for measures which are more important to the problem of human relations. It is first and foremost the day-to-day relationships between colleagues, superiors and subordinates that is decisive for the well-being and efficiency among employees*” (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 3, 1958: 55).

Björn Sjövall, psychologist: “*The question of the meaning of work has mostly been framed as an economic and social problem, and rarely does anyone ask what the meaning of work inclines in our personal lives. We spend a great deal of our daily lives at work and even in our spare time we might be said to be actively engaged in such a way that it resembles work. What signifies work is the fact that we aim for a result, and that we want these results to satisfy certain demands in terms of quality and quantity (...) Previously, we would experience work as meaningful because it gave us an economic incentive and a position in our community. The factor of personal development brings something new into this. Work becomes a part of our entire personality* (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 9, 1953: 178-179).

Øvind Skard, dr. philos.: “*There is a lot of talk on “human relations” in the organizations at the present moment. A lot of people misunderstand this concept and equates it with welfare. These two concepts have nothing in common. “Human relations” concerns the relations between people. It is clear that this, then, does not concern a specific domain of organizations, but is a significant feature in all those instances when two or more people comes together in an organization*” (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 8, 1955: 147).

To various extents, the material conditions of work is placed in a rather dim past, and the future of organizations rely on how the persistent questions of well-being, satisfaction and thriving is dealt with, in which the “psychological level” is elevated to function as a matrix

for the mapping of health and illness among employees. An array of different tools for investigating the *individual experience* of the workplace is on the offer. However, we can also find efforts to pin out this problem in a somewhat different stake. Among the most striking in this regard is thesis of “*hand in a glove*”. While a number of new ailments find their name and place in the organizations during the 1960’s, such as anxiety and burn-out, one finds few examples of programs that are articulated to primarily handle the work environment as such. The “hand in a glove”-thesis is one exception and is formulated as a complete inversion of the question of individual “*suitability*”, which revolves around finding the “proper match” between person and position. The proponents of “*hand in a glove*” suppose instead that the organization itself makes out the epicenter of the tension (between the person and its environment) and likewise have to be resolved at the level of its structure rather than at the level of its individual employees. These new ailments are thought to stem from the organizational constraints and uniformity that leaves out any possibility for employees to find their “own place” at work. The consequences of such rigid forms of organization might be economically viable initially but comes with huge costs for the health and well-being of the employees and will eventually also harm the organization, as it will be drained for energy and resources, it is proposed.

The organization should pave way for individual difference and make room for a diverse and unimpeded work life, where the environment should adapt to each person and not the other way around. In other words, this is a program framed in an anti-bureaucratic fashion, seeking to design organizations in which all forms of traits and individual character can fit like a “hand in a glove”: “*To put it in a nutshell: We have to assemble our society in such a way that it fits all of us, or almost every single citizen – and help each and every one to find their own place. This should not happen by way of totalitarian directives, but as a service provided to every human being. They are not the same, their needs vary and their ability to perform diverge*” (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 3, 1968: 46). These proposals are in continuation of a larger debate on “fitting the job to the worker”, that emerges in the late 1950’s and also unfolds in the realm of management journals (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer], no. 2, 1961: 23). Nevertheless, there is only a scarce and random continuation of the “hand in a glove”- thesis, which eventually disappears completely around 1970 and I will therefore not describe it any further here.

Mismanaged emotions

As far as I have been able to determine, among the first efforts to specifically re-invoke the «problem of health» in a realm of psychologized causes and effects takes place in 1931. In an article published in an anthology carrying the expressive title “*The dissatisfied worker*”, the two authors Fischer and Hanna distinguish between what they call “mental hygiene” and physical health, underlining the latter as a somewhat outmoded and limited concept of health. Mental hygiene is not counter-posed to physical health; on the contrary, it is conceived as a precondition of physical vigor, to such an extent that different forms of physical ailments can be prevented and handled through therapeutic work with the employees. A key term throughout the article – and the rest of the book – is the “*maladjusted emotions*” of the worker. Maladjusted emotions make out a hazardous risk for both the individual employee and the entire organization, and a number of examples of this is given by the authors. Accidents, for instance, are more often related to the emotions of the worker than to his physical surroundings or lack of measures of safety. Illness and fatigue may very well be “compensatory” acts, by an employee not feeling a proper acknowledgement for his work. Hostile attitudes towards the management is found among employees struggling with a sense inferiority or displacement. “*Emotional maladjustment*” thus serves as a universal scheme of cause and effect, wherein physical ailments appear through psychological “compensation” or as an effect of commotion. “Mismanaged” emotions can furthermore become poisonous for the whole organization, with employees less inclined to contribute and take care of its needs, or with individuals becoming so caught up in their own emotional upheaval that they neglect their own or other’s safety and well-being.

Against this background, the authors recommend all organizations (of a certain size) to establish a “mental health department”: “*The fundamental function or raison d’etre of the mental hygiene department is the safeguarding through personal and individual contact of the mental health of the potentially unstable worker and the adjustment of the emotionally maladjusted worker*” (Fischer and Hanna 1931: 244). On the one side, “emotions” are attributed with a form of assessable quality that can both reach out to and “de-code” the employee in a way that would otherwise be unattainable for the organization. On the other side, the specificity of individual emotions must be rendered visible for each employee in order for such an inducement to take a proper foothold. Employees should be exhorted to locate the possible source of ailments within themselves, to traverse the inner range of emotions as an explanatory index of why they perform and behave as they do, and to intersect

their own sense of well-being with that of the organization. Accordingly, the employee's inner life can become a spring of great productivity, if only "*the potentialities wrapped up in his emotions*" are allowed to be awakened and put into use (Fischer and Hanna 1931: 254).

In addition to the prevalence of emotions, there is also an evident concern for the relation between the social and genealogical "biography" of the employee and his experience of difficulties at the workplace. A mental health department "*should contain a complete record of the employee's previous jobs, the length of time they were held, the reasons assigned for leaving; a record of each employee's intelligence rating, a personality inventory, and his educational attainments; the number of brothers and sisters in his family and their respective ages; the ages of the parents and their social and economic status; the educational attainments of the parents and their vocations; and finally the employee's marital status (...)* In addition to these records the consulting psychologist will of course keep a careful record of each individual who comes or who is sent to him for help, the nature of his difficulty, the degree of improvement obtained, recommendations to other departments, etc." (Fischer and Hanna 1931: 243- 244). Mental health here implies a far-reaching program, as far as the organizational assessment of the employee's health goes, wherein "health" now serves to interlink everything from family background and career path to personality traits and cognitive capacity.

F. Herzberg is, internationally, perhaps the one that most clearly tries to re-formulate a "psychological" program of health for the workplace, with affinities to the coupling between illness/ health and the management of emotions, brought forward by Fischer and Hanna. His "*motivation-hygiene theory*", published in 1966, distinguishes between what he refers to as the hygienic and motivational factors of work. The hygienic factors consist of what prevents dissatisfaction with the job for the individual employee, such as effect on personal life, job security, salary and status. According to Herzberg, these factors do not, however, contribute positively to the satisfaction and contentment of work. Set against this backdrop, the motivational factors revolve around how employees' sense of satisfaction at work affects their performance and wellbeing, and includes such concepts as achievement, recognition, responsibility and advancement. Herzberg states that "*a "hygienic" environment prevents discontent with a job, but such an environment cannot lead the individual beyond a minimal adjustment consisting of the absence of dissatisfaction. A positive "happiness" seems to require some attainment for psychological growth. It is clear why the hygiene factors fail to provide for positive satisfactions; they do not possess the characteristics necessary for giving*

an individual a sense of growth. To feel that one has grown depends on achievement of tasks that have meaning to the individual, and since the hygiene factors do not relate to the task, they are powerless to give such meaning to the individual. Growth is dependent on some achievements, but achievement requires a task. The motivations are task factors and thus are necessary for growth; they provide the psychological stimulation by which the individual can be activated toward his self-realization needs” (Herzberg 2007 [1966]: 375). On this basis, the article distinguishes between motivation seekers and hygiene seekers, in which the former is attributed the quality of finding meaning with the work itself, detached from its specific set of tasks, while the latter group is seen as more oriented towards extra-occupational sources of gratification, such as the already mentioned factors of salary and status. The most striking thing about Herzbergs text is, however, the way in which this employee-typology relates itself to the domain of health. The notion of both job attitudes and (mental) health, he claims, has for too long been considered the opposite of illness, and the question of health has thereby been constrained to only consider how individual’s respond to potentially negative impacts, such as distressing personal relations, anxiety or stressful surroundings. Instead, Herzberg suggests, the motivating factors of “self-actualization and personal growth” must be positively taken into account, in terms of what makes people both healthy and content at work: “The motivation-hygiene concept holds that mental health depends on the individual’s history or past experience. The history of the healthy individual shows success in growth achievements. In contrast, mental illness depends on a different pattern of past experience. The unhealthy individual has concerned himself with surrounding conditions. His search for satisfaction has focused on the limitations imposed by objective reality and by other individuals, including society and culture. In the usual job situation these limitations consist of company policy, supervision, interpersonal relations and the like. In broader life adjustments the surrounding conditions include cultural taboos, social demands for material production and limited native ability. The hygiene seeker devotes his energies to concern with the surrounding limitations, to “defenses” in the Freudian sense. He seeks satisfaction, or mental health, in a policy of “defense”. No personal growth occurs and his search for health is fruitless, for it leads to ever more intricate maneuvers of defense or hygiene seeking” (Herzberg 2007 [1966]: 381).

The psychological categories at stake here, the intertwinement of personal growth, self-assessment and mental health, involves a peculiar pathologization of the employee, which

also finds a strong foothold in the whole debate on the “human problem” in Norway. I will address this in the next few pages.

Situational training and social sensitivity

With the articulation of the “human problem”, the workplace is framed as the venue in which modern individuals acquire a sense of meaning in their lives. The employee comes there to realize his possibilities, alongside others who also do so, in a community of shared *values* between colleagues and between employees and the management. In this way, employees are presupposed as subjects guided by the will to realize their opportunities and the need for a sense of coherency and attachment. The workplace is, as such, destined towards offering a realization of meaning and objectives. When this fails, however, the health of its employees is at stake. Pathologies flourish, it is proposed, where the sense of meaning slips away or remains unrealized.

To handle this condition, which does not report itself, so to speak, organizations start to acquire knowledge on the contentment and satisfaction – and the loss of it, among its employees. Questionnaires are sent out and group sessions and training programs are organized, where the employee and manager alike are encouraged to study the distinct social “dynamics” of the workplace and understand the social individuality of their colleagues. The questions revolve around the “environment” of the workplace and of becoming aware of others, how they might experience the workplace differently, due to different backgrounds and skills etc. Furthermore, both the employee and the manager are encouraged to discover their own individuality as a part of a bigger community. How does my appearance and behavior effect my surroundings, what kind of signals do I send out, how do I speak to my colleagues? In continuation of this, the employee is encouraged to assess his own emotions within this community. When do I feel content? How do I feel about the atmosphere at work?

These new efforts to evaluate and interpret why and how the employee experience contentment, thriving and well-being is partly tapped from the realm of “human relations”, brought out to organizations through a register of psychological themes (Donzelot 1979: 171). These themes, ranging from relational sensitivity to interpretation of utterance and situation is at this point, symptomatically, about to be fleshed out as a crucial managerial competence. As it is stated in one article on the subject of situational training for managers: *“We may not often be aware of how we appear to our superiors or subordinates or our*

friends, maybe not even to our immediate family. The situational training gives us the opportunity to learn more about the effect of our behavior” (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 1, 1960: 6). Similar type of courses, targeting the enhancement of social skills, are also being directed towards employees. By the middle of the 1950’s, employees are, for instance, offered courses and small textbooks on the subjects of collegial sensitivity and corporation, in which they, among other things, can learn how to “*evaluate their own attitudes as a member of a group*” (Arbeidslederen [The Daily Manager], no. 3, 1958: 55). The courses offered on sensitivity and situational training are often based on cases, following a line enquiry on how interactions and situations unfold. A typical scenario is depicted: If your colleague behaves unexpectedly or displays an ill temper, there might be reasons for this, of which you are not familiar. It might derive from a specific situation at work or it might be related to private matters. Now, how would you deal with this? In other words, these are exercises and tools that conceives of the workplace as a community and which gears the employee towards reflections on *how* he is a part of a community at the workplace. The introduction to one of Sverre Lysgaards courses on thriving and well-being at work states that “*we spend one third of our lives at work. This place gives us our status, our standard of living. It also gives us the decisive input for well-being or the lack of it. When the modern directors look at us, they assess our productivity and the conditions for well-being at work and with work. The employee and director are thereby in full agreement on the need to shed light on the workplace and the problem of wellbeing*” (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 10, 1953: 75). The workplace, as it is portrayed here, provides the ontological reassurance of status, income and meaning and it provides a neutralization of the differences between employees and directors in their united efforts to realize the workplace’ sociality. Well-being involves a *commitment* to the realization of sociality. Symptomatically, among the topics at the course are the relationships between employees, the relationship between employees and managers, responsibility and involvement, as well as the participant’s attitude towards work and colleagues and the will to work and cooperate. The course, directed at both employees and middle-managers, encourages the participants to “*investigate their own workplace in order to find out what makes us thrive and feel well or the opposite, what is the matter with ourselves and the environment and what can we do to create a better situation*” (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 10, 1953: 75).

In the themes of the safety and recruitment, the health condition of the employee was observed directly, as the manifest state of his body. The physical and cognitive capacities of the employee are measured; “health” is detected when illnesses and injuries are directly absent or when the body appears energetic and fit. When the “human factor” becomes so central it also involves that neither illness nor health any longer only can be pinned out according to a set of distinct and unambiguous symptoms. The diagnose now also becomes a self-diagnose and the organizations put a lot of effort into folding out techniques of assessment for this purpose. When *meaning* attains such a central position, the *loss* of it likewise comes to constitute a risk, for both the employee and the organization, as a source of ailments, such as the lack of thriving and motivation and or a sense of unease.

This means that illness and health, no longer holds a literal *embodiment* of viability; it is no longer only codified according to a host of qualities directly attached to the body of the employee. For instance, the risk of decline in the organization was previously equated with the decline of bodily conduct and vigor of employees. Now, on the other hand, the risk of decline is related, among other things, to the decline of *motivation* among employees. Another example is how “work environment” in this period acquires a new meaning, designating a social milieu more than the physical design of the workplace or how one starts to speak of the “climate” as a set of social relations at work. “The employees are not motivated because of the anomalies imposed by the work environment”, the organization seems to say about itself. At the same time, the organization also says to its employee, “to thrive and embattle these anomalies, you must find a meaning and this meaning can only be provided by yourself”. Illness then, is therefore no longer strictly observable in numbers of absenteeism or reported injuries and ailments and cannot be conveyed only as the cause and effect found in the interaction between the employees’ body and his environment. When a number of different concepts such as meaning, well-being, contentment, community and productivity assembles into a new semantics of health, there are also new pathologies appearing in its midst, such as passivity, unthriving, negativity and conflict-ridden attitudes. The various concepts and counter-concepts that circulates in the human semantics is abridged in the following figure:

concept 7 counter-concept

human	technocratic
mental health	the body
meaning	economic motivation
involvement	detachment
motivation	indifference
cares for community	self-sufficient
sensitivity	lack of social skills
the employee is seen and heard	authoritarian rule
individual differences	privacy

Illness and health is not as much a problematization of the body and environment as it is a problematization of the self and its environment, but emotions are not sought *disciplined* as was the case with bodily conducts. Instead, they must be spoken and balanced out in accordance with the self, as we will see in the following pages.

3) **Illness as affect. 1980-present**

During the 1980's, a number of new interventionist policies and programs are brought about, which aim to render the emotions visible to the employee who finds him- or herself in a state of disarray and upheaval. They are symptomatic for a number of new themes clustered around the emotions of the employee, wherein health and illness is increasingly invoked as a self-relationship that must be thoroughly scrutinized to find its solution. The techniques centered on the self's interaction with the environment and its own "balance", range from breathing- and relaxation-exercises to different therapeutic forms of speech acts. To be more precise, a whole vocabulary is now developed to describe a state of emotional maladjustment within the employee, that problematizes his relation to himself and his work.

Detecting the self

The semantics developing in this period is in continuity with a number of themes brought forward with the human semantics, not at least the interweaving of meaning and work. The most notable rupture in these new programs and tools from the 1980's onwards is the outdifferentiation of an "affective self", distinguished by his or her emotional (over)attachment to the surrounding environment. The following part will not be presented in the same detailed account as the previous periods that have been described. Instead, I will shortly describe the semantic field wherein stress attains its status as an "epidemic" before moving ahead to the problem of stress itself.

In the 1980's and the following decade, the "personal interview" is among the methods in use, that attracts a lot discussion, as at once a therapeutic intervention and source of knowledge of the employee:

"Studies of the actual work environment does not tell us anything about each individual's experience of his situation and his surroundings. Stress, anxiety and burn-out is not a physical entity that is measurable; in order to understand it we have to go and see the employee. In practice, this is done through large-scale work environment surveys, where the key tool is the personal interview. During such interviews you will often experience that people who claim to be in good health actually display precursory symptoms of illness. Many who proclaim to be satisfied with their work do actually have a relationship to their job that might turn out to be unhealthful. Others will claim to be very pleased with a high-pitched

work environment, through demands on their performance and pro-longed workdays, despite the fact that they don't have any time for the necessary recreation. Others again, will say that they are pleased simply because they think this is what they are expected to say [...] Through the interviews we will gain insight into the experience of stress and uneasiness among the employees, both physically and psychologically, which gives us the possibility to detect symptoms and predecessors to illness. Additionally, we will ask questions in order to map how each individual experiences the work situation, the environment and overall organization. These extended surveys cannot be conducted without a high degree of confidence between the interviewer and the employees. It is crucial that each person can speak freely and in complete discretion, which itself has a therapeutic value. It can be both difficult and redemptive to speak of your own experience with burn-out and stress, and such a conversation posits certain demands on the person conducting it. Some will, for instance, bring up experiences that intersect the spheres of private life and work, or reveal personality traits that they consider a "weakness" (Ledelse [Management] no. 10, 1985: 40).

The importance of trust and confidentiality between the interviewer and the employee is underlined repeatedly. Discussions are made of whether, for instance, someone of "senior rank" can conduct interviews with their own staff or if someone from other departments or external expertise always should be used instead. Under all circumstances, it is decisive that the employee feels free to expound experiences of difficulty, pressure and commotion, and the interview should facilitate an atmosphere of congeniality and lenience.

There are two points to be made here. First, one can see how the personal and "inner" life of the employee, throughout its vast emotional range - his or her doubts, disappointments, enjoyment, sense of ease or discouragement, the experience of marital difficulties or collegial intrigues - are now becoming crucial points of reference for mapping and preventing illness as well as improving the work environment and enhancing the performance of the employee. Symptomatically, large scale surveys on absenteeism appearing from the 1980's onwards frequently targets the mapping of "*inner motivation*" and sense of "*coherency*" and "*meaning*" among employees, in order to detect causal patterns between illness and discontentment in the workplace (see for instance, Andersen/ SINTEF 2000: 101-118).

Secondly, to be able to identify and respond to problems such as anxiety and emotional strains, one must gain access to the inner vaults of sentiments in the subject. It is, as the authors of the abovementioned interview-technique suggest, a form of intervention that must

seek to dig out and unveil what is hidden within the employee, that can reveal the sources of her well-being, discontentment and pleasure, which she might not herself even be familiar with and conscious of. The employee might *think* she has a sound and healthful relationship to work, but she very well might not. She might *think* she has her balance in order and that she thrives in the hurried pace at her work, but she might as well be seduced and blinded by ideals of how an employee should perform, or she might be burdened and inhibited by her *idea of* belonging to a formal organization, which expect her to speak and act according to a certain code of conduct.

This points towards a general problem in the various therapeutic tools; employees might be subdued by their expectation of how to behave and speak within the boundaries of a “traditional” organization, in which the relation – between organization and employee - is regulated according to pre-defined roles for the employee or an asymmetry between superior/subordinate. This position and outlook is itself even framed as harmful and unsound, because it blocks for the possibility of an authentic self-relationship at work. The potential illness of the employee does not only reside in the slumbers of her mind as a self-relationship, but also in her own conception of a fixed relationship to the organization, that restrains her from saying what she really feels. Her “formal” identification of herself as an employee vis-à-vis the organization makes her unable to speak her own true will. In such an atmosphere, pathologies breed and dissatisfaction thrive. Another atmosphere and relationship is called for then, that can “open up” the employee, both to the organization and to herself. Therefore, the organization must seek to engage the employee in enactments of disclosure that breach the traditional “stiffness” characterizing a formal employee-employer relationship. This is also framed as a “motivation”-issue:

“An employee who does not show the “willpower” to perform extra or to go out and finish a job with determination, does not necessarily lack the necessary personal skills in order to succeed. Maybe it’s just as much about the what kind of environment and what experiences we have been able to create when we meet this colleague or, alternatively, in our role as managers. Is there trust here? Will I be seen and recognized as the one who perform extra, if I choose a more crooked path towards the goal, if I invest the extra effort it takes to succeed? Self-control and endurance is not only personal traits that exist in a vacuum, even though we tend to think that way. Most of us know that it is easier to climb a mountain when we are accompanied by others, whom we care for, even though you still have to take every step yourself. Meeting people is somehow moments where you carry a part of that other person’s

life in your hands. How aware are we of this, in our private life and work life? How do you manage and make use of these moments as a good colleague or as a manager? How do we help each other to build trust and how do we give others good reasons to trust one another? Heightened awareness of this means that you as a good colleague or a good manager can make a considerable difference” (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 4, 2014: 55).

The *relation* between the organization and the employee is, as such, highlighted as a pivotal site of managerial intervention, for the well-being of the employee to flourish, to prevent and curtail illness or improve the work environment. It is a relationship that must *not* be assessed – from the point of view of the employee - according to its character of employment and both the specific therapeutic tools and the general interaction at the workplace must therefore invoke an air of complementarity and friendliness; the enactment of emotional disclosure is surrounded by secrecy, care and confidentiality. The various therapeutic efforts must therefore not bear any resemblance to the play of question and answers found in an *examination* (Foucault 1995: 184-185). The aim is not to, by any regards, *measure* or *assess* the employee as such, but should be centered on how to facilitate the authenticity of her self-relationship in such way that a true and unconstrained speech can be articulated. Her own search for, and expression of, true emotions constitute the efficient means to sustain her health and well-being. Furthermore, the organization seeks to mirror its own well-being (and lack of it) in the emotional state of the individual employee. The emotional life of the employee is conversely coded as a site of organizational learning and improvement, in which the employee’s unhindered and authentic speech makes it possible to map the *actual* work environment of the organization. In other words, the employee’s articulation of her true emotions accounts for a more realistic and accurate description of the organization itself than any of its other features, such as its physical surroundings, amount of sickness leave or health policies.

An incessant concern for the “self-worry” of the employee is articulated throughout the different intervention-techniques and therapeutic tools, as a source of unbearable difficulties, in the form of negative thoughts, emotional “over-investment” and imbalance. The pathology marked here, between the employee and his or her work, is sought located in the (in)ability to distinguish emotions from thoughts. Phrased differently, the relationship between the employee and his or her work is coded as an affective self-problematization, requiring the individual install a distanced and rational gaze on itself. As it is pointed out by Holmqvist and

Maravelias, "(...) *the healthy employee is self-aware; i.e., he or she possesses self-knowledge about the impulses, faculties and shortcomings that are associated with his or her specific personality and lifestyle*" (Holmqvist and Maravelias 2011: 133). We find this expressed in a variety of different ways:

"The point is to avoid becoming a victim of your own negative thoughts. If you find that your thoughts are filled with negative content and make you feel ill, try turning your attention to what's good at the moment and become more aware of what's right for you. From thinking that you cannot manage something, move your attention to what it actually takes, what resources you have, who you can contact, etc. This way you may experience better internal control and greater influence on your thoughts and actions, while strengthening both your self-esteem and self-image. Here is a basic question for all those who think their boss and colleagues are asking too much of them: Are you sure that they are actually expecting this much or is it just something you imagine?"(Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 6, 2008: 20)

"Our emotions influence our ability to think and what we think. Strong, negative emotions like anger, despair, anxiety and self-load are more challenging to deal with than more toned-down emotions like irritation, sadness, worry and disappointments of oneself. The strong emotions will surely trigger inexpedient thoughts and reactions that will increase the level of stress. Many will easily end up being trapped in thought patterns that turn out to be futile" (Arbeidsmiljø [Working Environment], no. 5, 2002: 32).

Stress emerges in this period as a form of "queen pathology" in which this self-relationship seems to find a very condensed expression. I will therefore continue the discussion of this self-relationship by displacing the problem that has been guiding the current analysis, from a historization of illness and health to a historization of the *stressful subject*. How is it possible to find traces of this subjectivity if one goes beyond the advent of its articulation?

CHAPTER 5

Stressful subjects

“The important matter is that each self in its own grade, in its own measure and degree, should be as fully rounded up, as well-proportioned as possible. And this consideration brings us back to our neurasthenic patients. Is it not plain that what ails them is a loss of balance and proportion in their mental lives?” (Drummond 1906: 12)

“How and on which tasks do I spend my time? What kind of balance do I have between the different arenas of my life? Do I like what I do or would I rather be doing something else?” (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 2, 2006: 32).

Between these two quotes a hundred years have passed. Both quotes point towards a self and its self-observation, which seems to be overloaded by complexity, unable to find a proper form of outlet. Both quotes actualize the lack of balance as a symptom and point of intervention. There is, however, not only continuity but also rupture between these two utterances. In the first, for instance, the problem is observed from the medical system and is centered on its exclusive audience, the patient. The second quote is observed from organizations and is directed towards employees in general. In this chapter I will look closer at both the affinity and difference between the patient of the first and the employee of the second.

Stress is not only actualized as a self-relationship. During the 1970's and onwards, *stress* also acquires the hallmark of a societal diagnose. It is observed as a *malady of society*, in which the low-spirited emblems of modern living can be fitted out and find a proper symptomology; hurriedness, the dissolution of social ties and self-consumption of work, loss of ancient virtues such as steadiness and the integral coordinates of religion, the increasing self-indulgency and fragility of the younger generations. Stress, coded as at once an individual and societal disease, becomes a prism through which modern society is critically assessed; the solitude of the modern individual, its uprooted existence and alienation from society is adduced to the inspection of what is found to be an inherent illness in modernity.

Stress is seen as a gloomy spark of life in a civilization draining itself for energy, a backlash for the prosperity and health that medical advancements has offered: *“What makes people sick? It is the thesis of a growing number of medical scientists – and of this explanatory book – that the basic cause of much of the twentieth-century disease is a shadow which has slowly*

darkened our lives, like the smog that has darkened our cities. This shadow is stress.” (McQuade and Aikman 1993 [1974]: 4). The “shadowiness” of stress is underlined repeatedly in the mass-medialized images produced in the 1970’s and 1980’s. This notion of dimness resembles somehow the pathological problem of stress outlined within the discipline of physiology in the prior decades. Unlike a body only responding to concrete attacks from, for instance, bacteria or sudden exposure to extreme heat, stress is *additionally* outlined according to its “shadowy” function: a state that haunts, in equal measures, *perceptions* of the future as well as the present, manifesting itself in a “sense” of danger – real or illusionary. When presented as a societal diagnose in the mass media, the “shadow” put on trial is, however, the very condition of modern society. Newspapers, popular magazines and self-help books report on the arrival of a malady residing in the heart of modern existence; stress is paving its way to the headlines, accompanied by baffled statements, diagnoses and advice on preventive measures from medical professionals, psychologists and statisticians (Jackson 2013). One might say that modernity itself has again found its very own expression in a semantics of pathology. In 1983, the cover of *Time Magazine* depicts a crying, anguished man breaking free from blocks of concrete tied around him, under the headline “*Stress! Finding a cure for Modern Anxiety*”¹¹. Critical voices, on the other hand, assert that “*stress has become fashionable, most people with regard for themselves and their work are now all of a sudden “stressed out”*” (Bjørk and Sidselrud 1985: 37).

A large number of stress policies and management exercises at the present moment seek to enhance the self-relationship of the employee by different means. The employee is encouraged to surveil her own reaction patterns, to question her own impulses and retract from the immediacy of her emotions. This requires a distancing gaze towards the self, that can detect the intrusion of affect that is assumed to distort and tweak the experience of reality: “*Stress management is about finding the inner readiness within each individual*” (Arbeidsmiljø [Working Environment], no. 6, 2002: 15). The observation of stress as at once a “modern epidemic” and a problematic self-relationship strikingly re-evokes the reception of a pathology, which during the 1880’s proliferated throughout sanatoriums and medical journals, actualizing, as we will see, clutters of existential themes linked to a newfound subject, both under the spell of and anguished by *work*. My hypothesis is that this figure is first actualized with the medical diagnose *neurasthenia*, emerging towards the end of the 19th

¹¹ <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19830606,00.html>

century. More accurately, the neurasthenic condition pathologizes work as a self-relationship, as opposed to a condition strictly posed by external constraints.

In-between sickness and health: the neurasthenic condition

During the early 1880's this diagnosis emerged, via the US, in Europe and the Scandinavian countries¹². The term *neurasthenia* derives from Greek, and literally translates into “*weakness of the nerves*” (Pietikainen 2007: 46). It rapidly attracted the attention of psychiatric and medical expertise, to such a degree that already by the late 1880's, over the course of less than a decade, it became among the most widespread diagnoses in Scandinavia, almost as if a long awaited, but unknown relative now finally arrived (Lillestøl and Bondevik 2013). At the time of its invention, the problem of neurasthenia gives rise to a number of considerations, on the relation between work on the one side and illness on the other.

As soon as the diagnose paves its way into the medical journals, it becomes a source of controversy, as to what the primary causes are, and to whether or not it actually does exist at all. The Austrian professor L. Hirt is among those who finds the diagnosis' prevalence somewhat problematic because it “*presumes nothing. Its incorrectness is difficult to prove, and has thereby acquainted many friends during a short time*” (Hirt 1889: 312). Doubts are made, in other words, of its ontological status. Other voices of the contemporaneous medical expertise raise similar questions about its suspicious “popularization”, relating it to the present day “*forced struggle for existence and indulgency, in which all eggs are put into one basket in order to obtain the most in the shortest amount of time*” (Dedichen 1886: 253). On the one hand, the neurasthenic is cast as an example of a weakness prevailing throughout society, as a pathology produced by society's “lowered expectations” towards its youth and their incessant hurriedness. On the other hand, critics also cast doubt of whether the neurasthenic really is sick or a captive of a “popular discourse”, trapped in the enthrallments of a fashionable disease (Stäheli 2012). The diagnosis' increasing frequency among patients at sanatoriums and in medical journals paves the way for the motives of the neurasthenic to come under suspicion. Is the neurasthenic merely performing? Does he just want to *display* the features of pathology without actually having been possessed by them? Some voice

¹² Intellectual overstrain are seen as key explanations, but often in combination with other activities, such as too much exercise, hard manual labor, exposure to perverted literature, sexual frivolity, adolescent masturbation, a poor diet or infections (Vogt 1905a: 16, Hirt 1889: 314, Babes 1893: 153, Vetlesen 1907: 346-347). Furthermore, exhaustion and fatigue are considered the primary characteristics of the illness, but the cluster of symptoms deriving from neurasthenia varies and also includes insomnia, dyspepsia, headache, irritability, anxiety and sadness (Bynum 2003: 1753).

concerns of having unleashed a dangerous excuse for the self-indulgency among the younger generations and find its wide appeal troubling, because it might distort the distinction between the state of illness and health. The combination of the diagnosis' supposed indistinctness and vast expansion is, by these voices, conceived of as an epistemological threat towards the "arch-division" between pathology and normality through which medicine has established its authority and knowledge. Those who most loudly formulate their hostility, equate the prevailing numbers of neurasthenics directly with the present zeitgeist: "*The concept of neurasthenia seems to have found a great audience. There is supposedly something elegant about being neurasthenic and this elegance is in fashion*" (Dejarine and Gaukler 1913: 548).

However, the state «in-between» sickness and health is, for the most part, seen as an accurate and helpful explanation of the neurasthenic and his condition. It is a diagnose perceived to designate a transition, in which the subject *is about to* make itself ill by the enactment of sheer thought and fascination with, most commonly, work and intellectual endeavors. Against this backdrop, neurasthenia (as a medical diagnosis), is attributed with a groundbreaking insight, "*providing a clearer understanding of the transitory states between the healthy and sick condition. These states have previously been considered irrelevant or partly still belonging to the planes of common tension, but they can indicate the beginning of more severe and damaging states. In order to afford a good treatment it is of the outmost importance that these states are discovered early on*" (Vetlesen 1886: 190-191). Unlike, for instance, the contemporaneous diagnose of hysteria, the neurasthenic condition refers to a fixation, wherein the individual has become inclined to a state of thought, which has not yet taken a proper form *as illness* and can therefore not be observed according to any unambiguous symptoms. The neurasthenic is, as such, assumed to be both sick and not sick, embodying an odd state of normality and pathology simultaneously. This leads to the idea that "*we are all more or less neurasthenic, for neurasthenia seems to range from occasional outbursts of uncontrolled temper or fits of gloom – "moodiness", in fact, to obsession by some one false idea, ending perhaps in insanity*" (Drummond 1907: 1813). Everyone carries, accordingly, traces of this pathology within them, to some extent or other. Even though the term "epidemic" never is explicitly linked to the phenomenon, as far as I have been able to see, it is under all circumstances an undercurrent of indirect affinities proposed in many of these assessments, folding out in the medical journals of the era.

The deviance is therefore partly marked in the culture of modern society, rather than exclusively in the individual as such, with its incessant demands of work and a way of living that holds a pace threatening to consume each single of its members. Phrased differently, there is, so to speak, a double diagnosis offering itself with the articulation of neurasthenia, as at once an individual condition and a condition of modernity, thought to impose itself on the populations of Western societies, as a “*disease of the present*” (Anonymous in Norsk Magazin for Lægevidenskaben [Norwegian Magazine of Medical Science] 1886: 223). Modern society is considered suspect: it requires an incessant work of thoughts, it seeks to enthrall through promises of wealth and short-lived happiness, it appeals to instincts of devotion, but produces merely selfishness and self-regard. Above all, modern life, and in particular its *working life*, narrows the center of attention among individuals, in a way that is compared to living in a small room with the blinds down. The neurasthenics have been “*crippled by modern culture*” (Sadolin 1906: 418). This critique is partly fashioned as a redemptive call for the tranquility and simpler outlook on life found prior to the arrival of the modern work life and urbanization; virtues no longer esteemed, thoroughly neglected and shattered by the specifically *novel* problems posed by modern society, such as hurriedness and ambition: “*It is born out of the ways of modern living, by the pursuit of self-enrichment in the shortest amount of time – one consults older textbooks on the subject without luck. There would be no reason for the neuropathologists to describe it, if it sometimes did occur in the past. It first emerged in present times, and it is very fitting that this disease was discovered or more correctly first described in that part of the world, in which inhabitants are known to both work and live fast, and they are decidedly more nervous and grow older earlier on, that is America*” (Hirt 1889: 312). The subject has displaced its true will in pursuit of the fluctuating ideals fabricated by the contemporaneous zeitgeist, often in the form of a complete devoutness to the single idea that obscures everything else.

However, neurasthenia is not considered to be evenly distributed throughout the population, some groups are more exposed than others, most notably people of bookish professions, such as intellectuals, brokers, politicians and artists, whose “*calling requires spiritual and bodily vigor, are all neurasthenics to a certain extent*” (Hirt 1889: 315). The neurasthenic is therefore very far from the marginalized figures that occupy great parts of psychiatry at that time, such as the sexual deviant, the insane or the criminal master-mind¹³. On the contrary, neurasthenia is conceived of as a coming from the midst of society and is thereby, as already

¹³ For a description of the latter, see for instance Borch 2005: 36.

mentioned, partly linked to a pathological deviation within society itself. In many regards the opposite of an “abnormal individual”, the neurasthenic is considered as a sort of tragic figure of modern culture, and most notably its *work culture*. Perhaps more accurate, one could say that the neurasthenic is seen as the host of a pathology within the normal, as a condensed expression of the “normalized” ills contained in the surrounding environment of modernity. When put into a form, the transient figure of the neurasthenic looks like this:

pathology \neg normality

normality \neg pathology

To briefly sum up so far, the neurasthenic is, by both critics and proponents of the diagnosis, viewed as a figure that somehow remains indistinct and without a proper place in the traditional schema of medicalization and treatment, as he or she cannot be positively represented as sick or “abnormal”, but only appear in the margins of and between “sickness” and “normality”. In this strange continuum between disease and health wherein modern human beings are thought to reside, certain dispositions of the mind can pose a pathological “danger”, such as the fixation of thoughts; the “*obsession by some one false idea*”, whereby the neurasthenic condition can take a foothold and expand, in worst case leading to extreme forms of mental illness, such as insanity. In other words, the neurasthenic is also linked to the prevailing register of well-established pathologies in the medical discourse.

Among those diagnosed with neurasthenia is the aspiring author Robert Musil, who in 1904 is treated for a “*nervous condition of the heart*” due to overwork. As an ambitious, young engineer, he devotes himself completely to the fulfilment of a project, involving the newfound possibilities of engineering technology. In Musil’s own words, he becomes intensively caught up *in* his work, as he notes in his diary: “*I was tremendously excited. It would by no means be right to conclude from what I had done that success would follow. On the other hand, I couldn’t dismiss the idea out of hand either. At best it would take a year until everything worked. Tests, trial runs. I decided to risk this one year. With the firm intention that if I failed I would put an end to the matter. It worked and buyers were found for the patent which brought me quite a nice sum of money. But what a year that was! Just imagine such a person in the first years of full maturity who, in order not to dissipate his efforts, cannot spare a single thought for what he considers his vocation. For a full eighteen*

months – then the sale and all kinds of related things made similarly heavy claims on me. Eighteen months ago I was talented and my [literary] drafts were well received. But what does it mean to have eighteen months cut out of one’s development! Will there be anything left there to justify having made this sacrifice? ... You can imagine how one burns to test things out. At the start, one feels deep discouragement – but this is something one anticipates. It has to be this way. The nerves are like ropes that have gone brittle and the first thing that needs to happen is for the association centers in the brain to be replaced. But in a fortnight one begins to pick up the threads again. Then some family doctor or other runs across one’s path and diagnoses a nervous condition of the heart as a result of overexertion, orders complete rest and paints the blackest picture of what will happen if one disobeys him. Of course, one has lived too intensely – it’s no wonder at all if, not having a single finer idea throughout the whole day, nor any sense of one’s own spiritual existence, one wants experience stimuli at night that positively tear at the nerve-endings...” (Musil 1999 [1904]: 72-73).

Musil’s account of his own beguilement and luring fascination of work is striking. The sense of illness he contracts is, in his own account, obviously not seen as a result of any exterior conditions and hardships attached to labor, yet he *is*, according to himself, made sick because of this work. The illness of this work is linked to an unhealthy consumption and obsession *within* himself. When Musil becomes *consumed* by work, he is lead astray from all other matters of life, as he describes it in his diary. This enigmatic state is promoted by medical expertise as a defining feature of the neurasthenic, and as such, Musil’s self-description is not very original. It is completely in line with the semantics emerging among medical professionals and therapists at this time. While he was ordered to rest at his family home, a large number of patients were sent off to sanatoriums, spa resorts and clinics, but apart from that one will find cases similar to that of Musil reverberate throughout the medical journals and reports from sanatoriums. George M. Beard, who first coins the concept of neurasthenia, describes a number of patients, with certain common features. A young man, aged 36, suffering from vertigo, insomnia and a feeling of pricking: “*the pretty evident cause was excess in sexual indulgence combined with over work in business*” (Beard 1887: 4). Another man, aged 27, displays symptoms of weakness and numbness aggravated by physical exertion and labor: “*mental labor, however, when protracted, made him worse [...]* In order to improve his health he had spent several months traveling in Europe, but was more injured

than benefited thereby. Long standing in picture galleries seemed to have aggravated all the symptoms” (Beard 1887: 5).

The relation between the self, work and illness is articulated throughout the descriptions of the neurasthenic patients and their ailments: *“Mr. R. aged 30. Business man, with very marked family history of nervous tendency; inclined to take whisky to excess; a very hard worker; anxious to succeed in business, often worked all night or took only one hour’s sleep in the twenty-four; thought he could do without sleep. Lost the power of expressing himself in writing, could not spell simple words correctly, would even forget his own name when signing a cheque. Began to take alcohol to procure sleep. Complains of restlessness; cannot concentrate on a business problem; sleeps very little; disposed to be excitable; has feeling of pressure and discomfort in top of head, aggravated by mental work”*

“Mr. R, aged 37. Business man: has been nervous and restless for some 12 or 18 months. Four or five months ago sold his shop, and has since brooded over this transaction. Thinks he will never be able to start another business – that he has ruined himself by his folly in parting with his business. Talks of nothing else; cannot sleep; complains of beating in the temples, which he says keeps him awake. His friends fear he will “go out of his mind” on account of his perpetual worry over the shop. Very depressed at times” (Drummond 1906: 12-13).

The descriptions are typical for the neurasthenic patient, oscillating between restless activity and fatigue. While Musil’s condition, a *“result of overexertion”*, is described as a form of perplexity and paralyze, it is still not a pacifying condition, but rather the opposite, in the form of a restless activity in which all attention is drawn towards work – after which a sense of fatigue sets in. The novelty of this obsession thought to emerge *“from within”* can hardly be overestimated, according to the medical expertise (*“one consults older textbooks on the subject without luck”*). What’s more interesting in this context, is that while neurasthenia couples a fatigued body with the enactment of work, its diagnosis could not possibly be further away from what Karl Marx around the same time describes as the horrific and terrifying imagery of extortion and overwork found at the factory floors (Marx 2008 [1890]: 306). The overburdened subject presumed in the neurasthenic condition, exhausted by overwork and fixed thoughts, seems impossible to equate with the worn-out bodies found, for instance, in the mines or the factories. Instead of a state of exhaustion strictly derived from the material conditions of work, it is assumed that the subject somehow has become unable to

dispose his or her own initiative and energy properly, leading to unsound attachments to the work itself. In this regard, the neurasthenic diagnosis sets in a new form of reference between the worker and the enactment of work that cannot be directly paired with the concept of the contract or with the exploitation-thesis. It is a reference that directs the subject's over-extortion back to his own problematic self-relationship. I will describe this in the following pages.

Loss of will and balance: a self of *fixed ideas*

The neurasthenic is confined to his own continuous "self-examination" and is, at the same time, immersed in fascination with a singular idea or object, from which he has difficulties to detach:"[But] *when one is allowed to absorb more than its due share of attention, and by degrees to become, as we say, a "fixed idea" monopolizing consciousness, the habit of selection is lost, the true will slips into abeyance, its power weakened or lost for want of exercise, and a usurper reigns in its stead. Instead of choosing its own objects of attention, the mind is unwillingly dominated by some notion that has taken possession, and becomes gradually narrowed down to its limits*" (Drummond 1906: 12).

While appearing indistinct as a pathological condition, its symptoms are sought identified indirectly according to a certain form of *falsity* that has entrenched itself in the subject. He has somehow, it is suggested, lost track of his own centerfield. The "self" can no longer display any features of authenticity, as it is deprived of its own *true* will and seduced by artificial ideas. The neurasthenic is ultimately considered to be in a state of temporary "self-loss", having no possession over the means by which it orients itself and perceives of reality, and thereby unable to constitute itself in the world. It is, as such, a diagnose of failed or weak self-observation; the self is considered unable to observe itself because it remains too closely attached and attuned to its own self-examination. This combination of absorption of thoughts and loss of will is explicitly linked to power. In the quote above, David Drummond, among the leading medical experts on neurasthenia of the era, conscripts the interweaving of powerlessness and the self, which makes out the object of intervention in the sanatoriums and spa resorts. The problem of the neurasthenic is that his will has been displaced within himself and that it remains beyond his reach. The fixation of his ideas is at once a symptom of his loss of will *and* a symptom of an external, alien will which have taken its place and absorbed him. His powerlessness lies in the fact that he is guided by a will other than his own,

incapable of distinguishing an external intrusion from the impulses, thoughts and perceptions truly coming “from within”. Likewise, the “loss of balance” from which the neurasthenic is suffering, is put in motion by emotional and intellectual “over-investment”. This is where the medical expertise comes in, it seeks to intervene in order to move and transform a *subjectivity* from a state of powerlessness to true will and from a state of fixation to release.

The neurasthenic therefore remains indistinguishable for itself, absorbed in complete and intact attention to whatever object or idea that has spellbound its will. Animated by an over-investment of thoughts, emotions or actions, the neurasthenic is in a “*loss of balance*”. The emotions contained within the self must be turned into a hetero-reference: “*self-consciousness unites two elements distinguished in thought, but inseparable in experience, subject, and object, the “ego” which feels, thinks, wills; and the environment which is absorbed in feeling, knowledge, action, and is itself interpreted and remodeled in the process [...] When once this constitution of the self is fairly apprehended, the inspiring thought follows at once that within limits it is open to all of us to become the selves we wish to be. We may do it by the exercise of steady choice in our objects of feeling and thought; these forthwith become the springs of our action, and in all three capacities are made one with the self by the double movement which at once transmutes objects into the self and transforms the self into their likeness. Infinite grades of character naturally emerge from this process, according to the degree of access that any individual has to that which is beyond himself and to the possibilities of responses with which the “ego” starts its career. The important matter is that each self in its own grade, in its own measure and degree, should be as fully rounded up, as well-proportioned as possible. And this consideration brings us back to our neurasthenic patients. Is it not plain that what ails them is a loss of balance and proportion in their mental lives? Some idea or group of ideas assumes abnormal and undue importance, overmasters the central will, and leads to a break-up in the hierarchy of centres governing both conscious and subconscious life*” (Drummond 1906: 12).

What is the logic governing this problem, of a subject temporarily out of control and in loss of its will? There seems to be two contradictory agencies at play, which uphold the neurasthenic figure. On the one side, there is the superior autonomy of a rational self, that is, a self that exclusively hosts its own thoughts and perceptions as opposed to the influences coming from a variety of external sources, originated beyond its own rationality. The self’s supposed superiority is drafted from its ability to detect and maintain a boundary, a strict line, between its own independent rationality and those more or less artificial rationalities found in

its environment. On the other side of this model of a triumphantly rational self, there is an agency which, in its fixed yet imperceptible ties to an external object or a false idea, cannot see how it has discharged of its own autonomy and have become dominated rather than self-ruling. In order for the self to regain its own true will and rationality; to realize its own inferiority, it must, paradoxically, be enlightened and mobilized by exterior interventions of therapy and exercise.

In line with this distinction between the self and its environment, Drummond sketches out an association of perception and reality that is mutually contingent. The neurasthenic condition is, as already mentioned, though to be retrieved from a general immobility of emotion and thought, but these can come back into motion once the neurasthenic realizes that there is a variety of patterns and options available to him – on *how* to feel and think differently. In other words, there is an element of contingency sought installed between the immobile self of the neurasthenic and his environment; all individuals are equipped with an ability to *choose* how it perceives of its reality and can thereby also form this reality itself, according to Drummond, but for the neurasthenic, provisionally guided by a will other than his or her own, these choices remain invisible *as choices*. Every human being, Drummond asserts, contains a latent capacity to form its surroundings by way of perception. This sense of contingency and choice is, however, lost in an accentuating state of neurasthenia. A peculiar juxtaposition is proposed, then, between the constancy of a self-governed and superior rationality and the mobility of thought patterns.

Against this backdrop, a typology is pinned out, of the specific characteristics of the thought patterns and inclinations of the neurasthenic. In other words, even though everyone are considered to be “*more or less neurasthenic*”, certain *personalities* are more prone to the obsession of ideas than others: “*The human being is just as varied in its individual resistance to harmful influence as it is varied in its appearance and look*” (Cramer 1910: 144). They are susceptible to “embrace shadows before joys”, and fail to see how their own emotions and outlook is determined by perpetual introspection: “*Our unhappy neurasthenic patients forget- if they ever recognized- that the mental horizon of which each individual is the centre may be gloriously wide and embrace the interesting and sunny aspects of life, or may be miserably circumscribed to the petty affairs of one personality who lives under the toils, burdens and sorrows of life in a dense shadow that obscures all its joys. Hence the danger of introspection and self-examination to those whose minds are not easily responsive to the common wholesome incentives to thought, and who are not spontaneously attracted by things outside*

their own limited personal sphere; for these habits tend to fix attention more and more on the central point, the tiny circle from which radiations might go forth to an infinitely far horizon” (Drummond 1907: 1813-1814).

Neurasthenia and occupational hygiene

The Norwegian psychiatrist Ragnar Vogt relates neurasthenia to extreme efforts of brainwork. In his publication on psychiatry and in a lecture series held in 1905 he outlines the “*physiological and psychological conditions, under which the ability to work can be exploited with a precise economy – in order to pursuit happiness of life and personal development*” (Vogt 1905a: 1). Under the heading of “*occupational hygiene*”, Vogt discusses how “brain-energy” can be stored and consumed most efficiently. While the brain directs the performance of intellectual tasks as well as the functional impulses of the body, no demanding intellectual activities can be carried out without reducing the total amount of energy available to the brain, according to Vogt (Vogt 1905b: 3). He is not alone on this venture of interweaving *work* and *personal development* according to certain dispositions of vital forces of the body. It can be detected in the reports from sanatoriums and occasionally also in the medical journals, in addition to small handbooks and manuals published on the topic. This literature is partly fashioned as an answer to the problem of neurasthenia, and is, as far as I can see, the first time the themes of *work*, *happiness* and *personal development* is interlinked through different forms of exercise and self-accounting. In other words, the neurasthenic condition does not only call upon a therapeutic intervention, but also a continuous work on the self, on a daily basis. Just as importantly, however, personal development is invoked as an answer to the problem of the neurasthenic condition.

Happiness and *personal development* are here formulated as the object of work. Work does not serve its own purpose, but the purpose of attaining a development in the inner life of the employee. At the same time, the employee is obliged to take care of this him- or herself, on the basis of efficient and systematic use of energies. The notions of happiness and personal development does not, however, really contain any specific meaning, as neither Vogt nor anyone else makes any noticeable account of their implication. Exactly what the development in the inner life of the employee signifies or how work can afford happiness, remains therefore unknown. Instead, Vogts guide is centered on the regularity of disposition of body and mind throughout the conduct of work.

In his writings, Vogt compares the brain to a machine, which consumes energy fulfilling one task while it at the same time decreases the amount of energy that can be spent solving other tasks. The key concept of energy is assumed to represent a universal potential inside all humans, as the basic element that makes us able or unable to work. The energy must accordingly be handled with regard to individual varieties, such as persistence, and carefully be adjusted to the schedule of the day¹⁴. To sustain well-being and health for the worker is, according to Vogt, largely a matter of planning work properly and predisposing energy efficiently. While the volume of brain-energy will vary between individuals, everyone will at some point meet a boundary, at which a sense of fatigue and exhaustion will set in. This is especially true for those who also devote a considerable part of their energy to steer the functioning of their own organs (Vogt 1905a: 5-11).

Against this backdrop, he introduces three elementary principles of energy saving for those undertaking any kind of intellectual work. The first form of saving is based on consciously selecting the order of tasks that are set out for a day's work. When the brain over a period is accustomed to fulfilling certain tasks, it works more relieved after a while. The most demanding tasks should therefore be performed firsthand after a night's sleep or after shorter rests during the day, while more familiar tasks can be carried out afterwards. By the means of "*harmonious exercise*", the brain can thus be adjusted to handling challenging intellectual work, and up to a certain point, most individuals with certain capacities can be skillfully trained to master their energy efficiently (Vogt 1905b: 4). Secondly, any element of the new and unfamiliar will require a substantial amount of energy, as the brain, just to process the very imagery of the unknown, becomes heavily burdened. The intellectual worker should therefore carefully consider how and when he ventures into unknown or new surroundings and conditions of work. The third principle of energy saving is directed towards an "*enhanced setting of attention*". The intellectual worker is often too easily distracted by interruptions or tasks, for which he or she is unprepared, leading to a situation where any line of thought barely is able to arrive at a conclusion. As far as possible, the worker should commit to the schedule set for the day and at all costs avoid irregular hours at the office, such as overtime. The lack of continuity and well prepared and set tasks for a day's work as well as irregular working hours is described as triggering factors of the neurasthenic conditions (Vogt 1905a: 5-11).

¹⁴ The exercises of energy saving do by all accounts address a certain kind of privileged worker, who can consciously take into consideration and decide how to make use of the energy available to him or her throughout a day's work.

Vogts inquiry revolves around a concept of energy, through which the worker can make strategies, predispose capacities, and enhance the ability to fulfil the tasks during a day's work. Through the use of time-tables, planning and by breaking the day's work into pieces according to their degree of energy-consumption, the neurasthenic ailments can be tamed, controlled and prevented. In other words, neurasthenia can be prevented by the means of a regular and disciplined conduct of the enactment of work, according to Vogt.

Proximity and distance

Vogts concept of a disciplined enactment of work seems to present itself as a form of "vaccine", whereas the sanatoriums, necessitating a withdrawal from work, are presented as the treatment of a condition in full flourish. As pointed out, the neurasthenic is cast into a lapse of thrilling one-mindedness, whereby all attention is drawn towards the object or idea of his or her fascination. It is perceived as a problem of proximity, as an inability to *retreat* from specific thoughts and *disengage* with objects. This closeness to the enthralling objects and ideas is sought broken through certain procedures of separation, detachment and isolation. The aim is to enable a regained and strengthened *will* through separating the self from its false desires, so it can become unbound by the fixed ideas overmastering a "true self". The treatment of the neurasthenic revolves around attaining two forms of distance.

First, there are the spatial arrangements through which a *physical distance* is obtained. The recreational spaces of the sanatoriums and health resorts provide the ideal topos for this purpose, as they usually are placed far from the hurriedness and noise found in the densely populated areas of cities and small towns. Patients are treated with various combinations of rest, diet, isolation, bathing, hiking and other forms of low-key exercise. The aim is not only to separate the neurasthenic from infatuating objects, but also to shield him or her from the urgency and haste of the modern, urban life; "*the practice of prolonged hiking can do more good than a whole pharmacy*" (Hirt 1889: 316). Bearing in mind that a large number of the patients are diagnosed with some form of overexertion due to work, the *worker* is now, for the first time, being sent off to the soothing resorts at the countryside and up in the mountains, put into electrical baths and sent off at long walks and hiking¹⁵. His or her body

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the condition is not restrained to the spheres of intellectual work. While the intellectual classes and businessmen often are at the center of attention for the diagnosing and treatment, farmers and working class are also frequent neurasthenic patients in the sanatoriums. As it is noted by Petteri Pietikainen, "*neurasthenia was not restricted to the intellectually overstrained middle classes*" and in certain sanatoriums across Scandinavia the neurasthenic patients were made out by a majority of working-class (Pietikainen 2007: 102-103).

and mind must be withdrawn from the entrenchment and consumption of work: “*it is highly recommended that the patient for a period of time is placed in different surroundings, among other people, that can provide another engagement than what he is used to, under constant supervision of a doctor*” (Hirt 1889: 315). The neurasthenic’s desire to be near work must be dissuaded. Physical proximity is offered as a “de-temporalization” of the self, that at once seek shield the neurasthenic from the enthralling enactment of work and the general accentuation of the modern world.

Secondly, by the means of a physical distance that can furnish a certain relaxation, a re-strengthened self can appear, enabling the patient to differentiate and set itself apart from the ideas occupying its mind. The patient must not end up mimicking his or her ordinary life and work, but is instead encouraged to mimic other, possible “lives” filled with soothing activities. For instance, patients are expected to refrain from work that is too similar to their profession and are encouraged to do gardening or carpentry in order to keep their minds off intellectual endeavors. Even though rest is considered an important element in the treatment, too much of it is dissuaded in case of triggering a “*hypochondric self-observation*” and thereby worsening the condition of the patient. These treatments thereby also contains an element of “dis-identification”, whereby the self can remove himself from the contagious enactments of work and urban life and re-furnish an identity in line with his own true will.

The semantics brought about to actualize the neurasthenic can be viewed accordingly:

concept counter-concept

powerless and loss of will	true will
emotional over-investment	balanced
introspection	wide mental horizon
fixation	choice
abeyance	independence
self-examination	
falsity	

Summary

What exactly is the novelty of neurasthenia? It is *not* the first time the field of medicine seeks to scrutinize the relationship between work and illness, as this starts to take place almost two hundred years earlier (with the publication of Bernardo Ramazzini's "Diseases of workers" as its point of departure, also mentioned previously (Ramazzini 1940 [1700])). Furthermore, a moral concern for the social and political agency of the worker also made out another co-current and reoccurring problem throughout the 19th century, which in part was sought governed through the worker's *body*. Across great parts of Europe and the US, workers were in this period encouraged by employers to take part in morally elevating activities in their spare time, in order to, among other things, be lifted up and separated from the politically harmful and degrading *masses* the working class so easily could become attached to (Cross 1993: 99-103). These concerns, in the US and parts of Europe formulated as appeals to "rational recreation", revolved exclusively around the activities of workers outside of their workplace, in which their bodies and minds were sought lifted into communities of kindred spirits through sport and song¹⁶.

In other words, the *novelty* of neurasthenia does not revolve around its articulation of work, illness and health. The advent of neurasthenia indicates, instead, a completely new problematization of the *individuality* of the subject in his or her relation to work, where illness, work and the self is brought together in the light of a series of self-problematizations. The self is seen as having become pathologically imprinted in the enactment of work according to a lack of self-restriction. It is the first time that the source of problems is located *within* the worker him- or herself; the dispositions of mental energies; the fixation of thoughts; the lack of balance and will; the inability to "let go" of work. *The neurasthenic condition installs a reference between the worker and the enactment of work that problematizes this relation as a self-relationship.*

It is remarkable that this condition, that occupies such a central position in psychiatry around the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, was thought to designate a continuum between pathology and normality rather than to constitute a clear-cut illness as such. To a certain extent, the neurasthenic condition is perceived of as a "normal" response to a pathological culture. On the one side, the neurasthenic was identified, albeit vaguely, as a patient and his condition was treated with the aid of a spatial distance provided by the sanatorium. On the

¹⁶ Although, according to Gary Cross, these efforts often failed to become the intended locus of organized leisure (Cross 1993: 101-102)

other side, the neurasthenic was perceived as a figure going far beyond the function of medicine and treatment, as a “symptom” of a societal pathology. As such, the neurasthenic did not only pose a medical problem, but he posed a problem for the constitution of the medical gaze by de-stabilizing the distinction between healthy and sick. The neurasthenic’s indistinctness is “doubled up”, both indistinct to himself and to the system which seeks to diagnose him as either sick or not sick. The difficulties of finding a proper place for the neurasthenic in the medical realm leads to accusations of a fashionable disease, an imposture merely playing out a ready repertoire of a popular pseudo-pathology.

Almost with the same sudden rush as the diagnosis emerges, it loses its dominant function as a diagnostic term and ebbs away in the intersecting years between the two world wars, and appears today as a marginal phenomenon in classification schemes such as ICD-10 (Byrum 2003: 1753). However, the analysis provided in this chapter has not been guided by an interest in the ruptures or discontinuities taking place within the fields of psychiatry and medicine as such. Instead, I have intended to show how a specific notion of subjectivity comes to take shape as a self-problematization, that is made into an object of intervention; a self-relationship which is sought transformed by re-instating a rationally autonomous agency within the self.

CHAPTER 6

The assets of pathology

We have seen how the neurasthenic is conceived of as a tragic figure of modern life, no longer able to separate himself from the surrounding environment and how this is handled by, among other things, sending these individuals off to resorts and sanatoriums in order to keep their minds off work *and* themselves. To make the subject regain its own will and come closer to himself, he must distinguish his own thoughts from the “artificial” ideas of modern culture that surrounds him; he must amend his own thought patterns and disconnect with the objects occupying his mind. For the inventors of stress research half of a century later, the most impeding object standing between the self and its environment, is likewise related to the “*perception of events*”, which can be handled by “*by putting events, goals and ideas in a different perspective, through conscious thinking. For instance, saying “I prefer to meet this goal” rather than “I must meet this goal”*” (Smith and Selye 1979: 1955). There is in other words a specific problem underlying the condition of stress concerning the self-relationship of the person holding that condition. Unlike the neurasthenic sent off to the soothing sanatoriums in the mountains, the stressful individual must acquire “balance” by other means.

In the following pages, we will see how, with the articulation of the “problem of stress”, this figure becomes charged with qualities of fundamental vitality to human life and the performative needs of society. Already from the initial attempts in physiology to pin out a new concept of the interaction between the human being and its environment, there are guides and instructions following in its wake formulated by the stress researchers themselves, on how to handle this supposed ancient state – of a self-opposed self. With the appearance of stress as a physiological problem, a new and detailed theory is built up around this figure, regarding the relation between the body, the perception and its environment. Stress management and stress research is inseparable. As the quote above indicates, the pioneering actors of stress research did not strictly confine their problem to the observation of “physiological processes”, but were actively engaged in formulating programs, directed at both organizations and a general public, in terms of how this condition efficiently is managed. Stress, just as we have seen with the concept of neurasthenia, does not really attach itself directly to neither illness nor health, but is instead situated between these two poles. There is, in other words, a strong continuation of a condition that simultaneously is linked to both illness and non-illness. A new element introduced to this state “in-between”; the

embattlement of the self-opposed self becomes a positively connoted state that simultaneously withholds a negative effect. Stress is both necessary and harmful. I will devote the following pages to the emergence of this necessity, and against this background give a detailed account of the intertwining of theory and practical advice that constitutes the initial stress research.

Exactly how are the scholarly endeavors of these stress researchers entwined with the management of stress, already from the offset of their research? First, they actively reach out, as practical advisers, self-proclaimed professorial “laymen”, public educators etc., to the different realms of organizations found in education and industry. The extent to which these researchers also function as counselors, industrial advisors and “therapists” (composing self-management techniques *on the basis* of their own biological and physiological research), makes it tempting to construct a caption like “research-management-therapy” and stick it onto the massive production put forward in this field. This was done to such an extent that it has been argued that the concept of stress did not proliferate into a “popular discourse” from a branch of science, but the other way around: *“Rather than a well-validated scientific discovery slowly permeating popular consciousness, it was support for the concept among the masses and the growing tendency to interpret their experiences in terms of “stress” that led to the gradual acceptance of what had previously been a highly skeptical community”* (Wainwright and Calnan 2002: 40). Second, the analyses and vocabulary on stress brought about in these works has taken a monumental form, as a source of revelation that explain not only why or how human beings are stressed, but also how it can be dealt with.

Thus, from the very beginning of stress research within the discipline of physiology, its pioneering actors set out to formulate their research programs and epistemological interests, not only according to a study of the human body, but also with an explicit effort to contribute to the improvement of society and the functioning of its institutions. This was done in light of the basic human response mechanisms, which they sought to unveil and interpret in their research. In the voluminous body of work that Walter B. Cannon and Hans Selye produced, there is a continuous and remarkable intertwining of perspectives considering the human body, on the one hand and the organization of society, most notably the industrial organizations, on the other hand. In other words, the epistemological profiles in these works are rarely consistently engaged with a strictly physiological problem, but on the contrary often juxtapose and enmesh considerations of the human body with and against the society that surrounds it. In the words of Foucault, this research provides *“programmes of conduct*

which have both prescriptive effects regarding what is to be done (effects of “jurisdiction”), and codifying effects regarding what is to be known (effects of “veridiction”)” (Foucault 1991c:75).

I will describe how this research went far beyond concerns posed in a strict framework of physiological inquiry, but how they sought to provide general societal analyses and ideals of self-management on the grounds of their physiological research. Following this lead, I will look at how certain forms of “self-analysis” and “codes of behavior”¹⁷ are posited in their advice aimed at both a general audience and organizations.

Before I move on to this, I will linger just a moment on the peculiar type of knowledge that is brought about and represented in these works. On the one hand, one finds restless, undetermined and hastily conceptualizations, brought up as intrinsic at one moment, just to be left to lie fallow the next. When looking into the reels of ideas and practical advice that constitute the writings of these researchers, it becomes apparent that they leap back and forth between different knowledge forms, such as pedagogy, psychology, sociology in addition to its base of physiology and biology; guided by a complete undercurrent of impatient digressions and analogies. This “mess” is simply a strong and consistent feature in the body of work brought forward by Walter B. Cannon and Hans Selye, invoking in the reader a sense of witnessing a knowledge form that still is looking for its own coherency and a more determined shape through which it can present itself. It is far from unambiguous what their theories are designed to promote: The “low”, sketch-like epistemological contours of the knowledge found here seems not yet certain of its own representation and hence actualizes itself through a vast number of appearances; a philosophical inquiry based on physiological underpinnings; a biological code of human behavior; a self-management model; an industrial psychology and so forth.

Yet, on the other hand, this is also a knowledge that eagerly awaits its own groundbreaking influence throughout society and which, from the offset, goes about to prescribe “grand narratives” in which modern society can inscribe itself and explain its various problems and possibly find solutions to them. Moreover, it is a knowledge that presents itself through ostentatious proclamations, whereby it seeks to link itself to the essential keys of the human nature provided by the likes of Darwin or Malthus. In this context, I will not trail these efforts

¹⁷ A term used by Hans Selye.

to place their own research in a direct line of “grandiose” thinkers, but center in on how the subject of the stressful condition is problematized and made into an object of intervention.

The body politic of Walter B. Cannon¹⁸

Throughout the 1910’s and the following two decades Walter B. Cannon delivered the blueprints for what stress researchers later would describe as the “*feedback mechanism*” and adaptive functions of the nervous system. In a number of these writings, which both aimed at a general public and peer scientists, Cannon voices his concern for the situation in which the modern man might end up: mollified and completely at ease with his surroundings. After the shock of the First World War, pacifism is on the rise throughout Western societies, and Cannon considers this new anti-militarist movement to pose a considerable threat towards both human nature and the industrial organizations of society. In “*Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage*” (1970 [1915]), Cannon describes how the “fighting qualities” inherent in human nature should not be evaded by any means, because the utility to society of a subject that remains alert and prone to respond with an instinct of attack, should not be underestimated. When warfare between nations seems to diminish and the nature of fighting emotions is increasingly belittled, other domains of society needs to substitute the “martial virtues” found in the military that in equal measures can pertain the urges and elemental instincts of humankind.

There are two points to be made here, which I will discuss at some length. A) When Cannon proposes “*to examine other forms of organization – industrial, domestic or social – in the light of the organization of the body*” (Cannon 1967 [1932]: 305), he very accurately put into words a peculiar ambition of his research; to transpose a biological problem observed in the interior of the body to the social organizations of society. B) The question of how the organizations of modern society can stimulate man’s natural desires imputes a specific subjectivity, which point in two directions of stimulation. On the one hand, it relies upon an environment that effectively can nurture, uphold and facilitate these primary traits of human capacity and will, and on the other hand, it is a question of how the societal environment *can be nourished by* them and effectively put them to use.

¹⁸ Cannon refers tirelessly to the necessity of a “body politic”. The semantics of “body politic” has a centuries-long conceptualization in the political theology of the English Crown: “Parliament was, by representation, the living “body politic” of the realm” (Kantorowicz 2016: 447).

(a) The body of society

How does Cannon see the problems he observes in the field of biology, revolving around the organization of visceral nerves and increase of blood sugar, as not only relevant, but simply intrinsic for the understanding of modern society and the individuals it inhabits? First of all, despite highlighting the importance of man's natural instinct, Cannon does not consider human beings to constitute a body of mere animalistic or primitive behavior. On the contrary, Cannon considers the society surrounding modern individuals to be out of step and rudimentarily composed when compared to the evolutionary advances of human beings, a society on a stage of development similar to "lower animals". Therefore, it is society rather than mankind that finds itself on a primitive level.

Secondly, what the surrounding society lacks in comparison with the physiological achievements of the human bodies, is a well-functioning centralized agency of stabilization, a "*social homeostasis*", that can uphold the necessary steadiness of security and freedom in order to reduce unnecessary distress among its members (Cannon 1967 [1932]: 305).

The idea of a social homeostasis is derived from the *physiological homeostasis*, which serves as a guiding concept in the research of Cannon. It describes the bodily capacity to preserve a steady state of blood pressure, temperature, or level of oxygen etc., despite the infliction of disease or physical constraints such as extreme heat or starvation. In the latter case, for instance, the body is thought to "spare" the parts of the brain and the heart, on the cost of the decay of other physiological structures (Cannon 1941: 4). *Homeostasis* designates thereby the careful and intelligent composition of instant defense and stabilizing agencies mobilized by the body, when different forms of danger threatens it.

Cannon conceives of the various functions of labor and professions found throughout society as analogous to the specialized functions and organs of the human body. While various forms of skilled work performed by employees in the spheres of business, education or industrial manufacture provides the necessary service for the continuous maintenance and development of society, it lacks the elemental function to regulate internal stability when faced with threats such as mass unemployment or economic decline. In times when such crises actually occur, the whole body of society weakens, due to the distress inflicted on its individual members. The challenge of managers and leaders is to arrange for a readiness of responses, which can uphold a sense of stability among the members of society during an "attack" and enable effective forms of counteroffensive, to diminish the impact of such attacks. In other words,

society – and especially its industrial organizations and division of labor – is not only similar to the functions of the human body, but the actual governance of society and organizations holds unrealized biological qualities, by which “incredible steadiness” can be achieved (Cannon 1941: 5). The utopian visions of Cannon, often proposed under the slogan of a “*more perfect social justice*”, invokes a society that on the one hand is akin to the “wholeness” of biological organisms, in which different parts are seamlessly arranged and unified in the supportive functions of the body. On the other hand, society is understood to lack exactly this agency, which can provide for such arrangements, in the form of a government that intelligibly facilitates a “constancy” of security and freedom, despite any form of external pressure or threat. The condition of stress is therefore equally as present in the bodies of human beings as it is in the body of society. I will not go into further detail with Cannon’s strange and fascinating efforts to provide a framework, in direct continuation of his physiological research, for the enhancement of societal governance and organizational management. The reason is simply that this idea of societal and organizational organisms, when not discouraged by peer researchers (see for instance Melcken 1932), does not find any further points of connection in the stress literature, in occupational health promotion or the practice of stress management¹⁹ – it is simply blocked out and remains today only in the shadows of the legacy ascribed to the initial stress research.

(b) The substitutes for warfare

While the concept of a “*social homeostasis*” never makes it into the realms of organization or the political spheres for which it was designed, the “martial virtues” which Cannon assigns to human nature finds a foothold that can be detected in almost any contemporary stress management course or self-help manual, under headings such as *fight or flight*²⁰.

Physiological homeostasis (stress does not appear as a specific term in Cannon’s work until the 1930’s²¹) is, as we have seen, presented as a response mechanism in which “primal instincts” of the body are activated, such as the release of blood sugar or secretion of adrenaline, which supplies the body with energy and reduces any sense of fatigue. This array of responses is sought explained as the result of man’s evolutionary adaptation to the specific living conditions in wild life, where omnipresent dangers have threatened and left human beings with the two options of either resistance or rapid withdrawal (Cannon 1970 [1915]:

¹⁹ Although there are those who remain favorably inclined towards his proposal of studying social organizations in light of the (stress-handling) body, neither this ambition nor the concept of social homeostasis is followed-up at any noticeable scale (see for instance Selye 1974: 63).

²⁰ An expression coined by Cannon himself in 1915. See Cannon 1970: 219

²¹ See Cannon 1935

218-219). On this basis, homeostasis is understood as a generalized and universal state of response, embedded in the deep nature and biological structure of human beings.

It might come across as somewhat peculiar that Cannon is so concerned with the societal preservation of martial virtues (and hostile towards pacifism), considering his efforts to pin out a system of social homeostasis wherein individuals could be sheltered from the anguish contained in modern society. However, the idea of a social homeostasis does not lead Cannon to disallow the concepts of threats and dangers as purely harmful. On the contrary, as previously pointed out, the necessity of stimulating man through different forms of *activation* of perceived or real threats is central to the initial thesis of homeostasis. Alluding to the psychologist Graham Wallas, Cannon proposes that the lack of a situation whereby the different emotional responses of individuals are triggered into action can itself cause ailments, such as nervous strains (Cannon 1970 [1915]: 380; Wallas 1914: 66). The “balked disposition” which can be found in the state of idleness is therefore not only unnatural to man, but also pose a threat to society at large. When the fighting instincts of human beings is kept at too great a distance, the complete welfare of society is at stake, due to the lack of *energizing mechanisms* that are not allowed to find a proper form of release, with the following risk of a society that lapses into self-indulgency and shortage of initiative (Cannon 1970 [1915]: 391). In other words, society must find the proper means to satisfy the human body’s integration of “*martial virtues and preparations for conflict*” (Cannon 1941: 9). The most interesting thing in this regard is not how Cannon in his general theory brings about a vocabulary that is partly mounted on, both directly and indirectly, military terminology, with a prevalence of concepts and terms such as *combat, struggle, aggression, hostility, antagonism, defense* and *attack*²². The most striking thing is how the processes of reaction observed within the human body holds a direct psychological evidence for the military composition deeply ingrained in the human character, as its most defining feature²³. The subject that appears here, always directed towards the single purpose of his or her own survival, is basically a displaced warrior (Cannon 1941: 4). To sum up short, human behavior is therefore, at a very primal level, above all dispositioned to react on threats and dangers, both as a source of stimulation and ontological intimidation. As human nature, according to Cannon, has been structured to reside in an environment of constant danger, the stimulation

²² This vocabulary is not unique to the works of Cannon in the field of physiology at this point.

²³ It should be noted that Cannon strongly oppose any militarist notion of the necessity of war (see Cannon 1970).

of these “martial virtues” are intrinsic for the general development of individuals, who are always-already geared towards warfare.

The resolution, however, to the problem of finding a proper form of release for these aggressive instincts is not to be found in the ontological insecurity provided by war. This is a skepticism partly ascribed to the totalizing destruction of modern warfare, but also to its increasingly “machine-like” character, in which the battlefield has removed itself from the virtuous struggle of man against man: “*The exhilarating swing and tug and quick thrust of the big limb muscles have largely vanished. Pressing an electronic contact or bending the trigger is a movement altogether too trifling*” (Cannon 1970 [1915]: 391). Instead, Cannon proposes *competition* as the proper form to “discipline the forces” of aggression and to exercise the fighting instinct, which is embedded in the nature of humans. It allows for a *simulation* of threats and danger to be kept up within human beings, on the condition of the existential security provided by modern society. The competition holds all the virtues that modern warfare either fails to deliver or delivers in too great amount: bodily vigor, attainment of alertness and skill, a practice of self-restraint, magnanimous rivalry, promotion of hardihood and willingness to encounter hazards. The contest is therefore the ideal answer and substitute to warfare for the human subject who always moves, in the depths of his nature, across a battlefield or, at least, a hostile environment. In this way, the concept of the modern individual is steeped in the image of the contingency of nature; its play of unpredictable demands and its incessant struggles of survival. Cannon brings together the raw contingency of nature and the tranquility of modern society, and points towards *simulation* of threats and dangers as the solution to the tensions between the naturally dispositioned human body/ mind and its artificial, modern environment.

The diagnose of the human being placed in the midst of tensions brought forward between a civilized society opposed to a nature of pure contingency, afforded by Cannon:

concept 7 counter-concept

idleness

fighting qualities

balked disposition

rivalry and contest

pacifism

martial virtues

The pathologies marked by Cannon are those of a society having completely discharged the sense of living under threats. Modern society has overemphasized the need for comfort and serenity, and by doing so, it might easily strip away the initiative of its members, which must be nourished by stimulating an *experience* of danger and unpredictability. As such, Cannon invokes a societal pathology that “contaminates” a natural state held *within* human beings, most markedly as a lack of the disciplining constraints provided by the relentless contests for survival that hosts the game of nature.

Eustress/ distress

Following the necessity of finding a proper form of release of certain impulses in a similar vein, Hans Selye, who initiates the branch of research exclusively conferred to the problem of stress, proposes that “*stress is unavoidable and, in fact, it would be undesirable to avoid it*” (Selye 1979: 6). Stress is, thus, now considered to carry a positive and necessary influence alongside its negative impacts on human beings. With Selye’s introduction of this two-folded notion, the preservation of “fighting qualities” (for which Cannon is so preoccupied throughout his writings) is advanced to a whole edifice of knowledge on the interplay between human beings and their environment. Hans Selye names this double capacity of enhancement and detracting *eustress* and *distress*. It immediately sparks controversy across different disciplines and remains, to say the least, contested. The psychologist Richard B. Lazarus has, for instance, noted that “*despite its widespread appeal, [it] has still not been adequately supported or refuted by empirical research*” (Lazarus 1999: 32). However, while enduring a controversial position within different branches of research, its impact can be detected in any stress management course, organizational stress policy or self-help book, often presented as a universal feature of human nature: “*The stress response is highly functional when properly managed, leading to eustress and elevated performance. There is also a downside to the stress response, for individuals, and for organizations, which is called distress. Distress occurs when the stress is not well managed or when it goes awry*” (Quick et al 2013: 14).

The evolution of this pairing does not evolve gradually, but happens with a sudden and abrupt turn in Selye’s work. When he first outlines the concept of stress in the mid-1930’s, under the heading of General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), there is no such two-folded disposition of the *stress experience* present in his dissection of biological mechanisms. Stress is, initially,

considered to designate a physical process leading to different forms of psychological responses. It actually takes beyond thirty years before Selye articulates the “machinery of the body” along such a two-sided spectrum of responses, with one side containing the potential of productivity and enhancement (eustress) and the other side containing only wear and tear on the human capacity (distress) (Szabo et al. 2012: 477). The notion of *eustress* is initially picked up, curiously, from an interdisciplinary anthology entitled “*Why Man Takes Chances*”, which for the most part contains philosophical and sociological inquiries into the thrills pursued by fictional and real “stress-seekers” (Klausner et al. 1968). Under different professional guises, the following question is put forward in the book: what characterizes both the societies and the individuals who are prone to pursue threats and dangers only for the sake of their thrill? The question in itself is interesting, because of the analogy between human beings and society is again proposed here. Unlike Walter B. Cannon’s notion of a “social homostasis”, it is not the interior body which is put adjacent to society, but a personality trait thought to reside in certain human beings which is being made equivalent to “traits” found among different organizations and societies. It is suggested that this “personality” is prone to take risks and is attributed with features akin to those of the *warrior* and *entrepreneur*. These features are, in the work of Selye from the late 1960’s onwards, recast from a typology of individually differentiated qualities into a typology of the stress-experience itself, which thereby becomes a feature ingrained in all human beings to various extents. In other words, a notion initially designed for characterizing an untypical and extreme individual quality (found among only a small minority of individuals) is almost immediately reconfigured into a general tenet of human nature itself.

This innovation allows for a new form of assessment of the subject’s relation to its environment. Firstly, the human being is made into a carrier of a symptom, which is at once both tormenting and stimulating the body, in a peculiar binary structure that now renders the state of stress with a universal force of aggression and as an equally universal precondition of life itself. Secondly, new predicaments of the individual’s internal life is brought about and arranged according to the necessities of different forms of “self-analysis” that can enable a transformation of the self²⁴. These arrangements are directed towards the particular experience of the subject’s “life world”; how does the world appear to the individual; what makes each person feel strong and in command or weak and helpless; how does family life or work intrude and upset or enrich and improve well-being? These are among the topics that

²⁴ «Self-analysis» is a concept often referred to by both Hans Selye and some of his fellow researchers within physiology.

are now being introduced among stress researchers, requiring the stressful subject to attune to a therapeutic mode of self-inquiry, in order to render the vast emotional register within him- and herself, sometimes hidden or suppressed, visible and thereby also manageable. Stress becomes contingent upon each individual's outlook or capacity as well as nourishment, sleep, lifestyle etc.

Stress is considered to necessitate a "wholeness" of self-analysis and awareness, as it is handled by at once working *on* the body, through means such as correct nutrition or workouts *and* by working on the perception, through coping techniques and self-analysis. *The perceptual and bodily response*, as primary targets of intervention, analysis and exercise, point towards an "invisibility" that unfold in the supposed "abyss of forces" that constitutes the condition of stress. What so obviously sets stress apart from most other pathologies, is that the condition of stress holds a both transformative and binary structure, found in the eustress/ distress-scheme. What makes one person feel at ease and well, such a tight schedule at work, can make another person ill. Alternatively, by means of self-intervention, an event previously causing illness can instead designate a productive and enhancing experience for the same person at a another point in time. A dominant characteristic of stress as a pathological entity is therefore found in its radical self-pathologization. The self "thinks" and "feels" itself to illness, but this pathologization can be suspended and reversed. The eustress/ distress- scheme displays a remarkable trait, in which a biological reaction thought to cause illness can, by way of perceptual intervention, be transformed into its opposite, as a source of well-being and health. The key to this transformation lies in the act of making perceptual reaction patterns *visible* to oneself, whereby stress can be reduced, or even be turned into an asset, creating a "being in balance". In a text published in *The American Journal of Nursing*, a "model for coping with stress" is proposed with the following proclamation: "*On all levels of life, from unicellular forms to human beings, health is determined largely by stable balance, a condition in which the parts of the whole function in harmony. When an organism is not in such balance, a condition of excessive stress exists*" (Smith and Selye 1979: 1953).

The ancient theme of balance and of the part and the whole is here turned towards the *emotion* and *perception* of each individual. Moreover, the condition of excessive stress is proposed as the result of a lack of such a balance. To take a concrete example, the model presents the reader (in this case most likely a nurse) with the problem of "*perception of events and agents as stressors*", which can be handled by "*neutralizing the intensity of stress by putting events, goals and ideas in a different perspective, through conscious thinking. For*

instance, saying “I prefer to meet this goal” rather than “I **must** meet this goal”” (Smith and Selye 1979: 1955). The “perception of events”, as it is phrased here, is presented as a key to unlock what might otherwise seem a fixed and definite experience for the individual. In addition to other “conditioning factors” such as a healthy lifestyle, sound nutritional habits and absence of sudden life changes, the question of so-called coping mechanisms are at the centerfield of this model. In this specific case, the stressful individual is presented with three mechanisms of coping: *ventilation* (of feelings, “talking about problems”), *diversionary activities* (distract the attention from the problem) and *physical activities* (decrease anxiety by utilizing the “unchanneled energy created by the stress reaction”). Coping with stress thus requires an extensive work on the self, ranging from perceptual modification to physical workouts and nutrition.

On the one hand, we find in the concept of stress a disclosure of a whole economy of the body, functioning according to incessant reaction patterns, which at all costs strives towards upholding an *equilibrium* of its internal environment. In the midst of this economy is the circulation of *energy*, inexorably used, gained and restored throughout the different functions and parts of the body (Selye 1976: 429). This is the basis of both *homeostasis* and the *general adaptation syndrome (GAS)*. There are three successive stages to the “human response mechanism” of *GAS*, first introduced by Hans Selye in 1936. The first reaction, the *alarm*, designates a phase of shock and “countershock”, where the adrenaline in the body heightens. In the second stage of *resistance*, the initial sense of shock disappears and the body is seemingly “adapted” to the new environment of threats. In the third stage of *exhaustion*, the body is out of “adaptability” and can no longer keep up with the “adaptive” requirements posed by an external stressor to the body. Thus, an alarmed body is mobilized to resistance, which eventually exhaustively gives in – this succession of biological reactions is likened to the lifecycle of a human being: birth/childhood, adolescence/ adult life and finally old age/ death. The stages do not only display the elementary defensive mechanisms of the body, according to Hans Selye, but constitutes a plain operation of the most elementary form of life itself (Selye 1976: 459). “Stress” is, during the 1960’s and 1970’s (in the writings of Selye), increasingly steeped in such ontological images, elevated to a function as the matrix of essential life: the human body would not be able to perform its most basic operations, including the process of circulating blood, breathing etc., without a state of stress. Thus, stress is proposed as a universal condition of life and the mere act of staying alive. It is not only a mechanism brought about to safeguard human beings from possible threats when they

occur, but designates a constancy of operations that simply marks the division between death and life. Hans Selye himself notes that “*there is no such thing as no stress. Only in a dead object is there no stress because there is no demand*” (Selye 1979: 6).

On the other hand, we find minute, diverse and relentless prescriptions of how the threat of *disequilibrium* (resulting in a state of stress) can be handled by different means of intervention, through perceptual exercise, self-awareness, counselling, breathing techniques, nutrition, sleep and lifestyle. It is a work that, among other things, requires the individual to make itself the object of analysis: “[*M*an’s ultimate aim in life is to express himself as fully as possible, according to his own lights, and to achieve a sense of security. To accomplish this, you must first find your optimal stress level, and then use your adaptation energy at a rate and in a direction adjusted to your innate qualifications and preferences” (Selye 1974: 110). The subject must center itself on finding a proper level, an adequate balance and adjustment between what is damaging and what is stimulating for itself and how this level can be obtained through self-mastery. It involves a variety of strategies for how an experience can be configured differently, be specified in new ways and reshaped through the work on the sheer perception of each individual. These forms of reconfiguration are only available to the individual who, above all else, is prepared to acquire certain forms of knowledge of him- and herself.

Distress is not only counterposed to eustress, but is a state that can be recast through a style of thought into a less distressful mode of being or even transformed to an experience of eustress. In the work of Selye and his peers, these techniques are proposed under headings such as a “code of behavior”, a “model for coping with stress”, a “philosophy of gratitude”, a “guide of conduct” and so forth, outlining, among other things, different personality traits and how they can be modified, or how certain “reaction patterns” can be overcome²⁵. Under the guiding light of self-analysis, certain experiences can be assembled in other ways or recast in a different light, in order to obtain the right balance: “*Stress, at its best primes you for your*

²⁵ The workings of the mind of the individual is, however, regulated according to very simple mechanisms and easily placed into typologies of popularized psychology, considering the complexity of biological structures that unfold in the interior of our bodies. We have, for instance, the “goal-oriented person” and the “positive thinker”, prone towards experiencing stress in positive terms, characterized by handling pressure by way of a “joy of achievement” and being “more conducive generally to success” (Selye 1980: 9). Opposed to this group of individuals, is obviously the “negative-thinking person”, who might not experience a lot of stress, but nonetheless will come out of things less satisfied, perform poorer and not obtain the healthy state he or she otherwise could. In this context, Selye refers time and again to the mantra of *reaction*: “*It isn’t the quantity of stress that’s bad, it’s the kind and the reaction to it*” (Selye 1980: 9).

peak performance at work or play and rouses your interest in the world. At its worst it can interfere with your ability to think and act straight (...) The wisest course is to try to recognize the circumstances that sound alarm bells and learn to manage the harmful stressors. This self-knowledge can help you sidestep some of the stressors that sour life and make the most of those that enhance it” (Selye 1979: 18).

The bio-psycho-social-being

Central to this self-knowledge, is a puzzling race against nature itself. Human beings are not strictly confined to the limits of their own nature, but can, provided the right means, amend, revise and even transform certain conditions of the nature that constitute our bodies and the way it informs our minds. The malleability of the individual’s perception can overrule and master the “nature of our bodies”, through which reality can be experienced differently: “*nature doesn’t always know best*”, as Selye states (Selye 1980: 9). According to this line of thought, the challenge is therefore to find the codes to “outclever” the body and its reaction patterns; each individual has to learn how to take charge and dominate the forces of his and her own nature. However, alongside this transient and malleable conception, we also encounter another form of nature, which is charged with completely different superiority. This is a “true nature” of human beings that has been distorted by misunderstood promotions of philanthropy and altruistic efforts in Western societies, and a form of nature that remain fixed and solid: “*We can do nothing about having been built to work and work primarily for our own good. Organs that are not used (muscles, bones, even the brain) undergo inactivity atrophy. Every living being looks out for itself first of all. There is no example in Nature of a creature guided exclusively by altruism and the desire to protect others*” (Selye 1976: 451). Selye continuously filters out two such distinct “natures”, one that works through laws over which no human being can possibly exercise authority, and which designs the thorough, invisible commands that can only be affirmed by our social behavior. Moreover, on the other hand, there is a nature which can be transformed, bent and modified, if only individuals allow themselves to become aware of how they react to threats and dangers. In other words, in this other form of nature, the perception of each individual can defeat and surmount the nature embedded in our bodies. In these two outlines of “nature” then, *perception* either is under the spell of it or simply detached from its laws.

The two variables described here, the economy of the body and the regulation of self-analysis, composites the individual in a particular kind of prism; it appears as a “*bio-psycho-social-being*”²⁶, linking the elements of physical rouse observed in the interior body to the imperative of balance, requiring a certain knowledge of and a certain work on the self. Selye accordingly encourages people to find their own stress level: “*People differ with regard to the amount and kind of work they consider worth doing to meet the exigencies of daily life and to assure their future security and happiness. In this respect, all of us are influenced by hereditary predispositions and the expectations of our society. Only through planned self-analysis can we establish what we really want; too many people suffer all their lives because they are too conservative to risk a radical change and break with traditions*” (Selye 1976: 452).

The bio-psycho-social-being is therefore a creature born out the efforts to interlink biological observations in the interior body with a set of normative prescriptions of self-management and organization. As such, the physical body, the mind and the sociality of each individual is sought bundled together in the state of stress and the attached requisites for handling it. This intertwinement, found across the models and prescriptions for self-management pinned out in the name of a physiological science, joints the body, the “sociality” and the mind of individuals as equal, interrelated targets of intervention. The imbalance found in the interior of the body must be “balanced out” in mental capacities and in the social life, through the different planes of identity that is thought to make up a person, such as work, family life or leisure. What is important to notice is how this whole imperative of balance melds biological, emotional and psychological reactions into a single mold. The question of balance brings in a grid of analysis (“self-analysis”) and intervention that unites a physiological process to that of social and psychological processes. The biological system is, as such, promoted to function as a representation of social and psychological *problems*. This point has also been made by Abbott (1990). In his exposition of the tradition of stress research, he notes how this scientific genre has been made up of four distinct, but overlapping themes, which adds up to the notion of the “stressful individual”; anxiety, performance, adjustment and what he refers to as “mentalism”. While there is no underlying unity holding these themes together in a cohesive epistemological framework, they all point towards how stress research is informed by strong cultural undercurrents in the contemporaneous society, far from any conception of a “pure” science. The elements of “culture” making up this branch of research point towards a “*janus-*

²⁶ A term used by Selye. See Smith and Selye 1979: 1953

faced” subject, according to Abbott, which “*is at once damaged by society and maladjusted to it*” (Abbott 1990: 442).

The construction of the “*bio-psycho-social-being*” can be summed up according to the two forms of contingency which it seeks to interlink:

A) The contingency of the environment we reside in. The environment is portrayed as fundamentally unreliable; any living inhabitant might suddenly be forced to adapt to a completely new situation by way of struggle or flight, e.g. the environment will be posing more or less demanding requirements of action towards us, often without any form of warning in advance. We might or we might not succeed to act in accordance with these new requirements, which can be a matter of life and death or just greeting the new superior at work.

B) The contingency of our own perception of the environment: Human beings will respond to the same external threat with different levels of reaction “internally”, which, according to Selye and his peers, can be explained by the difference in perception between individuals.

Stress as pathology and self-suspension of pathology

Just as with the case of neurasthenia, a lot of debate is stirred up concerning the difficulties of finding a proper place for the concept of stress in the differentiating scheme of health and illness. Is stress really a disease at all? From the offset, this question attracts quite some attention, and the pathological status of stress becomes a source of considerable dispute. For instance, it is proposed that “*(...) we might be better off without the term “stress” at all, given our present crude level of insight, but perhaps the notion of a generic term which somehow ties together the threatening or taxing demands of the environment on living organisms strikes some deep, responsive chord within us which keeps alive the use of “stress” terminology in spite of all the confusion it creates*” (Mason 1975: 8). The very confusion of the concept is, up to the 1980’s, repeatedly a frame of debate among researchers, therapists and other practitioners; its lack of clarity, its general vagueness, its “simple-minded invocation” which has “*done as much to retard research in this area as did the concepts of the miasmas at the time of the discovery of microorganisms*” (Casell 1976: 107).

The backdrop for a number of these debates is how the notion of stress seems to be charged with a particular kind of pathology: “*Stress is a (perceived) substantial imbalance between demand and response capability, under conditions where failure to meet demands has*

important (perceived) consequences” (McGrath 1970: 20). Stress is referred to as the “*just-to-be-ill syndrome*”, whereby its “vagueness” is pinpointed as a central feature of the experience itself. Throughout Selye’s research, we find descriptions of *stressors*, what produces stress, as *non-specific demands*, but also the effect of these demands remain non-specific. In other words, any situation can trigger stress and this stress can manifest itself in an extreme variety of symptoms (Engel 1985). The key term provided by Selye here is *adaptation*, which is juxtaposed to *maladaptation*. A human being will, accordingly, to various degrees react and manage to handle the various non-specific demands posed by its environment. Adaptation then, designates the individual capacity to handle pressure and maladaptation the lack of such a capacity.

Secondly, as we have seen in this chapter, stress is designed as a pathology that is not only counterposed to “health” but seeks to simultaneously describe itself according to notions of both *health* and *illness*. As a pathology it can only appear on the condition of its self-suspension as pathology, as what I have previously described as de-pathologization. The pathology of stress can only be made visible to the subject on the condition that it is exclusively produced within him- or herself. It is a condition that at once has to be discovered as a symptom (pathology) and re-visualized as a potential source of energy and productivity (health). In the semantics prepared to describe this phenomenon, a number of binary oppositions are mobilized, such as the perception opposed to environment, adaptation opposed to maladaptation, transformation opposed to nature and stress opposed to death. Stress is designated as both a precondition of life and an illness, and these two axes are, moreover, conceived as a continuum, in which the experience of stress is contingent upon the outlook and perception of each individual.

Between the two concepts of neurasthenia and stress there is a continuity of an “overloaded” subjectivity. As such, the concept of stress re-articulates a number of elements introduced in neurasthenia, such as the problematization of the self; the difference between the self and its environment, the mental disproportions of the individual, the necessity of self-assessment and release of “fixation”. But there is also rupture and discontinuity. Contrary to the concept of neurasthenia, stress is not conceived of as a symptom of a pathology which has been normalized in society. It does not imply a pathologization of society, of which the individual “case” is a response or condensed expression. The modern individual is not inscribed in this pathology as a tragic figure, as was the case with the neurasthenic. The stressful individual’s tragedy is his own, it is not derived from society, but seen as an expression of the individual’s

own failed adjustment to the more or less excessive demands posed by his environment. Stress is therefore not a normalized pathology but a normal state which can readily become a pathology. Stress designates an illness on the condition of its “health”, in which the pathological becomes an inability to handle the normal:

excessive stress as illness 7 excessive stress as source of growth and performance 7 **stress as normality (source of life)**

Summary

Central to both Cannon's proposal of *homeostasis* and Selye's concept of *stress*, is the necessity of at once both maintaining and stimulating perceived threats and dangers among individuals as well as providing techniques, models and "codes" for handling and balancing out their potentially harmful effect. They both bring forward and formulate applications and instructions for how different forms of stimuli can be directed towards individuals, within a framework aiming at the motivation of a *natural state* embedded in human beings, which has either been neglected or not fully rewarded in modern society. As such, there is also a relentless cultural critique at stake here: While Cannon, as we have seen, wages a stark disapproval of pacifism, Selye opposes the widespread misconception of altruism throughout society²⁷. These contemporaneous fashions are thought to *conceal* the true nature of human beings, such as the martial virtues or basic self-sufficiency ingrained in us.

The biologist Harold Wolff, formulates the question of stress in order "*to indicate that state within a living creature which results from the interaction with the organism with noxious stimuli or circumstances*" (Wolff, quoted from Hinkle 1973). Just like *balance*, the theme of *stimulation* serves at as an epistemological indicator that pinpoints various problems that needs to be uncovered, often referred to as the "person-environment problem". In continuation of this, this theme of stimulation likewise also binds a physiological operation to a social and psychological conduct. Stress as *distress* is as such designed to convey a state of exception, which, when it occurs, alerts the body through an increased production of adrenaline and so forth. With the introduction of *eustress*, however, this state of exception changes its fundamental tenets, because this unusual state becomes completely contingent upon the individual's own perception and interpretation of external events. In other words, the concept of stress now becomes psychologized in a way that was previously not the case. This rapture is also evident from the new horizon of psychologized themes which are actualized in the physiological research on stress, such as *appraisal*, *coping*, *balance* and *self-analysis*. When eustress is introduced, the horizon of problems starts to appear as a matter of self-management. In other words, the contingency of each individual's perception is made into a key explanatory scheme, which through means of self-assessment, is encouraged to determine how the experience of stress can be evaluated differently and handled by other measures. The individual must provide him- and herself the means to "allocate" the stress from a non-productive to a productive circuit of experience. "Being stressed" is now a state

²⁷ Selye proposes instead an "*egotistic altruism*" (Selye 1974: 134-136)

relying upon the self-investigation of subjects, which must ask him- and herself a number of questions as to how this exact experience – of tiredness, headache, anxiety, insomnia, unease – is actually the symptom of stress or something else, how it can be handled, reduced, by which means etc.

The problem of stimuli is not so much about incenting the individual to unveil for him- and herself the actual nature he or she is composed of, but it rather revolves around how individuals can be geared towards more enhanced performances and obtain increased well-being, at work or in sport and leisure, through a combination of inducements of arousal and continuous self-assessments. We have seen how *competition* makes out one such proposition; other proposals include targeting the emotional register of individuals, by stimulating a sense of joy, achievement and satisfaction in daily life. The stressful individual is also encouraged to make use of practical techniques such as setting goals, formulating clear plans and marking off achievements being made. There is, however, a fine line drawn between commitment and exhaustion, and between indolence and overachievement. Again, also the incentives of *stimulation* have to obey the imperative of balance. For instance, individuals should take certain considerations when they embark upon the quest for excellence, so that this excellence is not confused with a destructive strive for perfection: “*Everyone has his own limits. For some of us, these may be near the maximum, for others near the minimum, of what man can attain. But within the limits set by our innate abilities, we should strive for excellence, for the best we can do. Not for perfection – for that is almost always unattainable – and setting it as an aim can only lead to the distress of frustration*” (Selye 1974: 111-112). Stress is necessary to perform and enact and simply live, on the one hand. On the other hand, stress can turn into an illness if it comes in excessive amounts. This illness, however, can be suspended as an illness once the individual acquires a “perceptive” balance within him- or herself.

Walter B. Cannon and Hans Selye’s writings offer a physiological concept, which from the outset is carefully intertwined with ideals of how this condition can and should be *managed*. It is striking how much effort it is put into this intertwinement by these researchers themselves; Selye, for instance, publishes several books that consists partly of physiological research and partly of models for conduct, behavior and coping with stress. Here we can find clear traces of how stress management always entails a form of self-management, and how the condition of stress always entails a self-generated condition – and thereby also a

responsibility to work on the self. The condition of stress as it is formulated by the pioneering researchers is from the start filtered into its own possible solution, by way of self-assessment.

In the next chapter I will describe how the stressful individual is asked to reach into itself and look for answers.

CHAPTER 7

Self against self. Stress and self-help

“Work can make you sick – and work can make you happy. Which one happens depends on who you are, what you do and how you are treated at work” (Robertson and Cooper 2011: 3)

“In some instances, we face involuntarily emotional storms – challenges that come to us unbidden. Depending on how we manage them, they can either overwhelm us or serve as an opportunity for growth” (Loehr and Schwartz 2005: 79)

“The key to maintaining balance is in finding the appropriate level of stress to be productive, well and happy” (Coke and Mierau 2005: 319)

During the 1970's, in addition to being scattered across the established mass media, stress proliferates throughout society in the medium of popularized self-help literature, often comprised in small self- help guides and pieces promising scientific solutions to the problems encountered by the stressful individual. As such, a self-help book will typically offer the reader not only *“an improved understanding of stress, [but] also provides an effective program for coping with stress”* (Woolfolk and Richardson 1979: vii). In other words, what is presented here *are* efforts of formulating a cure for the “modern anxiety”.

The narratives found in these self-help guides follow a particular line of inquiry. First, the reader will be introduced to elaborate accounts of the physiological processes targeting different parts of the body when an “alarm” is triggered, in addition to a typology of psychological responses to such alarms. These facts are typically presented as intrinsic for the ability to change the stressful situation; you have to know your body in order to understand yourself. Set against this background, the reader will then be faced with his and her own contingency; how the pattern that molds together perception and response can be revised, alternated and reframed with the help of various techniques and modes of self-inquiry. In equal parts, we find the exposition of “the nature of stress” and “the coping of stress”. The different strategies proposed by the self-help literature reveal an obvious affinity to and continuation of the forms of self-management recommended by Hans Selye and his contemporaneous researchers. The following account is based on a reading of the self-help literature on stress that starts to appear in the aftermath of Selye, and is most often not written by physiologists or medical professionals, but by actors operating in the non-medical realm of the so-called “psy-disciplines”, such as psychotherapists and psychologists. Even though this


literature spans from the 1970's up to present times, I will not historicize this development, but rather treat it as an expression of an emergent semantics, that does not, as far as I can determine, undergo any noteworthy rapture or transformation in this period.

Symptomatically, many of the self-help books first published in the 1970's are reprinted throughout the following decades, gaining status as "classics" and are still expanding in circulation. Furthermore, it must be noted that this is not an investigation of the concept of self-help as such, but rather, more specifically, how the notion of stress is conjured up with and seen as critically relying on the means of self-help. As it has been stated elsewhere, the *notion of stress* and the *necessity of stress-management* is closely tied together, already from the offset of stress research. When I choose to examine the self-help literature more closely, it is also because of its actualization in the organizations themselves, where, as we will see, the semantics of self-help occupy a significant position. The different guides and practical advice contained in the self-help literature often appear first in the US, but rapidly find their way into European and Scandinavian countries, as translations and through management- and occupational health journals.

"Managing your lifestyle", *"changing beliefs"*, *"resolving interpersonal conflicts"*, *"relaxation"*, *"altering your response"*, *"transforming threat into challenge"* and *"maintaining a stress-resilient lifestyle"*. These are a few among the many different themes, aiming at enhanced self-awareness, that constitute the remedies of stress afforded by the emergent self-help literature. The different themes mentioned here are indicative for the key demand that the individual should articulate upon itself: change. The zenith of change (within the subject) is observed as contingent upon a distinction between person and environment.

The concept of stress hosts a series of discrepancies, which the different forms of stress management programs seeks to balance out. These discrepancies are embodied in a number of differences, such as that between the resources available to the employee and the volume of tasks to be carried out, and the difference between availability and privacy. Other discrepancies point towards the difference between the non-explicated expectations of the management and the employees' own expectations, the difference between the present and the future, the difference between coping and illness, and the erupting, technology-driven displacement of the difference between the time at work and the time at home. They are themes that strikingly encapsulate the same concerns as those forwarded by a large number of those researchers who, in one way or another, are trying to find a solution to the so-called work-life balance.

However, these discrepancies are most often outlined and problematized according to the difference between the person (perception) and the environment (reality), which is a primary distinction in the self-help literature. For instance, stress is a condition that usually appears manageable only at the side of the person in this distinction, while the environment on the other hand is charged with solid and often inflexible qualities. There are, in other words, different degrees of agency indicated between the two sides. The different programs, manuals and guides are designed to provide a transformation from distress to eustress and from anxiety to relief, which departs from a problematization of the self “*as a unified centre of personal agency which can act upon itself, others and the world. This conception presents the individual as the sole ontological pivot of experience*”, as Heidi Marie Rimke precisely puts it (Rimke 2000: 64). Furthermore, these manuals and guides require the stressful individual to inspect the distinction *itself*, between him- or herself, on one side and the environment, on the other. Stress management relies on techniques that brings about an individualization of the environment of each individual and an effort to re-constitute the relationship between reality and perception. The self appearing in stress management can be formalized as the unity between a “case” requiring intervention and a self-observation which must re-adjust. The subject must at once make itself into an object of intervention and an observing subject:

object of intervention  observing subject

The unobservability of emotions

The stressful individual is a victim of his or her own fixed perceptual patterns, in the form of “automatic thoughts”, unnecessary worry and mistaken beliefs. Each person is accordingly equipped with an internal voice that nags, warns and triggers arousal, but, additionally, there is also the presence of *emotions*, the unvoiced medium that often cause a *sense* of being stressed or anxious, detached from the subject’s awareness. “Mistaken beliefs” are rooted in such emotions, endangering the clear-cut rationality of each individual. Emotions and the potential falsehood they constitute holds a parasite-like incertitude and deviousness, where they crop up into the beliefs of each subject and ignites disarray, misguidance and excitement all the while the individual remains unaware of this. In order to regain control and balance, one has to set out to uncover these hidden thoughts and silent emotions. To take an example from a self-help guide entitled “*Stress Management for Dummies*”:

“Your automatic thinking can be incredibly strong and believable. When you notice these automatic (usually negative) thoughts, you believe they are reasonable and appropriate. But often they’re not. They can be distortions of your reality and create a good deal of unneeded distress. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to help you uncover these hidden, automatic thoughts:

- *What am I so distressed about this event or situation?*
- *What might I be saying to myself about what happened to create this anger (or any other stress emotion)?*
- *If a friend asked me why I was so stressed about this event or situation, what would I tell him?*

This kind of inquiry can help bring to the surface thoughts that may otherwise go unnoticed”.

The guide proceeds to elaborate how *“uncovering these automatic thoughts and bringing them into awareness is an important step in changing your thoughts”* (Elkin 2013: 194-195).

However, the notion of *belief* is not only conceived of as an affective mediation of falsehood opposed to a distanced and rational self-observation. Some also connote *belief* as a pure means, which can work either productively or inefficiently, as Woolford and Richardson: *“We commonly think that the most important thing about beliefs is whether they are true or false. On the contrary, the most important thing about beliefs is not their truthfulness, but their usefulness. It can be enormously helpful to you to evaluate beliefs in terms of their usefulness rather than their truth or falsehood. Stress-related beliefs are more like value judgements than beliefs about facts. In a real sense, there is no objective way to determine their truthfulness. Beliefs are more or less fruitful guides to action that need to be evaluated based on their results. They are nothing more or less than either effective or ineffective tools for living. The pertinent question is, do your beliefs maximize self-respect and pleasure in living?”* (Woolfold and Richardson 2008 [1979]: 112). To these authors, the point is not to enhance a correspondence with any form of “external actuality”, or phrased differently; the cognition of reality, as such, is not the ultimate aim at stake. In this case, the elaboration on the singular, unique perception contained within each person should rather organize the individual self-inquiry along the improvement of his or her well-being and productivity. Opposite to Elkin in the first quote, these authors are not concerned with *what* individuals believe, but how their beliefs efficiently can produce *other* results within themselves. Belief is here fashioned by its capacity and not according to its primary lack of truthfulness.

Nevertheless, emotions are always attributed with certain features of susceptibility and delusion, leading the individual astray from the clarity of perception. The dubiousness of emotions is to be found in their immediate *unobservability* – they refrain from disclosure and transparency, but works through the body, in the shadows of conscious thought. These emotions hold each individual captive of its own mind, producing beliefs that ingrain themselves as truths, (mis)leading the subject through commotion and disillusion. In other words, the condition of stress is fashioned by an overflow of negative emotions on the cost of a clear perception, positive energy and rational assessment. In order to handle stress, one thus must wage in an emotional struggle *against* these emotions; feelings must be localized, their infliction must be assessed and their turmoil diminished. The stressful individual should accordingly embark upon an *excavation* in the self; the secret layers of emotional subjugation in the mind must be dug out, and the hidden frenzy and distortion they impose must be unveiled. The subject should always start by inquiring its own individuality and ask, “*why do I feel this?*” and “*could I feel otherwise?*”. Only through such acts of self-inquiry is it possible to redeem the unobservability of emotions observable and make the “automatic thinking” come to a halt.

In foregoing parts of this thesis, we have seen how emotions is introduced as an element which allows for the difference between pathology and normality to be set anew in organizations, in which the register of personal experience is seen as both a precondition for the health of the employee and as a source of new ailments. Phrased differently, illness goes from being diagnosed from the outside (observed as a fit, injured or unhealthy body) to also being diagnosed from the “inside” of each individual (the personal experience of contentment, well-being, meaning). When emotions are made into the center of attention in stress management, however, they are largely equated with the intrusion of “irrationality” that necessitate a reform of thought and instinct. The stressful individual is framed as a case of “emotional self-seduction”, which acquires him to un-learn himself, because his emotions and sense of instinct is not in line with reality. In other words, the reference to emotions has a significantly different meaning than what was the case in the emotional and therapeutic codification of health and illness, that start to develop from the 1940’s. In stress management, emotions are at once cast as an intrusion that must be excluded *and* as an invigoration that must be re-included to fulfill a different self, as we will see.

The negative thoughts and the constant worry ingrained by emotions, gears the individual towards a diffuse state of alarm and unease: “*So it is stress of a peculiarly subjective sort that*

is the principal marauder of our society: not the pressure of a gun against the ribs, but the nagging worry about being mugged; not outright competition from a rival stalking the same forest for game, but a cutting memo circulating in a quiet office organization; not the dreaded appearance of diphtheria symptoms in a member of the family, but the uneasy feeling that one's child is out courting unhappiness and destruction, our instinctive body responses are of little use against problems such as these. Nevertheless, we go right on responding, with the result that we not only stew in the problems - we stew in the responses too” (McQade and Aikman 1993: 127).

The authors liken stress to the performance of a ventriloquist theater, completely attached to and moved by someone else's will. The self, embedded in emotional turmoil, is perceived as the passive and ordained prerequisite of the body. Being stressed is accordingly observed as the opposite of an actual “self-will”, it involves feeling and sensing someone else's feelings and senses. Distress is an exterior, alien emotion and state that the subject unknowingly makes itself the host of, letting it feed into the core of its own individuality, making the perception of reality and self-knowledge turn sour and blurred. In other words, the state of stress makes individuals lose their own actual voice and outlook, they only perceive and speak through the deception of negative thoughts and emotions fueled by the body. As such, nothing is actually true for subject that finds itself in a state of alarm and worry, as he or she is thoroughly deceived of his or her own reality. The fundamental loss of the ability to sense and assess reality calls upon a scrutiny of perception; the subject's “self-talk” and interpretation of the world, its sense of reason and knowledge of itself. A condition seen as fundamentally alien to the subject, levied from an external and dubious source, must be conquered and resolved with the means of mapping the “forces” that play out beneath or in in the outskirts of conscious thought.

Detachment and accountability: emotional re-constitution

“Stress management is about finding the inner readiness within each individual”

(Arbeidsmiljø [Working Environment], no. 6, 2002: 15).

The question is then, how can the subject obtain a reality that is already has lost? How does the subject regain its own “self”, when the self has been taken hostage to an alien state of turmoil and distraction? Furthermore, with what means is the individual supposed to overcome and break free of the restrictions and subjugations imposed on itself?

Within the framework of stress management, a new form of reality can be granted through a re-constitution of the difference between the self and its environment. The different strategies designed for this, seeks to hold the individual accountable to itself for both *how reality is perceived* and for *how it can be perceived otherwise*, e.g. how the premise of contingency can be used as a means to perceive, think and act *differently*.

A whole epistemology of cognition is built up around the concept of stress, often put forward in binary schemes, in which the world mainly can be experienced as either “emotional” and “instinctive” or as “rational”. However, since emotions cannot be excluded from the self, since people cannot completely “de-emotionalize”, the subject must pin out itself as rational and detached through what we might call “emotional re-constitutions”. There can be no solution to the problem of stress unless the subject of this unease opens up, looks inside and confide. The stressful subject simply carries too much weight; she is perplexed by her own continuous stream of reflection, becomes tangled up in mesmerizing images of herself, as she projects herself into worrisome pasts and futures. She is at once caught up by self-reflection and has lost track of it, she both contains too many feelings and does not yet “know” how she is seduced and controlled by these emotions. The paradoxical state of stress is not viewed according to its deficiency and lack, but by an abundancy and surplus of impulses, reflection, motives and emotions that slip away from control and regulation. Being stressed is accordingly a result of containing too much.

A certain form of knowledge is required of the self, then, as already mentioned, that seeks to question the forces of will that enables us to see and act, simply to “be” in this world. It is framed as a fundamentally epistemological quest – how do you know what you know about yourself and the world you inhabit? The answer to which can only be found by “putting it into words”. The stressful subject should thus engage in different forms of “speech acts” and self-assessments, that not only makes her capable of gaining insight into the turmoil of her inner life, but also makes her attuned to the specificity of her own difficulties, that above all requires a unique, individualized trajectory of cause and effect on the basis of her personality (childhood, family life, career, ambitions, collegial relations, “weaknesses”, “strengths”, traits etc.). Against this backdrop, the management of stress brings about an individualization of the subject, in the sense that she is expected to condition her experience of stress by invoking her own personality and “lifeworld”, which appear as codes for both detecting the pathology and handling it (and thereby realize that it does not have to be a pathology).

A large number of stress policies and management exercises seek to enhance the self-relationship of the employee by different means. The employee is encouraged to surveil her own reaction patterns, to question her own impulses and retract from the immediacy of her emotions:

“Think yourself on a scale from 1-10. How much pressure do you feel that you’re exposed to? How much of this pressure comes from your surroundings and how much of it comes from yourself? What do you feel should be the appropriate pace for you? Often one will experience that a significant amount of the load on your shoulders is really your own luggage. This is because you have put your own demands and expectations above those of the employer or colleague. Many become self-restricted and lose their drive, because they constantly want to perform above their peers. The willingness to take on tasks undermines our common sense and reason. We tend to take a lot of responsibility for other people’s work, or we lean too far forward. Many of us are our own worst critics. We allow saying things to ourselves that we would never say to others. We evaluate and devaluate our own efforts in ways that would have caused labor disputes and conflicts had we only done it against our own colleagues. “If it’s not a 100 %, it’s not worth anything!” Other examples of similar “mind-tricks” includes “Since I didn’t make it last time, I’m probably going to fail now as well!”, “If I actually did make it, it was due to luck!”, “When I don’t make it, it’s my own fault and nobody’s but mine!”

More often than we are aware of, this inner voice takes control of us. It increases a sense of pressure without us noticing how it pushes us around. What would be useful to reflect upon considering these forms of inner and outer pressure? If you are able to identify this form of pressure, you have an advantage, because it makes it possible for you to prevent further distress. If you are able to develop a stronger sense of pressure control, you can reduce some of your needs for stress control” (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 2, 2006: 32-33).

“The possible sources of stress is most efficiently mapped by conducting individual conversations on a regular basis in addition to systematic surveys. These methods are complimentary, where an in-depth interview is useful in order to detect causes and find solutions, while surveys on the work environment might be useful in order to gather statistical material” (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 7, 2006: 49)

The self is bounded - and deceived - by its continuous self-assessment, an “inner voice”, which inflicts its misguidance through emotional upheaval. The state of stress prevents access to the “actual” reality, which is hidden behind the layers of urgency; the stressful subject equates its own reality with the negative instincts mediated by emotions and attitudes, whereby disappointments and distress effectively is realized rather than a “productive and well-balanced performance”. In order to handle this, the subject is encouraged to engage in what we might call strategies of detachment, which makes it possible to shield the self from the abruptness of its own emotions and misconceived attitudes.

In other words, the world, as it appears for the stressful employee is fashioned according to a series of misrepresentations and forgeries brought about within him- and herself, such as self-criticism or towering, but misconceived ambitions. A self that lets itself become inflicted and disposed according to such immediate “states” will lose the autonomy of its reason and the authenticity of its self-relationship. Conversely, stress is sought identified, mapped, prevented, explained, analyzed and cured along the thresholds of the subject’s orientation towards reality. The “detachment-strategy” seeks to re-establish an effective and authentic relation between the self and its outlooks and attitudes against a bewilderment caused by self-produced “noise”, in the form of emotional disturbance and misguided attitudes. The self is caught up – unknowingly - in a struggle against itself, by which it can either surrender to its own immediate emotions or seek to identify and antagonize the forces operating beneath and beyond the conscious realm of reflection and reason. It is in this regard that emotions are thought to hold a dubious quality, which seduce and deceive without revealing their own presence, superimposing an impulse-ridden regime of immediacy, timidity, chaos and alarm. While this results in a defeat of balance, productivity and self-authenticity, it simultaneously produces a perverted and destructive experience of reality within the subject. Emotions make the self indistinguishable to itself. In the diverse and vast semantics that is brought forward to describe this problematic self-environment relation, the discovery of pathologies as self-imposed pathologies is at the centerfield of both diagnosis and treatment. Stress can only be detected as a self-pathologization, as it is stated in the quote above: *“We allow saying things to ourselves that we would never say to others. We evaluate and devalue our own efforts in ways that would have caused labor disputes and conflicts had we only done it against our own colleagues”*

The stressful individual tormented and deceived by the enthrallment of its own emotions, is therefore offered a “field of possible action” centered on the instalment of a self-observation,

that can afford a social remoteness to the urgency of impulse, affect and hyper-reflection. The continuous and critical self-assessment that imposes itself by affective allurements is sought “neutralized” through another, distancing form of self-assessment, which seeks to make the subject accountable for the “authorship” through which it produces its own, singular and highly personal “lifeworld” and experiences. On the one hand, the stressful subject must detect how its pathology contains a unique and personal trajectory (personal traits, background, family situation, etc.). On the other hand, this pathology is all the while also a completely de-personalized and general condition, with its diagnosis of emotional excess, inability to retrieve from the “mental” realm of work, self-production of negative and false beliefs etc. Together, these two variables make up a strategy that aims at inscribing the self in its own production of contingency, by making it examine and question its own “forces of will”:

“The point is to avoid becoming a victim of your own negative thoughts. If you find that your thoughts are filled with negative content, try turning your attention to what's good at the moment and become more aware of what's right for you. From thinking that you cannot manage something, move your attention to what it actually takes, what resources you have, who you can contact, etc. This way you may experience better internal control and greater influence on your thoughts and actions, while strengthening both your self-esteem and self-image. Here is a basic question for all those who think their boss and colleagues are asking too much of them: Are you sure that they are actually expecting this much or is it just something you imagine?”(Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 6, 2008: 20)

“How and on which tasks do I spend my time? What kind of balance do I have between the different arenas of my life? Do I like what I do or would I rather be doing something else?” (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 2, 2006: 32).

“Our emotions influence our ability to think and what we think. Strong, negative emotions like anger, despair, anxiety and self-load are more challenging to deal with than more toned-down emotions like irritation, sadness, worry and disappointments of oneself. The strong emotions will surely trigger inexpedient thoughts and reactions that will increase the level of stress. Many will easily end up being trapped in thought patterns that turn out to be futile” (Arbeidsmiljø [Working Environment], no. 5, 2002: 32).

“We must do our best to facilitate a balanced life, and we can work on how to accept things that remain out of our reach. Additionally, we can change the way we think about our own

stress, because the very way we think about our own stress makes a considerable difference. It cannot only decrease your sense of stress, but also the overall negative health effects caused by your stress. Maybe an improved knowledge on the connection between stress and bodily reactions might enable you to adapt another mindset on the stress you feel” (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 1, 2014: 54)

In order to overcome the allure of his or her own emotions, the employee needs to observe him- and herself with a distanced and super-critical gaze – that is, an observation from which it can isolate, distinguish, analyze and pin down the affective intrusion brought on to the core of its own being. This is enacted as a mode of dis-identification; what is required is an externalization of the emotions caught up in the self, which enforce self-criticism and loss of self-control. Phrased differently, the subject must turn into an abstract figure, conceive of itself as a “case”, assess the interplay between the self and its environment as if it was an external observer. In this enactment, however, the stressful subject paradoxically oscillates between its own inside and outside; it is over-reflective, yet not sufficiently aware of itself; too self-critical, but not adequately examining the critique brought on by itself. What seems to be the case is an antidote that seeks to enlarge and extend the sources of the pathological state it has set out to dissolve and put an end to.

Among the most notable strategies in this regard is the use of so-called positive emotions and thoughts. When people cannot simply retract from their emotions, they must be conditioned and transformed into a state that brings ease rather than worry and well-being rather than distress. In their book on well-being, productivity and happiness at work, Ivan Robertson and Gary Cooper expounds the difference between negative and positive emotions. In their account, *“much of the research on the negative effects of workplace stress supports the idea that prolonged experience of negative emotions depletes psychological resources and makes people more vulnerable to physical and psychological illness (...)”* (Robertson and Cooper 2011: 48). Negative emotions are accordingly considered to be among the main causes of stress as it drains individual’s ability to resist in periods facing pressure and struggle.

Furthermore, such emotions are equated with a strong self-impact of pathological anguish within the subject, because when such a negative register of feelings prevail it makes people more susceptible to different forms of illness. Negative emotions impose a sort of expanding injury caused by the self, making the individual weaker and less prone to keep track of both itself and the surroundings, and these emotions are thus perceived as a radical self-pathologization, causing physical as well as psychological illness.

Positive emotions, on the other hand, strengthens, sparkles, enhances and energizes; they amplify and maximize a “balanced presence” of the self in whatever turmoil or challenge the subject might face. This emotional register is attached to both treatment and prevention. Robertson and Cooper phrases it like this: *“Positive emotions appear to have a protective effect by broadening our range of responses and behaviors and also building our psychological resources, enabling us to cope more effectively. As well as providing a protective effect, positive emotions also help people to bounce back after experiencing adversity (Tugade and Fredrickson 2004) and they also help to undo the detrimental effects of negative emotions (Fredrickson et al. 2000). One of the most interesting areas where positive emotions have a beneficial effect is in the promotion of flexible thinking and creativity. Many laboratory studies have shown how positive emotions can help people to think more broadly and to be more creative in solving problems (...)”* (Robertson and Cooper 2011: 48).

Positive, “energetic” emotions are typically found in invigoration, confidence, joyfulness and serenity, whereas negative emotions are expressed through anger, fear, defense, anxiousness or resentment. A peculiar semantics of “*emotional capacity*” appears in the outline of this dichotomy, where feelings are economically and performatively coded, either as viable or unfeasible, all according to their potential for transaction, flexibility and investment: *“The primary markers of physical capacity are strength, endurance, flexibility and resilience. These are precisely the same markers of capacity emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Flexibility at the physical level, for example, means that the muscle has a broad range of motion. Stretching increases flexibility. The same is true emotionally. Emotional flexibility reflects capacity to move freely and appropriately along a wide spectrum of emotions rather than responding rigidly and defensively. Emotional resilience is the ability to bounce back from the experience of disappointment, frustration and even loss”* (Loehr and Schwartz 2005: 11).

The subject should accordingly train and supervise his or her own “emotional capacity” in order to sustain a strong defense against difficulties due to, for instance, conflicts or high demands at work. Emotions can be transformed into a vault of resources, acquiring the subject to develop, sustain and carefully apply these resources onto itself. The concept of positive versus negative emotions emerges in a scheme that seeks to arrange the “forces within the self” according to an accountability of progress and flexibility. Emotions are both made into a vantage point for the assessment of the performance of the self *and* as a vantage

point for the continuous improvement of the self, often appearing as analogous – as in the quote above - to the requirements of exercise, endurance, and enhancement found in the field of sports. The rather strange coupling of sports and emotions is not entirely developed for the purpose of metaphorical use, but can also be traced back to the stress physiologists and their work with sport and management in the 1960's.

When the concept of stress first appears in management literature in the 1960's, several physiologists of note, such as Ulf von Euler, Erik Hohwü Christensen and Levi Lennart, are giving their advice to organizations in terms of how to prevent and treat stress. They are drawing on, among other things, the work they have conducted with athletes. At this point, stress is something that is more often related to management rather than employees – managers are considered particularly disposed for stress, due to their long work hours and great responsibility. As far as I have been able to determine, in Norway, this notion of stress makes its first appearance in a management journal in 1960. It is then described as a possible cause of cardiac arrest targeting mainly managers and functionaries: *“In the English language, the concept of stress designates the wide range of pressure one might experience. A company doctor who conducts regular examinations of employees and staff in the organization, will after some period of time learn that functionaries – and above all those holding a leading position or those having climbed up the social ladder in a rapid pace – are working under a considerably more intense pressure and are more exposed to stress than the ordinary worker”* (Arbeidsgiveren [The Employer], no. 11, 1960: 167). In this version, stress becomes an illness strictly attached to what is perceived as a specifically managerial vulnerability. It is considered a form of “elite pathology”. The manager's personality and his specific individual traits such as underdeveloped or weak response-mechanisms is, according to these physiologists, a core problematic. The stressful manager is characterized by fear of change, by lacking the necessary skills to adjust to new surroundings, or by possessing unrealistic ambitions towards the organization or his own career. Stress is therefore primarily considered *“an individual response to something, not this something in itself. It is true enough that organizational and work-related conditions might cause stress. But the personality traits of this individual is the most decisive factor for the extent to which they experience stress”* (Arbeidsledelse og Teknikk [Occupational Management and Technology], no. 5, 1968: 11). Moreover, the question of health also revolves around personality, insofar as one always should consider whether or not one is “cut out for the job”. Thus, everyone who applies for a job involving management should carefully consider whether they are suited for

such a position – do they have the necessary skills, persistence, qualification and so forth. In other words, *health* relies on the abilities to strategically maneuver and make use of specific personality traits and fit these traits into the set realm of “managerialism”. To apply for a managerial position therefore also involves putting one’s health at stake if one’s personality turns out to offer a poor match with the needs and challenges posed by the job.

The health of the manager is therefore contingent upon a specific set of “skills” contained in his personality and stature. Personality is linked to health in a way that assumes a certain character and behavior unfolding in the position of the manager, making him capable or incapable of sustaining well-being and “good health”. Gradually, throughout the 1970’s and 80’s, these are problems that will be posed in similar ways towards the employee. Lennart Levi, a pioneer in the field of occupational stress research, points towards the individual differences in response to unsettling or alarming situations as a capital explanatory scheme. Together with fellow researchers, he conducts a number of experiments, in which subjects are exposed to seemingly stress-triggering mechanisms such as chords and noise. On the basis of these studies, it is proposed that while certain people will shrug it off without much distraction or effort, others might have a complete breakdown, due to variations in physical and psychological “stature”. Furthermore, stress reactions do not only necessarily follow a strict pattern of individual differences, the response will also vary with the same individual, depending on the time and place of the occurring event (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 3, 1968). Against this backdrop, Levi introduces the concept of *emotional endurance*, which he relates to the ability to handle pressure, hurriedness and critique at work. In line with this, Levi underscores the necessity of *training* and *exercise* in order to adapt such forms of emotional endurance: “*It is, phrased differently, not so that all forms of stress cause damage. In the appropriate amounts, pressure – we shall call it exercise – can stimulate and enhance our performance*” (Vern og Velferd [Protection and Welfare], no. 3, 1968: 44). The problem of stress is coded as a performative enactment that requires the subject to make use of its “inner life”, just as an athlete will make use of his or her own body in order to develop muscles and strengthen endurance. Stress can accordingly appear both vital and hurtful for the employee, and it is a matter of subtle technique and exercise to utilize the stress as a pathway to self-enrichment rather than self-destruction.

The first self-help book on stress to appear in Norway, comes perhaps not coincidentally from the field of sport psychology. The book, “*Handle stress – get fit*”, offers the reader ways of becoming “*more conscious of your negative reaction patterns*” and mental exercises to

develop a “*positive inner dialogue*” (Railo et al. 1981: 18). Willi Railo, who is among the authors, develops a variety of methods on handling stress based on the work he has conducted with professional athletes. Often, he claims, “inspired, go-getting employees” will compare themselves and their work to the ambitions found among top athletes, but they lack the sufficient techniques and methods for realizing their goals.²⁸

According to Railo, the idea that stress stems from a mismatch between time and resources is a common misconception: “*It’s commonly stated that “I don’t have time, I have too much on my schedule”. But the fact that time is scarce hardly offers a description of the problem.*” (Ledelse [Management], no. 3 1982: 38). Stress is rather, he claims, the result of a weak and undetermined management of time itself or caused by a lack of “sheltering” family life: “*The stress is even worsened because people remain transfixed on work as they come home, they cannot shut off the stream of impulses and take a rest. The impulses keep on working in the brain. These might often be thoughts on problems that were supposed to have been resolved. Or thoughts on worry and insecurity*” (Ledelse [Management], no. 3 1982: 38). Railo couples this to emotional training and adaptation; the ability to mentally “retrieve” from work; to detect negative thought patterns; to view problems as “positive obstacles”; to plan and look ahead rather than back at the misery and failure of the past.

In the semantics of emotional endurance and resilience, emotions become a sort of continuation of bodily conducts, that situates the “inner life” in a line between progression and impediment and enhancement of strength and augmentation of weakness. Emotions that, it is proposed, can actively be trained; they must be re-constituted.

²⁸ Ledelse [Management], no. 3 1982: 39

Scarcity as resource: The performativity of stress

As it is clear by now, stress is not only an emotional and physical state that, for instance, designates a certain lack of clarity or loss of balance that must be regained and refurnished within the subject. It is also continuously interlaced with and juxtaposed to the question of the employee's productivity and performance, which is a "mechanism" so present throughout the field of occupational health promotion that it almost seems out of sight. Greco and Stenner (2013) suggests that the strive for well-being should be understood as part of a shift towards new ideals of entrepreneurial subjectivity emerging in the late 1990's across different domains of society, and that corporate strategies of promoting well-being, resilience and optimism in the labor force are closely interlinked with productivity. However, as we have seen in foregoing part of this thesis, well-being is far from a novel concept in the 1990's, but reaches back to a confrontation with "technocratic" ideals of management, already evident in the 1940's. This is not insignificant, because it also implies that *well-being* is not only conjured up with a specifically entrepreneurial subjectivity arising from a neo-liberal "turn" of management in the 1990's, among other things because the reference to an interlinked "well-being" and "motivation" has been there throughout the latter part of the 20th century. As we have seen previously, the "problem of well-being" is a part of a semantics that allows for a new difference between pathology and normality to come into play in organizations, which invokes the self-relationship of the employee as a primary reference.

"Positive and negative voices" and "self-dialogue", emotional "layers", narrative accounts – all appearing within in the self, becomes key themes in the work of furnishing another identity, that can prove more resilient and effective in the embattlement of the self's stress. In this self-transformation, at the center stage of stress management, the individual circulates in an inverse economy of performative resources. The act of transformation aims at turning a state of scarcity, for instance by way of inefficiency or simply illness, into a resource itself. A peculiar notion of productivity thus appears, where the state of pathology is sought to spill over onto its opposite state of health and thereby create a better, more improved health. The state of emotional "deficit" is likewise sought turned into a surplus of emotions (and "emotional capacity"), by which the subject can link together the resources of his or her "inner life" with the performativity of the organization. It is about turning scarcity *into* a resource:

“You constantly hear how bad stress is for you; it’s damaging your health, jeopardizing your relationships, and hurting your performance. While these risks are real, recent research is showing that work strain, when managed correctly, can actually have a positive impact on productivity and performance. So how can you take the stress you thought was killing you and make it constructive?” (Gallo 2011)

“Stress is an opportunity when it enables a person to display the talents, skills, knowledge, and gifts with which he or she is endowed. Stress is an opportunity when one grows, learns, changes, and develops through the experience. Stress is an opportunity when it leads us to transform ourselves, adapt to changing circumstances, and live well. What makes the difference in whether stress is a challenge, a threat, a hindrance, or an opportunity lies in the eye of the beholder. (...) the purpose of self-care through preventive stress management is to become more competent in managing stress; to become healthier; and as a result of that competence and health, to be a stronger asset for the groups and organizations in which we participate” (Quick et al. 2013: 203/ 204)

“Although it’s unlikely that the pace or intensity of work will change much anytime soon, there’s a growing body of research that suggest certain types of development activities can effectively build the capacity for resilience. One approach is to focus on employees’ personal growth and development. When I was working at Google as the director of executive development, for example, we focused on helping managers create the “happiest, healthiest, and most productive workforce on the planet”. Investing in employee personal growth and development from this perspective is the first step in unleashing creativity, enabling potential, and supporting sustainable productivity” (Fernandez 2016)

Work strain can be a source of “growth”, the sense of unease and perpetual demands can be turned into a rush of performative urge, whatever you might think constitutes an illness can strengthen, enhance and release a vast potential within you; energy, creativity, well-being and so forth. In other words, the sickness within you is what also will make you healthier and stronger – insofar as you are willing and capable to recognize and work on it. This pseudo-Nietzschean promise of strength and self-change is afforded by an “intersecting” of different “lifeworld’s” and realms of experience. This change offers itself as an “inverse economy” opposite of a “zero-sum game”, whereby an increase in “effective stress management” and “well-being” potentially leads to improved personal relations, competence, happiness, performance etc. The transformation is a source of prosperity that radiates and spreads; to the

organization, to family life, to career, to creativity, to “personal growth”. Stress is, as we have seen, on the one side a condition that revolves around the self-pathologization of a surplus of “resources” held within the subject, in the form of (too many) impulses, emotions and reflections - that are assumed to paralyze and subjugate the subject’s access to a true self. On the other side, this is simultaneously considered to lead to a reduction of the performative resources available to the subject, weakening his or her energy, creativity, decisiveness, collegiality etc. The problem of stress never appears alone, as a condition that exclusively refers to itself. Instead, the problem of stress is consequently coupled with the performative failure and enhancement of the self, for which purpose a variety of exercises and therapeutic interventions are sought deployed. The “stress problem” is in other words rarely confined to a singular code, but appears instead through an interplay of pathological (symptom), therapeutic (treatment), power (self-release) and economic (resource-enhancement) codes. For now, I will leave aside how this interplay of codes can be analyzed as a simultaneity of incongruent perspectives, but rather see how different realms and surfaces of experience are sought interconnected. I will take up the question of how the problem of stress interlinks power and illness, once reach the next chapter.

We see then, how the subjects’ health and health, personal relationships and performance are challenged as distinct spheres that designate a personal as opposed to a professional domain (and the other way around), inhabited at different points in time and space (e.g. “nine-to-five”). These spheres neither should nor can be separated if the subject is to acquire a transformation of scarcity into resource. In other words, the vast array of “personal experience” should instead be invoked and linked together with experiences of work-related “progress”, difficulties and challenges. There are no boundaries between these domains in the causalities leading to the state of stress, according to the imperative of self-change, and the state of stress can only be mastered at the level of eradicating such boundaries by, among other things, zeroing in on how the state of stress unites, brings together and relocates the realms of personal and professional experiences. The knowledge required by the subject for this purpose is to be found at the points of intersection between work, collegial relations, personal attitudes, skills and competence, family life etc.: *“(…) if we do not take the total life context of workers into account, including family life, goals, and the personal meanings they see in their family as well as the working life (...), we fail fully to understand the stress and emotions they experience (...). Stress and family create the two most important sources of daily stress in modern adult life. In today’s world, where both husbands and wives often work*

and also accept responsibility for housework and childcare, this is especially true. It is surprising that it has taken so long to recognize the contextual theme of a figure-ground relationship for these forces of stress” (Lazarus 1999: 132-133). Stress is something that must be viewed as an “interplay of factors” that resides just as much outside of the workplace as it does on the inside of it. How stress is dealt with at the workplace can therefore not be detached from how each employee experience demands and expectations in other realms of life.

Phrased differently, managing the condition of stress requires the subject to intersect and connect the spheres, that otherwise might appear to be divided “externally”, but which are united “internally”, that is, within the supposed continuum of individual experiences. Stress is both generated and managed throughout the conduct of a “lifestyle”, a “self-analysis”, a “self-dialogue”, a “personality” and so forth. This intersection of experiences brings to mind what Hans Selye thought to make out the heartland of his own scientific achievements, the discovery of the “*bio-psycho-social-being*”. The backlash of medical advancements, he proposed, was due to the lack of perspectives of “wholeness” in the assessment of the individual: “*Unfortunately, medical progress in recent years has not brought with it any significant improvement in human health. It has been highly technological, but the approach has not been one that keeps man in balance as a bio-psycho-social being. Medical progress has focused on diseased parts and interventions, neglecting the common denominator of stress in these “diseases of adaptation”*” (Smith and Selye 1979: 1953).

When the stressful subject is encouraged to interlink and find the “wholeness” of his or her experience and attune this to the complexity of “performative needs” in both work life and personal life, the domain of work must not be shielded from “private issues”, but instead sought integrated and resolved through the prism of his or her personality and all-encompassing “lifeworld”. The stressful subject is geared to problematize its difficulties according to the multitude of boundaries it continuously is assumed to feel squeezed between, such as self/ home and family, self/ colleagues and work environment, self/ work assignments and work load, self/ management, self/ ambitions and self-expectations. The experience of “aggregated” tensions between these different realms is not something that can be left aside, it is proposed, once the door is shut to the office or at home; the experience of stress does not make itself relevant only when the employee is at work, it makes itself relevant and affects the performativity of all relations, also that of being a mother, a partner or a friend. At the same time, however, the problem of stress is linked to an employee who has overtly absorbed

his or her identity as an employee, which is unable to distinguish its own employee-status from other realms in life and which has let itself become “colonized” by work. In other words, there is a peculiar ambiguity concerning the pathology of an over-identified employee, which simultaneously must be made aware of how this pathology adds up and connects the different realms of his life, such as that of work and that of home. On the one hand, the organization says to its employee, “you are sick because you have over-identified with your work, you therefore need to re-learn how to shelter and maintain your privacy”. On the other hand, it says, “you have to refurnish an identity according to how your private life interferes with work and how work interferes with your private life. The stress you experience is not only a problem concerning your work, your private sociality spills over into the sociality of your work and you can therefore not distinguish one from the other”.

The means of self-assessment

“Facing the truth requires making yourself the object of inquiry – conducting an audit of your life and holding yourself accountable for the energy consequences of your behaviors” (Loehr and Schwartz 2005: 156).

From the first efforts to present a coherent strategy for handling stress in organizations in the middle of the 1970’s, up to the present-day stress management, the question of “appraisal”, “coping” or “self-assessment” of the employee is dealt with as a core problematic. As pointed out previously, the self is stressed because of its “excessive self-assessment” and must self-assess all the more. In Robert L. Woolfolk and Frank C. Richardsons influential book “Stress, sanity and survival”, first published in 1978, they state that *“stress lies in the perception of events, not in events themselves. Perceiving events as threatening to our egos or thwarting of our efforts leads to harmful emotional arousal. This is the problem of stress – not outside situations or other persons, but our ideas about them and what they mean to us. Most of the ideas that produce stress can be boiled down to a few key mistaken beliefs about ourselves and the world. These beliefs are emotionally charged upon ourselves and others. They are the root cause of the hurry, frustration, and growing sense of hopelessness that often characterize overstressed lives”* (2008 [1979]: 87). Similar notions of the strong link between individual perception and stress-arousal are at the centerfield of most stress management literature and tools, as it for instance is expressed in a more recent work by the stress consultant and psychologist Allen Elkin: *“Feeling stressed is, and always has been, a two-*

part process. First you need something “out there” to trigger your stress, and then you need to perceive that trigger as stressful. Then you feel stressed. You empower these external events and situations by viewing them in certain ways. Look at something one way and you feel major stress; look at it another way and you feel less stress, maybe even no stress at all” (Elkin 2013: 187). Elkin proceeds to elaborate on what this process entails: *“If only the external situation caused stress, everyone would feel the same stress when placed in the same situation. Clearly, this is not the case. A group of people will exhibit a wide range of reactions when exposed to the same stress trigger. What’s stressful for somebody else may be less stressful for you, or maybe not stressful at all. Depending on how you think about a situation or event, you create different feelings. You can create more stress than necessary, or less stress. In short, your thoughts have the power to determine the amount of stress you feel (...) The trick, or rather the skill, is to recognize when your stress is excessive and be able to identify and correct any thinking that is producing and maintaining it”* (Elkin 2013: 189). This assumption, that stress is produced within each individual, finds its rationale, among other things, in a neuro-physical fact; the level of physical arousal varies between people responding to the same circumstances. Stress is accordingly understood as something created and nurtured due to an imbalanced perception, which therefore must be solved at the level of subjective self-inquiry. The perception of each individual is elevated to function as both a critical point of examination *and* intervention, in which the handling of stress starts by pointing towards a problematic self-production of stress.

The modes of self-inquiry brought about to handle the state of stress is closely attached to the sense and feeling of “mastery” and “coping”, which largely consists of discovering and articulating “counter-realities”. Different forms of templates, through which the individual will be able to pin out and review his or her own emotional state, potential, patterns of thought and behavior, positive and negative reactions, are on the offer, but they all revolve around placing the subject’s inner life interfaced with his and her specific surroundings and circumstance. According to Robertson and Cooper, *“(...) it seems clear that individuals who are resilient are very active in finding and using coping strategies. A failure to adopt active coping strategies can lead individuals into a state of “learned helplessness” (see Abrahamson et al., 1978) where they feel that nothing they can do will alleviate matters and they develop a set of unhelpful behaviors including withdrawal, resignation and even a resistance to reversing the negative state of affairs”* (2011: 103-104). This “mindset” appears under the heading of “Thinking Errors”, which involve a *“bias towards thinking in a*

particular way, whatever the objective evidence suggests. Individuals tend to be prone to making one or more of these errors more frequently than the others. It can be very helpful to identify your own bias, and to learn to challenge it by checking out the evidence for and against these thoughts when they occur” (Robertson and Cooper 2011: 104). The authors give a number of examples of such errors, for instance “*all-or-nothing thinking*”, “*magnification*” and “*emotional reasoning*” (“*you take your emotions as evidence for the truth*”). The work of detecting such self-produced errors of both emotion and thought is a common feature in the “toolboxes” offered by stress management. More or less exhaustive lists are made in order to render the individual employee capable of reflecting upon the self-critique and self-demands through which he and she is locked in and trapped:

Psychologist Joy Buikema Fjærtøft (Arbeidsmiljø [Working Environment], no. 5, 2002: 32):

- **“Just have to- thoughts. I absolutely need to do this or that”**
- **“Exaggerations and maximizing crisis, such as “I cannot do this, this is terrible””**
- **“Reproach and condemnation”**

Psychologist Allen Elkin (Elkin 2013: 196-206)

- **“catastrophizing and awfulizing”** (“*how important is it? Is it really a big deal?*”)
- **“can’t stand it-itis”** (“*is my overreacting helping in any way? Or is it making things worse?*”)
- **“what-if-ing”** (“*am I over-worrying about this?*”)
- **“overgeneralizing”** (“*look out for language that reflects this all-or-nothing thinking – words like “always” and “never”, “nobody” and “everybody”*”)
- **“mind reading and conclusion-jumping”** (“*simply ask yourself, “Do I really have enough evidence to support my beliefs?”*”)
- **“comparativitis”** (“*do I believe that the people I’m comparing myself to are really happier?*”)
- **“personalizing”** (“*believing that if someone is angry at you, you deserve that anger*”)
- **“emotional reasoning”** (“*can I trust this feeling, or is this feeling temporarily?*”)
- **“self-rating”** (“*do I really need to have others approval to feel good about myself?*”).

In other words, the subject which is under the spell of its own “thinking errors” is in lack of sufficient distance and objective gaze towards his and her own emotions and thought. It is a subject completely immersed in its own immediate subjectivity, unaware of the “patterns”

and predispositions to which it is embedded and how its experience of reality is filtered through and directed by a (self-)critical mode. The stressful subject is endowed with a preexisting irrationality, that seeks a tragic narrative to inscribe itself in. The tragedy is the dominating outlook of the world and identity of this subject.

What these examples of emotional and perceptible errors seek to offer is a problematization of the ways in which the subject problematizes its own reality. They are simply faults and liabilities of the inner life, adding to and intensifying the experience of unease, anxiety and stress. This problematization of the subject's self-problematization mirrors the experience of stress in a specific emulating figure - a "devil on the shoulder", appearing in a voice that twists and drowns the authentic voice of the self. Handling the state of stress thereby also means that the self must wage a battle against itself, more specifically through identifying the antagonistic forces which disturbs and drains the self for energy, ambition and well-being. An authentic voice of the self cannot be properly voiced, as long as the subject remains inclined to describe its world in the language of up-scaling pessimism. The reality that appears before him and her is the product of self-generated defeats, threats and dangers, but this fixation of experience can be subdued and transgressed.

Opposed to the negative, destructive mode of thought is a "*constructive self-talk*" that can enable "*constructive, forward-looking thinking*" (Quick et al. 2013: 154) and "*flexible thinking*", in which the "*ability to "reframe" and control or accept thoughts, is an important aspect of personal resilience*" (Robertson and Cooper 2011: 102). In order to enhance and train such modes of flexible thinking, the utilization of a "*thought record*" is proposed, to "*enable people to examine the validity of their thinking about work-related issues that trouble them*":

Situation	Feelings	Thoughts/ Beliefs	Challenges and alternative	Action
What happened or what is happening?	How do you feel about this?	What thoughts are making you feel the way you do? Why do you feel like that?	How rational are your thoughts and beliefs? Are there any Thinking Errors? What's an alternative way to think about this?	What's your best course of action?

(Robertson and Cooper 2011: 103)

In order to detect the cause of stress, the subject must take upon itself an identity as emotionally seduced, “overloaded”, and biased towards a negation of its own potential. It is an identity furnished according to a denial of reality, because the reality cannot be accessed directly, but appear only through the deceptive images and voices of negation and negativity. While this pattern of fixed behavior, emotion and thought is clearly indexed (e.g. “thinking errors”, “emotional reasoning” etc.), the measures provided to release the subject from its own fixation is instead centered on “opening up” this identity without articulating clear answers. That is obviously a key point, all the while the answers to the cause and effect of this fixation only can be provided through the means of biographizing the trajectory of pathological experience – that is, by invoking the family situation, personality, work environment, ambitions and career path etc. of the subject at stake. By bringing its own fixation into question, through the means of self-inquiry, the stressful subject is encouraged to find alternate pathways and routes to its own experience of the world. In other words, both the causalities and manageability of the stress symptom lays hidden within the subject itself.

“Constructive Self-Talk Alternatives to Typical Mental Monologues”

Situation	Typical mental monologue	Constructive self-talk alternative
Driving to work on a day that will be full of appointments and potentially distressful meetings	Oh brother, what a day this will be!	This looks like a busy day.
	It's gonna be hell.	The day should be very productive.
	I'll never get it all done.	I'll get a lot accomplished today.
	It'll be exhausting.	This ought to be a challenge.
	What if I blow it?	I'll take a deep breath and relax.
Anticipation of a seminar presentation or public address	Nobody will laugh at that opening joke	They'll enjoy it.
	What if they ask about...? I hate talking to groups.	Each presentation goes a bit better.
Recovering from a heart attack	I almost died. I'll die soon	I didn't die. I made it through.
	I'll never be able to play sports again.	The doctor says I'll be able to get back to work soon.
		I can keep active and gradually get back to most of my old sports.
Difficulty with a superior at work	I hate that person.	I don't feel comfortable with him.
	He makes me feel stupid.	I let myself get on edge when he's around.
	We'll never get along.	It will take some effort to get along.
Flat tire on a business trip	Damn this old car (pacing around the car, looking at the flat tire).	These things happen to everyone. I can fix it.
	I'll miss all my meeting.	Bad time for a flat (beginning to get tools and start working).
	It's hopeless.	I'll call and cancel Jenkins. I should make the rest of the appointments.

(Quick et al. 2013: 155)

The authors continue to propose that the use of plans that can serve as “*a self-affirming contract and a reminder of action option decisions for managing stress*” (Quick et a. 2013: 196). The plan is designed to hold the subject accountable to itself, through continual assessment and revision of its own voice.

According to the authors, “*the process of developing a plan should be seen as one of trial and success. The bottom line is whether the individual feels a sense of relief and achieves the feeling we described earlier as eustress. The basic question is: “When you use the action options outlined, how do you feel at the end of the day? At the end of the week? At the end of the year?” There are a number of interventions with proven success to increase a sense of subjective well-being along with reduced strain on the body. Individuals can be trained to proactively self-monitor or manage their personal perceptions to both enhance positive and*

discourage negative displays of emotion. Constructive self-talk is a learned technique that replaces negative self-talk with more positive and reinforcing self-talk (Wright et al., 2007). Another potential avenue of change involves incorporating signature strengths of character into one's daily routine, both at home and at work. As previously discussed, a growing body of evidence has indicated possible connections between positive feelings and well-being and such character strengths as spirituality, forgiveness, humility, gratitude, zest, hope and kindness (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Wright and Quick, 2011). One caveat is appropriate here. As with any change attempt, the audience must perceive the change as authentic and genuine. Change attempts that are perceived as insincere and phony will eventually be found out, and all goodwill will be lost. The content and context of intervention are both very important. Being intentionally hurtful and negative on a subject that speaks to another's actual or perceived core strength will never be counterbalanced by telling that person several times that his or her new hat is attractive" (Quick et al. 2011: 197-198).

We can see two opposed selves appear in these self-assessment tools, conveying the juxtaposed voices of negativity and positivity, centered on the gap between the world as it seems (but does not have to be) and the world as it could be (but does not by itself turn into). In other words, there is a doubling of the self, in a present and a future, in a mode of over-identification opposed to a mode of dis-identification. There is a set of "false beliefs" against one "constructive self-talk", a set of alarming reactions and thought patterns against "solutions". The variety of "positive" selves does not have any singular and *defined* endpoint, such as making people more "harmonious" or more co-operative at the workplace. Rather, it revolves around charging the difference between the self and its environment with other qualities than what the stressful individual currently is assumed to have available, so to *change* his or her "mindset" and "reaction patterns" from a fixed state to an open and malleable state. For instance, by installing a "positive voice" and an alternated attitude, the self is rendered with a new field of action, through which "opportunities" and "possibilities" appear instead of fear and apprehension. However, this enactment goes far beyond the suggestion of alternative options to "deal" with problems and difficulties. These acts of modification and shift in self-image offer, I propose, an alternation of the world, which promise to change the foundation of reality itself. I will describe this peculiar emergence of sociality in the next few pages.

Before doing so, we can briefly summarize the various solutions brought about to handle stress according to their different meaning dimensions. In the social dimension, the stressful individual must learn to dis-identify with both its own alluring emotional “self-knowledge” and its over-absorbed employee-status, specifically by learning to “let go” *from work* and withdrawing from demands *at work* when they tower up. In the temporal dimension, the stressful subject is at once trapped in the tragedies of its own past and incessantly worried about the future. The different self-assessment tools temporalize a new self appearing in a horizon of “positive” and “constructive” self-expectations. In the factual dimension, the actualization of self-imposed pathologies residing in a failed observation of the self (in its environment), serves to distinguish the pathologies of the self from those of its environment. Together, these dimensions can provide for a new reality to appear in front of the self, as we will see.

CHAPTER 8

Couplings: Stress, power and self-transformation

In the following chapter, I will discuss how stress management emerge as a technology of self-transformation and how this technology couples illness and power. I will first clarify what technology here entails, before moving on to the question of how illness and power comes into play in this realm.

In the case of stress management, the question of how the self can regain and strengthen its own will, is, as we have seen, connected to notions of perception, assumed to be at once conditioned by immobility and plasticity. These two poles reflect each other, insofar as the *immobility* of the subjects thought patterns and reactions - that leads to stress – only can be observed and recognized on the condition of their *malleability*, as something that can be shaped differently and recast in another light. There is no opportunity to problematize and symptomize the fixed design of emotional and cognitive frenzy – from the position of the therapist, coach or the subject itself – unless this design can be re-arranged and configured in another form and expression. The diagnose of a self-pathology and its following de-pathologization is, as such, founded on a zenith of change – the hope and possibility of a re-design of the self. Following this line of diagnostics, all human beings are endowed with a latent ability to imagine themselves and the world otherwise and thereby, through the sheer act of (re-)imagining, experience the world taking another shape. This deconstructive logic offers itself as a therapeutic imperative; when the world is *described* differently, the world itself *becomes* different – and it us up to the stressful individual whether or not and how to engage in the act of splitting up and reassembling the bits and pieces of self and reality in alternate accounts. First, reality and perception is split up, and thereafter they are sought molded together in a new way.

In 1771, almost two decades prior to the French Revolution in 1789, the author Louis-Sebastien Mercier published the novel *The Year 2440*, often referred to as the first science fiction novel ever written. In the book, we encounter a society in which all citizens have become authors, who spend a vast amount of their lives recording their own moral achievements. In this world, still centuries ahead of us, the act of speaking and writing have become pivotal to a degree that only an individual who is also an author can rightfully claim to be a citizen. Citizenship is simply realized through writing. At one point, the protagonist, who originates from Merciers contemporaneous Paris, spots a man fleeing and asks his

companion: *"I Entreat you to tell me who that man is, who wears a mask, whose step is so precipitate that he seems to be flying from the pursuit of some enemy? Who can he be?"*

– *"He is the author who has published a bad work"* (Mercier 1797 [1771]: 29).

In many regards, Merciers utopian depiction of a futuristic Paris immersed with writing as an act both liberating and binding, bears an arresting resemblance to how stress management relies on the self-inquiry of subjects as the vital entry point *into* their own reality, but also *out* of it. In the current section, I have so far pointed towards how perception functions as a key concept in the management and literature on stress, which revolves around a) making individuals aware of how they perceive themselves and their surroundings and b) making individuals take responsibility for their own stressful reality by revising and alternating these perception-patterns.

These two molds of subjectivity, e.g. perception and responsibility, situate individuals in what we might call a *"a network of writing"* (Foucault 1995: 189). In order to take charge of stress and learn to cope with it, the subject has to transform into an "author", that is able to re-write the script of stressful experience. The environment that surrounds each individual can be re-invented through realizing that the state of reality, whatever it might contain, is already "self-scripted" and therefore can be re-written. I refer to this enactment as a technology of self-transformation. In the words of Foucault, a technology is characterized by how it will *"permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality"* (Foucault 1988: 18). Unlike technologies strictly designating physical entities, like an engine, a fridge or a cell phone, technology here refers to a process of social modification or adjustment, that is, the aim of a change in the way we perceive of ourselves and others or how we do things. It is, as such, a technology of the social. In other words, a technology usually installs an expectation of a difference to come into play, for instance between how things are now and how they can become in the future. As Foucault makes clear, *all* technologies carry with them an ambition of transformation. However, social technologies do not share anything apart from this ambition to transform us in one way or another and the question of how a technology takes upon itself this effort to change, for instance a classroom, an organization or a population, can only be studied in its local and concrete emergence. In the case of stress management, we have seen how the

difference between perception and reality a guiding theme throughout its different templates allowing for increased “self-mastery”.

The mobilization of reality versus perception, on the surface appearing as a fundamental, Cartesian ontology, is furnished according to a variety of different goals, such as an increase in productivity, well-being, self-esteem and efficiency. The therapeutic mode of self-inquiry revolves around de-stabilizing the motives and self-knowledge of each subject and thereby recreate a new, possibly more efficient outlook and sense of reality. The perception of the subject thereby serves to highlight how stress emerges and forms an ontological grid, which determines how and what kind of reality that appears in front of him or her. The promise of stress management entails nothing less than the possibility of obtaining a new “self”, in the form of another (and improved) self-consciousness and self-image.

As we have already seen in the introduction to Luhmann’s theory, perception and consciousness are, from a systems theoretical position, placed on the outside of communication. Our consciousness remains, in its psychological primacy, unreachable for any “second party”, in the form of other consciousness’s or interactions. Human beings composite a diverse range of operations that is ultimately beyond the scope of any unifying term or concept, such as the “individual”. For instance, a human being will be equipped with a conscious realm of thoughts and emotions, biological operations of blood circulation and digestion and mechanical movements of fingers and eyelids. This constitutes a complex entirety of operations that no surrounding environment can have direct and complete access to. Even though this might seem abstract, it is not a deductive point. For example, one cannot really dispute, feel enchanted by, agree or argue with the consciousness and perception of another person or, for that matter, one’s own. Moreover, we often will have good reasons *not* to express what is on our mind, for the sake of maintaining an “undisturbed” interaction, politeness, norms, the wish to keep on communicating and so on. Most doctors will refrain from saying to a patient that he strangely resembles Mona Lisa before moving on to the consultancy, even though the option is there. In other words, it is not possible to furnish any points of direct connection between a system of communication and a system of consciousness. In continuation of this, communication itself “*cannot produce or receive perceptions*”, but remains open to a variety of communicative actualizations of perceptible experiences (Luhmann 2002d). We can retell a dream we had last night, but others cannot re-dream it. In the terms of systems theory, the consciousness is *operationally closed*, insofar as its unique cognitive and sensory richness cannot by any means be replicated as

communication. Yet, our contemporary society offers an abundant repertoire of technologies with the purpose of describing, assessing and treating the inner conditions of ourselves and others. There is, as is the case with stress management, an array of technologies for therapeutic intervention appearing throughout society, targeting everything from parenthood to eating habits and gambling, which take their point of departure in an inner condition from which the subject should liberate or transgress and enable itself a form of freedom that would otherwise remain unreachable²⁹. In a systems theoretical perspective, however, human beings are mainly invoked as *communicative addresses*, such as that of performers (doctor, teacher, politician) and roles (patient, pupil, voter), in society. In fact, to society, human beings remain nothing more or less than a multitude of possible addresses, such as a “citizen”, “social client”, “employee”, “customer”, “parent”, “marginalized” etc. The difference between a human being and an address is a crucial difference, because it enables a clear-cut analysis of how stress management revolves around a particular ambition to interconnect psychic systems with their environment, centered on creating a reverberation between perception and reality. When perception, as such, is mobilized to *enable* and *disable* specific forms of reality, it is akin to what Barbara Cruikshank describes as “revolutions within” (Cruikshank 1999: 88).³⁰

As a technology of self-transformation, stress management does *not* seek to inscribe the self in a strictly pre-written narrative, but rather seeks to polycontextualize reality, by invoking alternate narratives (Günther 1962). The subject’s gaze is, as such, afforded a “blind spot”; a stressful individual does not see *how* it sees itself and its surroundings, it is claimed (Luhmann 2013a: 154). By peeling off the layers of emotional turmoil and fixed thought, another kind of self can emerge *alongside* another kind of reality. The subject should, so to speak, push the circularity of the world in an opposite direction, away from itself, to break free from the angle of a passive receiver of “ready-made impressions” of reality. Instead of locking itself in, in the position as a mere “subscriber” of experience, the subject is encouraged to instead speak out and write down its “life-world”, literally, in order to change the world. The acute ability of the subject to govern and fertilize the distinction between perception and reality takes its problematizing point of departure in the conditions of the subject’s self-relation, where the “futile” couplings between *perception* and *reality* is thought

²⁹ See for instance (in Norwegian) https://www.bufdir.no/Familie/Tilbud_Regionene/circle_of_security/

³⁰ In her study on several new social movements in the US, Barbara Cruikshank describes how these movements in the last decades of the 20th century was built up, bearing all the hallmarks of an emancipatory quest, around the question of how to induce self-esteem among “marginalized groups” in society (Cruikshank 1999).

to make out the source of and solution to the experience of stress; the subject's lack of will, failure to take charge of emotions and blurred insight and self-knowledge. Stress is, as such, really a consequence of a "failed organization" in the inner life of the self, requiring specific measures to re-establish an effective, transparent organization of *emotions, will* and *perception*.

Couplings: Illness, power and the self

In the beginning of this thesis, I discussed how illness can be regarded as a form holding together two sides, pathology and normality. When illness is communicated, it marks this difference, whatever its object may be, such as a failing body function or an employees' absence from the workplace. The various therapeutic efforts found in stress management programs can be seen as a means to confront and change the way employees themselves indicate experiences of illness and how they (the stressful individuals) mark the difference between pathology and normality. Perhaps exactly because there is no doctor/ patient-relationship to inform this negotiation of health and sickness, the concept of illness becomes charged with an extraordinary plasticity in these therapeutic efforts. Illness is sought "deconstructed", as a solipsistic (dis)order within the self, and as a *self-production* of draining noises and shouting demands. Crucial to this practice is the notion of participants having become "lost" to themselves in some way or another, as we have seen, for instance due to a "lack of balance", "crisis-maximization" and "negative self-talk". This instigates a work on the identity, of the way individuals furnish and perform their own "selves" and how they require meaning of both their life-world as well as their workplace. Illness is in other words marked in the identity-construction of the individual, calling upon intervention and transformation. In this context, illness and therapy is coupled to a concept of power. To be more exact, illness becomes - in stress management - moulded into power communication when the possibility of treatment and therapy is considered completely reliant upon the empowering and authentication of the self. In the following account, I will shortly describe the form of power and then describe how power and illness is coupled in the therapeutic regime of stress management.

Power as communication

Within certain traditions of sociology, for instance in the vein of Max Weber, it is assumed that power first and foremost constitute a relation of pure domination, between a superior and an inferior part (Weber 1964: 152-153). Weber famously asserts that power is executed forcefully, carried out despite resistance, wherein, as Robert Dahl puts it, A makes B do something he or she would otherwise not have done (had it not been for the superiority of A) (Dahl 1957: 202-203). Luhmann proposes that power must be differentiated from brute force, and that, in such instances of threats and possibly violence, power is disabled rather than effected, at least temporarily. What's more to it, power must not be confused with any relation invested with, for instance, money or passion, because such relations are not always-already governed by the prospect of sanctions, be them positive or negative. I will in the coming paragraph give a short account of the analytics of power offered by systems theory, including its requirements of accuracy in the study of how power unfolds itself.

Luhmann understands power as an *effort* of influence, where A is faced with certain expectations from B, which resides over sanctions that might or might not come into use. However, instead of a one-way demand voiced from a singular source "above", we should understand power in its relational capacity on both sides of the table, as a matter of a mutual "*I expect you to expect that I have expectations to you*". Power only works, claims Luhmann, when the freedom to choose and act according to one's own will is granted to both parties in a relationship; it is not a form of infliction that seeks to twist, bend and shut down the will of those who are at the margins, but on the contrary a relation which presuppose and depends on the accessibility and readiness of the freedom of the "other" (Luhmann 2017: 132-135). In systems theoretical terms, we are dealing with "double contingency", in the form of mutual expectations and freedom in a relation, which likewise must be taken into consideration by both sides. To phrase it differently, the function of power designates the situation in which the possibilities to act differently are available to both sides in the relation between an inferior and a superior part. In the case of complete and utter "powerlessness", individuals cannot be summoned to consider and respond to expectations that are directed towards them.

An individual, for instance a partner or a pupil, can only be taken into consideration as a subject of love or learning insofar as they are or can be motivated by themselves to engage in the relation to the other partner or the school. A pupil who is considered unmotivated cannot learn, pedagogical principles typically claims. A partner who no longer displays any signs of

“interest” cannot love, at least not passionately. When we in this regard need to distinguish power from coercion, it is because there are no (or extremely limited) options to choose differently or to consider other alternatives available for a person who is coerced to act in a specific manner, strictly according to someone else’s preference. Coercion and obedience holds a direct line of action from one person to another, with no regard for the possibility of considerations of alternatives and adjustments on the part of the coerced. To be clear, this does not imply that we have entered an era that is predominantly “non-violent”, where fear has become obsolete or that acts of threats, bullying or abuse necessarily are less prevalent today than in pre-modern societies. It simply means that power as a form of communication relies on the absence of violence and coercion, its function loses foothold once direct force is applied. Violence breaks down the possibility to communicate on the premise of double contingency, at least as far as power goes (Luhmann 2013a: 121).

Against this background Luhmann introduces the power-holder and the power-subject as a constitutive difference in his concept of power. Power is not, like Weber or Dahl suggests, performed on the side of a superior part against someone inferior, but emerges in the relation between these two parts. There is obviously an asymmetrical difference at play here, insofar as the power-holder holds a more favourable position than the power-subject. But the relation is not fixed, it is not necessarily given by institutional circumstance when or how a relation of power comes into being (the difference between doctor/ patient, state/ municipality or parent/ child is therefore not per se exchangeable with the difference between a power-holder and a power-subject). Neither is it a relation that remains entrenched in the same dynamics over time, a power-holder might weaken his or her position, so that the difference in power decreases; the difference between a power-holder and a power-subject is only possible on the condition that it can be transformed or cease to exist. We can therefore say that power attends to the relationality of a relation in a specific way, which puts demands on all parties involved. As Luhmann points out, “(...) *because of his power, the power-holder himself will have success and failures attributed to, and suitable motives imposed on, him, whether he wants this or not. Thus power does not become the instrument of an already present will, it first of all generates that will*” (Luhmann 2017: 133-134).

To take an example, we can think of a situation where an employee on tenure is told that the company has a tradition for rewarding high ambitions among their staff. Now, what does “reward” mean? Does it imply that she might get a permanent position? Does it involve a raise, a bonus or promotion? Furthermore, what does “high ambitions” mean? Is she expected

to increase her portfolio of clients? Take on more assignments? Take initiative to develop new strategies in the market? The obscurity might not even be intentional on the part of the manager, but it puts the employee in a position where she is bound to the continuous interpretation of “reward” and “ambitions”. For power to come into effect, freedom must be granted to consider and interpret such expectations. If we hold on to the scenario, we can also imagine the employee asking for a contract, wherein the specific conditions for a promotion or a raise is explicitly listed, in which case the freedom to handle the complexity of the relation is pushed back over to the superior (if it succeeds). In Foucauldian terms, I will argue that power therefore involves a certain intensification of freedom in relations, in the form of expectation-intensity and interpretation-intensity (Nealon 2008: 32-51).

In the realm of stress management, power and illness is coupled through the enactment of “findings the answers” to one’s disarray and pressure, as a biographical code. I will elaborate on what I mean by this. First, when I refer to a biographical code, I simply mean the different techniques that are put forward in stress management, with the purpose of making individuals reflect on themselves, their own “thought-patterns”, reactions, emotions, relations, inclinations and so forth. Phrased differently, these are techniques that caters the subject with questions that point towards answers within him-and herself. Second, power is folded into illness in a way that governs the prospects of “healing” through the self-empowerment of the subject, most notably by gaining a “positive” language and a revised narration of the self. The subject that is called into self-assessments in stress management, is assumed to be powerless, due to a perception and voice that cannot distinguish itself from its environment. It is, in other words, a subject assumed to be inauthentic. Stress management revolves around pinning out strategies, through which the subject can overcome this supposed state of self-imposed powerlessness and in this way take possession of its own voice and identity. In systems theoretical terms, illness is hereby observed from a power-perspective; in order to become “healthy”, the stressful individual has to empower itself. This coupling between illness and health allows for a vast number of themes to be actualized as therapeutic “issues”, such as responsibility, authenticity and performance. In the coming parts of this thesis, I will further unfold the paradoxes of this therapeutic realm against the backdrop of this coupling between illness and power.

The “other” reality

We have so far seen how the malleability of reality is a key component in stress management. However, next to a reality that can be revised and alternated, there is second form of reality, which appears completely solid and is described as out-of-control, hectic, unreasonable and chaotic. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is an influential stress expert and mindfulness guru, writes for instance that *“even if you have a job with lots of autonomy and a good salary and you are doing things that you care about, even love to do, work always presents its unique challenges and lets you know that you are never completely in control, even if you think you are. The law of impermanence still applies. Things still change. You can’t control that. There are always people or forces that can disrupt your work, threaten your job and your role, or make what you said one day “inoperable” the next, no matter how much power you think you have accumulated. Moreover, there are usually intrinsic limits to how much you can change things or resist certain changes within organizations or industries, even if it objectively looks as if you have a lot of power and influence. Just think for a moment how difficult it is, even if you wanted to, to regulate Wall Street and the global financial industry for the sake of stability. Even the president of the United States is unable to do it, and may not want to. Think of the recession in 2008, triggered and then compounded by clever people in the banking industry and the housing market intoxicated by the prospect of selling houses on a massive level to people who they knew couldn’t afford them, ultimately draining the savings of so much of the world’s middle class and putting so many people out of work. Balance and a measure of sanity may eventually be restored, but the harm to individual people can be colossal and lasting. And this tends to happen in cycles because the collective memory for such object lessons in business and finance is very short. This itself is a kind of disease, brought by the human mind when it loses its moral compass, as can happen so easily in work settings under all the encompassing pressures to “succeed”, and to “grow the business”. At the level of the individual person at work, job stress, insecurity, frustration, and failure can be experienced in any job and at any pay grade, from janitor to chief executive, from waiter, factory worker, or bus driver to lawyer, doctor, scientist, police chief, or politician. Many jobs are intrinsically stressful, as we have seen, because of the combination of low decision-making latitude and high responsibility. To correct this requires reorganizing the job itself or compensating the employees better to make it more tolerable. Yet, given that many job descriptions will not be rewritten in the short run to lower employee stress, people are forced to cope as best they can using their own resources. The degree to which you are affected by*

such stressful circumstances can be influenced positively by your own coping skills (...) the level of psychological stress you experience depends on how you interpret things-in other words, on your attitude, on whether you are able to flow with change or, on the other hand, make every ripple in the way things are unfolding into an occasion for fighting or worrying or falling into despair” (Kabat-Zinn 2013: 503-504).

The reality of the employee is thus ultimately unstable, unpredictable and uncontrollable to a degree that it, according to Kabat-Zinn, can be compared to the financial market: A pure force of its own, which usually escapes all efforts of regulation. The employee is left with scarce resources to resolve any conflicts due to, for instance, time pressure or conflicting demands in such an environment. Rather, the employee should learn how to handle the state of permanent change and accept its “fate” among the all-encompassing threats, residing in every corner of the workplace, such as the possibility of dismissal or continuous disruptions etc. The options of facing stress offered here are either to keep up with the flow or to dry up, by choosing dejection or seeking conflicts. In the latter case, this will supposedly sparkle more and stronger conflicts and an even more stressful environment. Stress and organizational change is, as such, usually interlinked, in which a generally increasing intensity and tempo in work life, is seen a premise that can both drain and gain the employee, depending on how it is perceived. As it is formulated in a handbook on preventive stress management: *“Work and organizational life are undergoing dramatic change, and we expect that to continue and increase as we move deeper into the 21st century. Change is a major source of stress for people in organizations. Is that change-induced stress simply a challenge, or a threat, or perhaps just a hindrance? Although our mind-body system may say that it is a threat, maybe we need to change our minds and see the challenge and opportunity that stress may offer” (Quick et al. 2013: 25).*

In a similar vein, Christine, an HR-manager at a multi-national corporation that I interviewed, holds forth stress as closely interlinked with (lack of) adaptability to the changing circumstances that surrounds the employees. In addition to what is described as a generally hectic work environment, the company has undergone several rounds of redundancies and re-organization over the past years. On this background, the HR-department decided to initiate certain measures in order to reduce stress and anxiety among the staff. Speaking of these efforts and how stress should be handled, Christine says:

We’ve worked quite intensely throughout the last four years with our culture, with change of attitudes and processes of change and what has come out of it is sort of, well, it works better

to go along than to go against your tasks and your job. So we have worked a lot in order to get our employees not to fight against all of these changes. And you can feel it yourself as well, right, thinking that things were better off before all these shifts came about, but if you manage to stay focused and on top of things you realize that “well, things are good now”. Then I understand why they want these changes. I think as long as you manage to maintain such an attitude, then you will save yourself a lot of frustration and things like that. Because I think a lot of people have been dealing with that at our workplace. And if they don’t experience stress, then they certainly feel frustrated.

Interviewer: So is that the reason you started these awareness campaigns?

Christine; Yes, it was a combination of things, because a lot of different things were changing very rapidly and new systems were also being introduced. And people were not approving, they were resisting this. We found out that we had to start on scratch, in order to get people to understand our mindset. We started working a lot with team-work and organized development courses, where we dealt with our culture here, the environment at our workplace and that has really helped us out, to get us here, to the other end of the tunnel. Because if you find an employee here and ask that person where will you be in five years, how do you imagine this place in five years, it is not possible to give an answer, because nobody knows. You don’t know if you will work here, you don’t know the circumstances, if we will be consolidated with another company or sold again. There is only one thing that is certain and that is change. And if you don’t have the ability to remain curious, if you’re unable adapt to the speed of things and always fear the changes that are about to come, then this is not the right place for you. And that’s a shame, because we’ve had some people here that didn’t stick around too long, because they’ve realized that they just couldn’t keep up with it. It’s too demanding, simply. There isn’t any room for slack here. You don’t have the possibility to hide and be anonymous and not be seen if you take things down a notch. A lot depends upon you doing your job. You will be caught, sort of.

Christine describes a workplace in a state of more or less constant transition, and where the employees, in order to handle these changes, has to be attuned into a similar mode of change. It strikingly resembles a capacity of adaptation underlined by Hans Selye himself: *”The increasingly rapid pace of change requires us to constantly accelerate this adaptive process. To survive, twentieth century man must adapt to a society in a permanent state of flux, where*

*everything is changing before his eyes... ”³¹. In this demanding reality, the employee is left with marginal space for time-outs or any kind of “mental” detours. On one hand, stress is, in this case, described as a latent product of organizational circumstance: unpredictability, perpetual change, high-speed and “no slack”. However, these possible triggers are, on the other hand, exclusively problematized within the context of perception, by way of awareness and attitudes. *Resistance, fear, lack of involvement and inability to adjust*; this register of organizational “hurdles” will be familiar to anyone who has glimpsed into a handbook of HR-strategies. The HR-manager interprets these different mechanisms as a basic “response-pattern” which has to be challenged and reformed, in order for employees to manage their own employment. By tapping into the transient mode of the organization: by staying “curious”, as it is phrased here, the employee can be equipped to deal with his or her own stressful reality. This reality, and all it might contain of hurriedness and insecurity, designates only the premise through which the perception has to adapt and move along. In other words, the (ever-changing) reality remains stable, whereas the perception of the individual employee must be readily de-stabilized. This division of transience and stability is present throughout the stress management literature, which seems to be calling upon a “discipline” of plasticity of the employee, which must be properly attuned to the complexity and transient mode of his and her environment.*

Suspending the tragedy: A second act

Faced with this disturbing reality, stress management says, somehow, to the individual: *When you experience stress, it is because you expect the world as “facts”. If you gear yourself towards an increased self-awareness on how you “produce” the world, you will realize and thereby come to expect that other realities also are possible.* By different means such as self-monitoring, “self-talk”, the use of diary or a stress plan, the self is geared towards a redistribution of the circularity between these two sides (of perception, on the one side and reality, on the other). In this regard, stress management obviously contains a strong appeal to a readiness of malleability, plasticity and change. However, there is another side to this coin. The stressful individual, absorbed in its own tragic narratives, is akin to what Roland Barthes dismissingly described as a “romantic author”, who only writes according to the approval and demand of an outer authority (Barthes 2004: 200-215). In other words, the very narrative of

³¹ Quoted from Ehrenberg 2010: 114

the self is pathologized. The subject who creates a “bad work”, that is, a self-seduced and emotional account of his own reality, cannot be conceived of as free. If he fails to produce a “counter-narrative” in light of his own “weak” self-observation in the past, his observations of himself in the present come under suspicion. To regain a true will and self-relationship, the subject must oppose its own “romantic authorship” so as to authentically write and speak on the basis of his own, singular outlook and experience, centered on self-approval and self-demands rather than those of others. The world must be fictionalized in order to become real.

However, “negative self-talk” cannot be equated with a self-authentic perception of reality. “Negative self-talk” is conceived of as the “fountain” of tragedies, but only on the condition of their failure to correspond with reality. The subject can only be perceived as released from an outer authority when the account of reality follows the expectations of two, internally struggling agencies within the self. In other words, there is an outer authority which can distinguish when and how the subject is released from an outer authority, and how the subject fails or succeeds in advancing its own, singular self-authenticity (I will come back to this paradox in the next chapter).

The self that has made itself the source its own tragedies, must re-narrate its own world to suspend its own tragic fate, as a “second act”. We might say that the subject of unease at the present moment must turn to the narrative of himself as a “*counter-structural media*”: to “re-narrate” enables a future provision of a changed self, wherein all sorts of difficulties and pressure no longer have to exist (Luhmann 2013a: 245). The story through which the subject frames itself and its own difficulties must not only be changed, this narrative is itself *what* will change his or her difficult circumstances and experiences. The self’s narration of a reality appearing through a positive and invigorated self-voice point towards a future which has diminished the pathological present and perhaps even completely transgressed it. The improved self of the future is mirrored in the yet-to-be transformed self of the present moment, but the very anticipation of a change produces an experience that is *already* present, in the form of a necessity of change granted by the transformed self in the future (Koselleck 2006: 360). In other words, when a change within the subject is forecast as a solution to future problems, it also changes the relevance-criteria for how the experience of problems can be put into words. On the one hand, the stressful conditions can, accordingly, in its most radical proposition, be altered by mere imagination. On the other hand, when different “imaginary resources” are mobilized, the subject is already conceived of as a subject enacting in the self-transformation. In systems theoretical terms we can say that the failed narrative

and the successful narrative (of the self) are seen as equivalent solutions to the same problem, namely the question of how to process information and acquire knowledge of the world (Luhmann 2000b: 91-93; Luhmann 2002c).

To briefly summarize the main points so far: The subject appearing in stress management is exhorted to inscribe and regulate itself in this social reality by *other* means than those offered by the tragic narrative. He or she contains a unique and authentic observation of the world which grants him or her an exclusive access to reality. Therefore, reality can only be understood as a singularized reality, that strictly emerges within the individual. When there are no ultimate external references to which the subject can attach and find a foothold, the subject must take responsibility for how it perceives and thereby also how it, by doing so, realize and create a sociality. Yet, in this “second act” there are certain expectations as to how the subject invokes the singularity of its inner “life-world”, by finding an authentic voice that can convey the tragedy of its past into a future where it is suspended. The subject is assumed as a triumphantly autonomous in its reason and outlook, but this can only be decided according to how it chooses to articulate its world of commotion and pressure.

This brings us to the next point, which is that this problematization of the self appears as if the subject is detached from all “social regulation” apart from his or her self-regulation. Stress management assumes to see a blind spot in the stressful subject’s self-observation, but it does not see how this assumption at the same time creates its own social reality. We have seen how stress management aims to unfold alternative narratives through which the subject can mirror itself and take upon itself an identity as, for instance, “emotionally enduring”, “self-aware” and “balanced”. By doing so, another social space also emerges, that point towards how it is possible to interact and deal with problems at work. What the self-transformative imperative is unable to perceive, is therefore how it inserts the individual in another social realm when it proposes a re-constellation between the self and its environment. Phrased differently, the enabling of a strengthened self-relationship also constitutes a new social environment. When the scheme of reality and perception is brought about and sought de-stabilized and re-designed, it does not “extinguish” any external reality, the outer world does not disappear. Of course, “everyone” knows this, also those who acquire individuals to perceive of themselves differently. The fact that it still remains there, is also underlined repeatedly in the stress management literature, as we have seen. However, the effort to make stressful employees take responsibility for their own perceptions, invokes a social reality wherein the individual is assumed to be ideally unbound by any rationality other than his

own. The workplace is, as such, configured a as site of prevailing individual rationalities that must be encouraged to govern themselves in line with their own true will.

CHAPTER 9

The employee as a generalized addict: Stress and the objects of desire

In the chapter that follows, I will make a short “detour” into what can be described as an “extreme case” of HR-strategies which cannot be generalized (Flyvbjerg 2001). It is, however, a case that sheds light onto how one specific organization employs the vocabulary of self-pathologies in order to prevent stress and illness among its employees.

Telenor, which ranks among the biggest companies in Norway, has issued a number of self-help exercises and advice on stress management to their employees. According to the organization, an efficient management of stress constitute a significant competitive advantage for the individual employee, in a time where work life demands increasingly more from its employees:

“The busier you are, the more important it will be for you to find an efficient way to handle various projects, tasks, deadlines and the relations to your colleagues. Here are some advice on how you can handle your stress efficiently. Stress does not really need an explanation: you know when you are stressed out. At the same time, the knowledge on stress, what triggers it and how you can handle it, is almost becoming a competitive advantage in a work life where the assignments are increasing and the time is diminishing. If you are able to keep the perspective, control and progress when the heat is on, you will easily be considered a more valuable asset than the colleague who gets distracted, forgets things, turns up too late for meetings and is unable to deliver before deadlines. Stress basically consists of two things: a triggering factor (stressor) and an emotional and physical response. The factors which trigger the response can be linked to, for instance, too many tasks, the complexity of your assignment, distractions and interruptions when you are trying to work your way through the to-do list just before you have to head on home from the office. It is about being in a situation where we have to manage more than we are capable of and reactions such as the “fight- or flight”-response might be kicking in”³²

Handling stress - in this case - revolves around how the employee can position and nurture an image of him- and herself as a valuable asset for the organization. In order to do so, it is necessary to display certain desirable features, such as efficiency and calmness. What is

³² <http://jobbsmartere.no/2015/10/stressmestring-ta-kontroll-stresset/>

sketched out here is a protocol for a performative enactment of energy and determined will in a situation where the organization is in a permanent state of urgency and where the demands on the employee constantly increase – a situation which the stress consultant Ivar Vehler describes as “*the eye of the hurricane*” (Vehler 2010). In Telenor’s stress management guide, employees are advised on how to avoid falling into – and coming out of - conditions such as “*learned helplessness*” and “*self-inflicted ADHD*”, resulting in the postponement of increasingly more work, starting off projects that are not followed up, the need for ever stronger stimuli of “instant gratifications”, such as incoming e-mails or “likes”, a short attention span, increased impatience, irritation and restlessness. These different symptoms constitute “*a serious problem that you need to work on. And the work consists first and foremost of realizing that you have a problem*”.

So, an employee is trapped and has come to a halt in the flow of routines and tasks – a condition grounded in a cognitive and emotional fluctuations within the self. The vantage points brought about for monitoring and treating this condition is partly mounted on the semantics of addiction, in which the problematic behavior requires a more severe knowledge of what “*the overproduction of dopamine leads to, and why this chemical substance results in unfertile stress, postponements, and occasional anxiety for not being able to deliver - or even getting started in the first place. It is only when we have identified this behavior within ourselves, which paradoxically can be understood as a form of addiction, that we are able to simply change it. Dopamine has a number of different function and can produce a variety of effects on the brain, such as the reward: when we are enacting in a behavior that creates a sense of a positive result, there is a small dose of dopamine released which stimulates the brain’s reward function. It simply feels good. The problem we encounter in our modern society, and in a completely technologized work environment, is that the tools we are surrounded by are designed to attract our attention, which in turn gives us our small dopamine fix. Visual stimuli, such as the small square in the corner of your screen signaling a new e-mail in Outlook, the number indicating a new message on Messenger or the light signaling three times on your mobile phone, when you receive a new text message, will drown other forms of stimuli that also holds important functions to us. Sounds have the same effect, often appearing simultaneously with the visual stimuli - and if you really have called upon the whole infantry, your mobile phone and tablet will vibrate instantaneously. When this occurs over a period, the result will be a hyperactive attention demanding increasingly stronger stimuli to satisfy the brain. In other words, we have become overstimulated. At the*

same time, all these sounds, visual impressions, vibrations – as well as the updates, likes and e-mails appearing behind them – will result in a dopamine activity that is addictive. We search for increasingly shorter tasks, gratifying us instantly, at the cost of analysis, in-depth reading, concentration and focus. To make matters even worse, we don't even have to feel the dopamine kick in every time we check our e-mail or search for likes on Facebook, in order to amplify this pattern of behavior. Research on what is called classical conditioning (the relation between a certain kind of stimuli and a type of behavior) shows that we only have to experience a reward as rarely as every fiftieth time in order to repeat this behavior with the same intensity every time”³³

Thus, employees are exhorted to codify themselves and their behavior in the framework of (prevention and treatment of) addiction. Concepts such as *symptom* and *stimulation* appear here as key themes through which the employee can scan the causalities leading to one's behavior and find an explanation of a fluctuating attention and inability to perform sufficiently. The language of pathology is present to such a degree here that the employee is encouraged to – on a regular basis – “diagnose” him- and herself in order to find a proper “cure”.

The source of the employee's addiction is located in a “general condition” of our contemporary work life and society; the technologized sphere of omnipresent digital equipment, on the one hand and hurriedness and pressure of time, on the other hand. The message is clear: the tools and technologies that were supposed to make our lives easier and more efficient have invaded us. These machines have colonized our very souls; they have installed an instable, ever-shifting gaze in us that nourishes itself from our ability to stay put, endure, and gain perspective. Instead of becoming a Luddite, however, the employee is encouraged to struggle against this impossible, yet unavoidable condition of work life by waging a battle against his and her own inclinations. The employee should observe him- and herself as a generalized addict: Since the technologies at moment are ready to take possession of our attention and are yet also inescapable, both in our daily lives and at work, the employee resides in a “danger-zone”, where addictive behavior easily might transpire and take control of him or her. Therefore, the source of this addiction cannot be removed or diminished – the environment that surrounds us is always-already highly infectious, according to the organization. The careful work of prevention and treatment required by the

³³ <http://jobbsmartere.no/2015/10/stressmestring-ta-kontroll-stresset/>

employee in this situation, is instead centered on the self-management of gratification; his or her sense of joy and enthrallment when interacting with the technologies. Accordingly, the stress of the employee is thought to derive from the emotional (over)attachment to a number of objects that are indispensable for performing work.

The surroundings of the employee is accordingly filled with objects of a dubious and alluring nature, that at any moment can infect him or her through their strange emotional appeal. They are objects described as noise-induced surfaces that enthrall and absorb the gaze, which oscillates the attention of the employee in vastly different directions in increasingly shorter time spans. Of course, behind these visual-auditory artefacts, there is work: the mail and relentless search on the internet is obviously (also) work-related. These artefacts obviously contain *something* beyond their own surface of sound and vision, which supposedly triggers the employee – such as possible new assignments, inquiries from clients etc. The difference between these symbols and what they actually contain of information is, however, not a dominating distinction. On the contrary, they appear to be the same, whereby the addiction of the employee remains unspecified, as addiction that can be fixed on work itself as well as on the rapid imagery of symbols appearing in front of and around the employee.

When employees become overstimulated, they venture into a restless search for stronger pleasure, doomed to inhabit a sense of permanent subtraction, inflicted by unease and commotion. In other words, the employee that has become over-attached to his or her work features all the well-known symptoms of an addict; when the sense of reward gradually diminishes, it produces a need for ever-stronger increments. The workplace is framed as a site invested with affective enthrallment, full of temptations that gradually induce increasing lust and desire, which again calls for satisfaction within the employee. As such, the organization, just as society, is described as harmful, since it creates and fortify patterns of addiction, leaving the employee behind in a state of exhaustion and overstimulation. However, the objects of desire that so strongly resonates with the intrinsic need for pleasure within the employee cannot simply be removed or thrown out. The employee remains bound to these objects; they linger at the center of his or her work. There are, furthermore, neither any possibilities of refraining from the sources of risk in other, outer-organizational environments, such as the home or society at large, since the source of addiction is no less present there and already has unified what might previously have been separated spheres of privacy and work. According to Telenor, the private life of the employee has therefore already folded itself into his or her work life and vice versa, by way of internet or social

media platforms. As such, the source of addiction can appear anywhere and more or less take any form, such as the insipid sounds of incoming mails or vibrating phones. What is at stake here is therefore an organization that actualizes itself through its own problematic self-actualization of a vast affective topography, from which the employee, for obvious reasons, cannot spatially isolate or retrieve. It is an organization that problematizes itself through the self-problematization of its employees.

It is clear that the possibility of soberness is not really accessible in this environment, since it potentially always will breed and amplify addictive behavior. As a matter of fact, the concept of addiction as it appears here, as a precondition and omnipresent risk of the organization, is not directly juxtaposed to sobriety, since the aim for a complete self-sobriety in such an environment will prove itself obsolete. The employee should instead consider him- or herself a “risky” subject, which is always on the verge of a certain form of impious consumption, whereby a sense stimulation sets in, for instance when encountering the rapid motions and auditory effects that moves across the computer screen. The pathways of action rendered available from this seductive environment suppose the employee instead as an always-already recovering addict, counterposed to the excessive addict in self-fertilized overstimulation; he/she must learn to detach from the sources of addiction while simultaneously retaining a proximity to them, work out a proper balance between attachment and remoteness, detect and assess triggers and problematic behavior. Put into a form, the employee as a generalized addict would appear like this:

(recovering) addiction \neg (excessive) addiction

addiction \neg sobriety

Hurriedness, performance and addiction is molded together in the practices of self-assessment and regulation brought about to the stressful employee in these guidelines. In order to handle this state - a constant danger of intensified attraction to the variety of artefacts found throughout the organization - the employee is encouraged to retract by way of spatial isolation and self-analysis, through the following means:

- *“Find someone you can talk to, who knows you from a work-setting and can provide an external perspective on the way you perform at work. To put into words what you find frustrating and to formulate goals that others actually can measure and assess, is both clarifying and committing. It feels good to talk about it.*
- *Try to define in typing what kind of behavior you feel is troubling for yourself. If the problem consists in you making to-lists that are too ambitious, it is quite simple to do something about that challenge. If you, however, make lists that are fairly achievable, but rarely manage to pull it through, you probably need to work on your lack of focus, time-leaks, up-date addiction and poor boundary management.*
- *Try to limit the amount of information and disruptions from day to day. Herbert Simon once wrote that “a wealth of attention creates a poverty of attention” – and something as trivial as working on a small screen with only a few windows open can be more efficient than working on the 27-inch screen running fifteen programs simultaneously*
- *Use the “silent rooms” without being embarrassed, especially to begin with, when you are trying to change your behavior. Make sure that your surroundings are aware that you do not want to be interrupted, if anyone should knock on the door or likewise.*
- *Imagine your attention along a scale, with “distracted” in the one end to a situation where you at times will experience a “flow”, in the other end. And remember that your attention is a muscle that needs constant exercise, which will end up dreary if it’s not sustained.*
- *Use a simple method, such as the Pomodoro-technique in order to get going. This means that you work in intermissions, where you for instance can begin by working non-stop for thirty minutes, take a small break and then go on for another thirty. You will gradually enhance your ability to concentrate and substitute your dopamine kick with the satisfaction of having worked continuously for longer period of time and having finished off an assignment.*
- *Check your mobile phone, mail, Yammer and other social media platforms on specific times, which you have already set beforehand.*
- *Use your dialogue partner actively, maybe on a daily basis to begin with, in order to talk through your experiences and for having someone who holds you accountable for your responsibility”³⁴*

³⁴ <http://jobbsmartere.no/2015/10/stressmestring-ta-kontroll-stresset/>

As previously mentioned, the stress the employee is addressed as a symptom of “hurriedness” and the “urgency of now” found across contemporary work life. In the case of these guidelines, the problem of stress is fashioned according to two different temporalities; the fluctuating attention of the employee *and* the “structural” acceleration of work life, in which time becomes an increasingly scarcer resource. However, each assertion of overwork, exhaustion, anxiety and stress here refers itself to the non-specific addiction residing within the employee. In an outright manner, the organization also says: You must work on yourself in order to enhance your performance and stay on top of your game: *“If you are able to keep the perspective, control and progress when the heat is on, you will easily be considered a more valuable asset than the colleague who gets distracted, forgets things, turns up too late for meetings and is unable to deliver before deadlines”*³⁵. In the next chapter, we will see what happens when these notions of self-pathology, performance and responsibility becomes the center of attention in a stress management course.

³⁵ <http://jobbsmartere.no/2015/10/stressmestring-ta-kontroll-stresset/>

CHAPTER 10

Self-transformation and the paradox of authenticity

How does an employee take upon itself the therapeutic imperative of self-transformation? How does the distinction between perception and reality appear when it is sought indorsed and attached to the concrete daily life of individuals who experience pressure and stress at their work? How is the call for “authorship” interpreted and received among employees?

While the different sources of empirical data applied so far have been *practice-oriented*, I will in the following chapter examine how stress management unfolds these self-problematizations at the actual level of a therapeutic “intervention” during a stress management course. Up until this point, my inquiry has revolved around *ideal* discourses found in, for instance, the literature of self-help or HR-strategies. In this chapter, I will look into how these ideals are met and interpreted among participants throughout a stress management course. In systems theoretical terms, I turn from the semantics of stress management to the actual operation of this vocabulary. The following account is based on my own participatory observation of a stress management program, offered to employees struggling with stress at work. The observations have been conducted at an occupational health care provider, offering different stress relief courses to employees of both private and public sector. During my participation I did not bring along any recording equipment and the quotes that follows are based on my notes from the sessions. At this specific course there are nine participants in all, most of whom work in different parts of the private sector, such as banking, research, insurance and IT. The course runs over two months, during which the participants meet once a week for a session that lasts about an hour and a half. The participants were made aware of and gave consent to my presence as a researcher.

Apart from a large ellipse-formed table with nine chairs and a small blackboard hanging on the wall, the room does not contain much else. It is small, but feels quite airy and does not feel packed once everyone are seated. The stress management instructor gives a short introduction to the concept, underlining that she is not an instructor in a traditional sense, but rather a guide. “*This is not a concept that is very concerned with right and wrong ways of doing things, you yourself have to feel what is right and wrong for you*”, she says.

In line with the dominating stress management literature, the course seeks to open up and adjust the fixed thoughts and reaction patterns of the course participant. In addition to the weekly course, the participants are encouraged to make lists of priorities and keep diaries, to detect their own “*potentials of improvement in terms of utilizing the stress-energy*”. In the material handed out, participants are therefore exhorted to observe and write down their own positive and negative emotions, how they handle resistance, both privately and at work, and reflect on how their gained self-awareness on these matters can be used positively. During the second gathering of the course, the instructor gives an introduction to what is called SOAL, a technique on how to “*notice yourself*”:

Stress instructor: *SOAL is an exercise that revolves around how to notice yourself, quite simply. It's an acronym indicating the four different steps you need to take in order to notice yourself, when you're in the midst of the thunder and lightning. Stop, observe, accept, letting go. In order to notice myself, I have to be able to set me apart from my environment. Only then can I start to reflect on exactly why I feel stressed or upset, "what goes on out there and what goes on in here?" [pointing index finger towards the head]. This is what self-esteem is all about, feeling yourself and your own presence. Because you will usually find that there is a strong mismatch between what the world expects of you, on the one hand, and the expectations you have towards yourself on the other hand. And this reflection, again, enables me to take a conscious decision on how to respond to this situation...*

Frida: *I think I get what you mean, speaking of this, but for my part, when I am in the middle of all this... I often tend to go and reflect a lot afterwards, I carry it with me for quite some time and I have problems putting it aside. For instance, during a weekend quite recently, it was a Sunday morning, around 10 AM, I was called up by a colleague asking about a case I've had before. And when we're done on the phone, then I start to think all of a sudden, well, "could I've explained this case better for him, did I really perform well?" And these thoughts, they stick around, they can remain with me for quite some time.*

Stress coach: *Well, I think a lot of these issues is about obtaining a certain distance, when you've been thinking this thought and notice that it's bothering you, well, "now I have to pull out, I have to withdraw from this thought". I think this is... This is something that you actually can work on and get your hands around, to avoid escaping into those old videos that all of sudden start to rewind in the back of your mind. It is about learning how to dispose unimportant thoughts, of sorting out what is useful and what is not, how to get rid of the*

thoughts that drain you. This inner notion of unease, that is something you actually can change, everything else is beyond your control. See, you took a choice and picked up that phone on a Sunday, when you had your day off. You could also just have decided not to or say to yourself “I’ll call him up first thing tomorrow”. Because basically, you cannot take upon yourself the problems of others, you cannot solve their issues for them, they have to take care of that themselves. So you have to tune into the now-situation, let it go, all of these concerns on have you did perform or how will you perform tomorrow. You can always make a choice, “how do I choose to handle this?”

The mentioning of “old videos” and the “now-situation” are noteworthy, because the metaphor of “videos” and “VCR” runs through parts of the stress management literature, as to explain a state of *captivity* to the past or, alternatively, as an effective *means of self-assessment*. For instance, one example of the latter form can be found in a stress management technique called “freeze-time”, which “*is based on the concept that conscious perception is like watching a movie, and we perceive each moment as an individual frame. When a scene becomes stressful, the technique allows you to freeze that perceptual frame and isolate it in time so you can observe it from a more detached and objective viewpoint – similar to pausing the VCR for a moment*” (Cryer et al. 2003: 5). Perception is thus divided into two internally struggling agencies, between *immediate perception* and the *awareness of immediate perception*. In other words, in order to make individuals perceive *how* they perceive, one must provide a distinction between *what* and *how* they experience the stressful reality that infuses their perception. By drawing such a line, between the *what* and the *how*, the individual is supposed to unravel and expose the malleability of his or her own thought-patterns.

The point is to invoke a form of “awakening from the slumbers” of perception, through which the individual can obtain a distance from a specific emotional state or thought-pattern and monitor how it emerges. The same situation or thought can thereby be cast in a different narrative outline. In Woolfolk and Richardson’s classic self-help guide “*Stress, sanity and survival*”, this concept of “pausing the frame” is put adjacent to the possibilities of a self-transformation:

“The best way to get in touch with the threatening or hostile meanings you give to events is to become aware of what you say to yourself about them. The things you tell yourself about what is happening, what it means, what is going to happen next, and what you should do

about it create and maintain perceptions of infringement and threat. Your self-talk and self-instructions stoke the emotional furnace and keep the coals glowing. In the stressful situation you have selected, try to become aware of the way you interpret the people and events involved. Determine what is the most stressful moment for you in this situation, for example, "Facing a deadline at work". Often the most stressful point is anticipating a situation while sitting around waiting for it to occur. Sometimes the most disturbing moment is thinking about an event after it occurs. Focus on yourself at that moment and become aware of the kinds of thoughts and images that cross your mind. You have probably been through it all many times. Imagine that there is a videotape with soundtrack and self-talk at that point in time. Replay it several times in your imagination. Write down on the left half of a half blanksheet [...], as many things as you can of the things you say or picture yourself in that situation. Be specific and comprehensive. Do not take anything for granted. Many of the things you tell yourself that cause anxiety or irritation have become so automatic and familiar that it will be difficult to disconnect the public facts from the meaning you give to it. Be especially alert for self-talk containing the words should, must, ought to, deserve, owe, or any of their negative or synonyms. These kinds of rights and obligations are not part of the objective situation. They are meanings you give it. If you feel like something is missing from your picture of the situation, crystallized in your internal monologue of self-talk, then it probably is. Look again. Generate as much self-talk as you can, even minor variations on themes, until you have a comprehensive list. The thoughts and images you have written down reveal the perceptions of threat that trigger the stress reaction. They also provide clues, which, if read properly, can eventually lead you to the mistaken beliefs that are the source of stress" (Woolfolk and Richardson 1979: 115-116).

What is at stake in these "old videos" and the "VCR" is a temporalization of the perception, which the subject is encouraged to detach from or, contrarily, to utilize as a reel for improved self-insight. Both of the video-metaphors are actually played out during the "SOAL"-exercise at the stress management course. In the excerpt from the course quoted above, one can see that the instructor suddenly switches from problematizing one form of temporal self-inquiry to another as one of the participants, Frida, gives her opinion on the exercise.

The instructor sets off by invoking the necessity of framing our perception when we experience stress - to *stop* and *observe*. Frida responds to this by mentioning a recent situation related to her work, where she ends up being "stuck" in her own thoughts on how she performed, as she phrases it. The gradual set-up in the exercise, of moving on from the

stages of “stop” and “observe” to those of “accept” and “letting go”, does not seem to resonate very well with Frida’s own experiences. When Frida talks about her difficulties of going from a stage of “observing” herself to “letting go” of the situation, she brings about experiences that does not respond affirmatively to the “map” of self-transformation; she lingers on the moment instead of moving on. Frida seems to somehow “pervert” the self-transformational scheme, which is pinned out for the participants. Against this backdrop, the instructor then points to how Frida should focus her attention on how to “*avoid escaping into those old videos*” and to “*withdraw from this thought*”, suggesting that she is “stopping” for too long.

Frida and the other participants are therefore at once both “transfixed” by a past from which they must set themselves free and are simultaneously encouraged to zero in this past, by way of inquiring their own perceptive responses to events initially experienced as “stressful”. In continuation of this, the instructor at the stress management course problematizes the ability and inability to differentiate between the “interior” life of perception and thought, on the one hand, and the “exterior” world of demands, expectations and tasks, on the other hand. The subject under stress remains “un-differentiated”, unable to distinguish his or her own thoughts and emotions from the surrounding environment. Instead, the “self” enmeshed in stress is highlighted according to a fluctuating and “fluid” identity, continuously oscillating between alarming “images” of the world (what they demand) and its own critical self-assessment (how I perform).

The instructor suggests that this state of “un-differentiation” can be explained according to the distance between what might be called a “projected self” and an “authentic self”. She explains, literally, how the ability to “*set me apart from the environment*” is the first step on the way to obtain a greater self-authenticity, or, as it is phrased, of “*feeling yourself and your own presence*”. The stressful subject is accordingly stuck within “*zones of indistinction*” (Agamben 1998: 122). Stress is thought to appear *within* a perception that perceives itself and its reality through a number of blurred and indistinct lines, between the singular individuality of the self and everything that surrounds it. The “projected self” is therefore a self that is not properly mounted on itself. It is a self that is caught “out there”, on the borders or beyond, of its own singularity, where it moves ungrounded and removed from the possibility of articulating the experience of the world consistent with an authentic voice and perception. Aiming to obtain both a closer proximity (to the authentic self) and a distance (to the

environment), the stress management course seeks to center its participants on the obstacles and challenges that stand in the way of such an authenticity and, furthermore, the techniques required to regain “access” to an authentic voice. These two *selves* (*projected* and *authentic*) and their perception-patterns, one containing an agency that only perceives through immediate experience vs an agency containing the ubiquitous quality of being able to calmly peel off the layers of meaning ascribed to the experience, is akin to the difference between dependent and independent self-awareness, respectively slave and master, put forward by Hegel (Hegel 2007 [1807]: 109-114). The different exercises and techniques applied to release individuals from their own aberrational perception, therefore usually installs different variants of this slave-master agency. The slave, in the form of an immediately perceiving subject, that experience the world only at the level of sudden emotions and intuition, is restricted by the lack of resonance and self-reflection. The slave-agency is only able to hear and feel his or her own enslaved “dissonance”, such as emotional self-resentment, threats, obstacles, physical exhaustion etc. The master, on the other hand, takes the shape of an awakened and rational subject that is able to provide other interpretations and meanings, as well as other emotional and physical reactions to the different situations that impose a sense of stress. The stressed out individual has accordingly either lost (or never had) a master-agency or is torn in a struggle between the two agencies.

The two-fold paradox of authenticity

Certain questions arise, however, in the midst of these efforts to improve self-esteem and an authentic self-relationship. How is the line between inauthenticity and authenticity drawn and made into a pivotal point of self-transformation? How can an individual be geared towards obtaining a greater proximity to the self? Moreover, on the opposite movement, how can a self drift away from what, on the outset, has been an authentic “core” of subjectivity? How can an authentic voice at all be re-installed in the self, if this voice only can come “from within”? How does a subject come under the control of forces “out there”, which simultaneously are merely the product of his or her own imagination?

What appears behind these questions are, obviously, the concealment of the “voice” of the therapeutic intervention itself. This points to the first paradox of authenticity: The therapeutic intervention has to construct the authentic voice of the subject in order for the subject to become able to voice its own authenticity. Similarly, the unobservability of the overflow of

emotions that, in the shadows of conscious thought, directs the perception of the stressful individual must be constructed as a blind spot in order for the blind spot to be “discovered”, affirmed and put into use as a problem of the self. Hence, these blind spots (within the self) and unconsciousness’ can only appear on the communicative occasion of their supposed intrinsic importance and value for the employee and his or her self-relationship. What’s more to it, however, is how this construction assumes a specific problem laying behind the state of stress, which is beyond the immediate scope of the subjects themselves (unconscious emotions, inauthenticity, “false” perception etc.). If the opposite was the case (that specific forms of unconsciousness already was within the conscious scope the subject), no effort would obviously have to be made in order to actualize and guide individuals towards discovering these blind spots within themselves. The therapeutic intervention sees what the stressful subject is unable to see that it cannot see, but the enactment of this “superior” point of observation must remain very discreet, because otherwise the possibility for furnishing an authentic self will be jeopardized. To phrase it differently, the therapeutic intervention *knows* that the subjects lacks a form of *self-knowledge*, yet this insight – what this lack of self-knowledge consists of – can only be “discovered” and articulated by the subject itself in order to retain its authenticity *as* insight and self-knowledge. This is typically done when people are encouraged to make themselves the subject of a self-inquiry: “*how could you have reacted otherwise...?*”. We will see, in the following pages, that there is a lot of tension coming to the surface when this is played out.

When the instructor says (as quoted above): “*you will usually find that there is a strong mismatch between what the world expects of you, on the one hand, and the expectations you have towards yourself on the other hand. And this reflection, again, enables me to take a conscious decision on how to respond to this situation*” it is, likewise, a matter of establishing an authentic voice that can distinguish its own singularity from the disturbing cacophony of self-projected voices “out there”. This points to the second paradox of the authenticity that is played out in the therapeutic intervention: The “inauthentic” voices that the subject projects from itself onto its environment (when perceiving crises and alarms), cannot be distinguished from an “authentic” voice that is mounted on its own, unique singularity. The self-transformation from a stressful to a “stress-managing” individual revolves around (re-) installing a voice of authenticity that can only be voiced by the same individual which initially has infused its own reality *as* stressful. It remains the same voice: only an “authentic” self can determine the authenticity (in the future) or inauthenticity (in the

past) of itself. Therefore, the act of distinguishing an authentic voice from the voices of inauthenticity remains a fundamentally paradoxical operation.

The epistemology of choice

The session with the SOAL-exercise quoted above pinpoints how the actualization of *choice* and *expectation* reverberates throughout the stress management course. As the instructor seeks to make clear, “*you can always make a choice, “how do I choose to handle this?”*”.

Put differently, the course seeks to make its participants take responsibility for their own perception and reaction patterns by identifying these as *choices*, which are guided by their own expectations and self-image. The stressful individual needs to debunk its notions of a reality infused by necessity and force, of experiencing stress as something coming from outside in the form of given constraints. In other words, the *choice* appears as a code for the actualization of contingency (of perception) as opposed to fixation (of reality). The stress management says that you always can make a choice, on how to *expect* and *handle* your situation differently. In fact, you are *required* to make a choice.

Here it might be useful to consider how *expectations* can be understood in systems theoretical terms. Expectations are always directed towards a future that cannot be foreseen, as the future by definition is uncertain. As such, expectations works to build up a present capacity to orient ourselves and reflect upon an unknown future (Esposito 2011a: 14-15). Luhmann dismisses the traditional juxtaposition of factual or descriptive expectations and normative expectations as false, on the grounds that expectations always are factual, whether or not they turn out to be fulfilled. What ought to be and what actually is, is therefore not a matter of factuality, since both forms of expectations are real *as* expectations. Instead, Luhmann proposes the difference between normative and cognitive expectations as more adequately fit and empirically productive to describe societal problems of expectation (Luhmann 2014: 31-35). Cognitive expectations are recursively bound to the fulfilment of disappointments from which we *might* choose to learn or reflect in one way or another. Furthermore, cognitive expectations does not only enable us to handle disappointments, but they also make us capable of perceiving the future possibility of unfulfilled expectations in the present. Normative expectations are, on the other hand, not conditioned by learning, neither as "irrational" preference nor as reality-check, e.g. readjustment for future encounters of similar situations. On the contrary, normative expectations makes it possible for us to proceed

without any reflexive hesitation or capacity to learn. For example, while a newly employed and young co-worker might normatively be expected to deliver the report on deadline, she might also be cognitively expected, by her boss or co-workers, to appear energetic, young, playful and creative in the performance of tasks. If the employee fails to deliver the report in time, there might be certain sanctions involved, such as a notice. But the manager will usually not “learn” from the unfulfilled expectation and hereafter expect all reports to be delivered a week after deadline. On the other hand, if the report is delivered on time, but fails to display any characteristics of creativity or playfulness, the manager might feel impelled to provide examples of such creative solutions to the employee or simply wait to see how things evolve. As Luhmann puts it: “*Cognitive expectations, then, are characterized by a not necessarily preparedness to learn, whilst normative expectations signify the determination not to learn from disappointments. The possibility of disappointment is foreseen – one knows oneself to be in a complex and contingent world, in which others may act unexpectedly – but is, at the outset, seen as irrelevant to the expectation*” (Luhmann 2014: 33).

Interestingly, in the stress management course, the participants are framed as caught up in normative expectations, because they perceive their own situation as coming from “outside”. They cannot, accordingly, *learn* anything – about themselves, their performance, their own sense of pathology etc. These normative expectations are sought turned into cognitive expectations that can radically charge the stressful individual with a responsibility for itself, its performance and pathology. What you perceive as facts are actually choices you have already made about how to perceive them, it is suggested:

Stress coach: *Stress is a sense of losing control. So what do you tell yourself, for instance, when you experience some sort of defeat or fear that things are about to get out of hand, when it’s about to get too much. When we are in a situation with a lot of strain, a very demanding situation, we can choose to fight or flight. You always have a throttle available, to accelerate speed, but you also have a brake to slow it down or stop completely, and we have to learn have to use these two, the throttle and the brake, in a way that doesn’t drain us for energy, but rather gives it back to us. The medical terms for these two functions are sympathetic and parasympathetic. On a certain point, if you keep your warm water flooding, you will run out of it, the tank runs dry at some point. And to be honest, if you choose to have a heart attack, it is exactly a choice you make, it is your choice to have that heart attack, because what is certain is that it is you who is spinning the hamster wheel, it is you who*

decide the pace of it and if you should jump off for a while. It is no one else who is spinning that wheel for you.

Linda: Well, when it comes to these things, the way we tend to talk about it, and I've also gotten the same notion when I've read a couple of stress management books, what I feel is that there are a lot of metaphors at play, such as the warm water and the hamster wheel and so forth, but when you are faced with your own actual reality, when you try to apply this to your own daily struggles and issues at work, well, to me it often remains very abstract. I feel that, quite often, these concrete problems can't really be handled by way of thinking metaphorically. Another thing is, for instance, the more specific how-to exercises, such as breathing techniques. I mean, I can see that they are very useful in many other situations, but when I'm at work and there is a lot going on, then I think, well, "do all of these pressing issues just vanish if I breathe more consciously and remember that I have a choice, I can choose to jump off the wheel?" I mean, the deadline doesn't disappear, the workload doesn't shrink. All of these things, these pressing issues, they remain there no matter how I choose to consider them. I feel that these metaphors are not necessarily very applicable, they do not make me more capable of solving the problems or the hurriedness I face at work.

Stress coach: Well, stress is about getting stuck in the past or getting too fixated on the future, on everything that is about to come. It is proven scientifically that your level of arousal and stress can be efficiently handled and lowered with certain exercises and techniques. When you are facing a threat, whatever it is, there is only one person who can tell you how to handle it. And there is only one person who can tell you when it's too much, that is what this is all about. It's about what you tell yourself when you all of sudden find yourself in the eye of the hurricane... It is about becoming present in what is happening exactly now, the now-situation, and let go of what is about to come and let go of what happened before lunch, or yesterday or last year. To be honest, I can feel that there is quite a lot of resistance here today. And that is not bad, I think this resistance, it is telling us something about this process of becoming aware of ourselves. The resistance, that is you ego, it is what you are fighting against, it is you who are fighting against yourself, against becoming a conscious you. Because you are threatening your own ego by becoming aware of yourself.

Linda: Well, I'm not sure if it is a resistance as such, I just feel that these things often remain quite abstract...

Stress coach: *What do you tell yourself when you are unable to deliver before deadline, do you punch yourself in the face or do you tell yourself, "that is ok, I did my best"? That is at a very concrete level of handling things. It is about getting the proper discipline with these exercises, of getting a discipline with a practice, on a regular, daily basis, of stepping out of the stress you experience. The resistance is your motivation, you have to go into it and asks yourself where it comes from.*

Again the question of making a choice is brought up, because the conscious enactment of choosing is supposedly out of the scope of the stressful subject. There are no choices available in his or her conscious register, only a sense of facts, which means that the possibility of "control" is lost, as the instructor phrases it. The stressful individual is not choice-less, however, it is not a state of *not being able to* make a choice that has let this subject "astray", but rather an *unwillingness to* deliberately choose and decide. When the instructor speaks of "*spinning the hamster wheel*" and that "*it is you who decide the pace*" it obviously revolves around an effort to interchange a notion of facts with that of choice, and to replace a sense of necessity with that of possibility. To make her point, the instructor even goes as far as to say "*to be honest, if you choose to have a heart attack, it is exactly a choice you make, it is your choice to have that heart attack*".

To choose, then, involves specifically a choice of whether or not to account for the responsibility *you* have, for how *you* feel and think, for *your* illness, for what *you* expect from yourself and for what *you* expect that your surroundings expect from you. The instructor makes use of a number of temporal figures in order to underscore the critical difference between making a choice and not, such as "*becoming present*", the "*now-situation*", "*getting stuck in the past*", "*fixated on the future*", the "*throttle*", the "*brake*", the "*tank running dry*" and the "*hamster wheel*". The experience of hurriedness, pressure and illness is brought into these temporal figures, as to explain how each person can choose to take responsibility for its own pace, energy, performance and so on. For Linda, however, these figures and metaphors remain very abstract, as she puts it, as they seem both inapplicable and irrelevant for the difficulties and pressure she has at work. Furthermore, she also points out that the specific exercises seem pertinent to the range of problems she encounters, as she phrases it herself: "*do all of these pressing issues just disappear if I breathe more consciously?*". The instructor responds to this by invoking a peculiar linkage between resistance and self-transformation. The "resistance" and disagreements voiced among the participants is entrenched with a

specific quality by the instructor, namely that of symptom of an authentic struggle within the self.

The “resistance”, as the instructor calls it, is an inauthentic voice speaking under the pressure of another, emergent authentic voice; it is the “ego” feeling threatened by the increased self-awareness that is taking place within the participant. Therefore, any resistance towards the exercises and the language being offered at the stress management course is considered a sign of progress and a step in the direction of becoming a more enlightened and authentic self. To oppose, reject or simply feel unfamiliar with what is taking place is not, in any direct form at least, met with disapproval, but rather welcomed and emphasized as an indication of a genuine and necessary engagement. The inauthentic self is “cracking up” because authentic annoyance and irritation can be heard and seen. The participants are standing on a brink of alternation, according to the instructor, whereby their old beliefs of a “factually” expected world might collapse – the “resistance” expressed among them is an expression of the subsequent embattlement within the self: *“it is you who are fighting against yourself, against becoming a conscious you”*. When resistance is, as such, framed as a struggle between authenticity and inauthenticity it obviously has certain consequences for how the participants can express themselves and the stress they face at work. If one seeks to criticize the therapeutic imperative of authenticity and self-transformation, the critique itself is tapped into the problem of authenticity and self-transformation as a point of struggle and alternation within the self. On the one hand, the expression of affect and “opposition”, whatever form it takes, is viewed as a self that is taking upon itself the self-inquiring schema of authenticity and inauthenticity. On the other hand, the expression of an “affirmative” authenticity remains under the suspicion of whether this emerging authentic voice actually is genuinely chosen and voiced authentically.

The temporal dimension of stress is grounded in the assumed pressure upheld in the two temporal axioms, surrounding the individual, of the past and the future. The past casts its shadows over the present, in the form of disappointments. The future, on the other hand, appears as a threat (with its deadlines, workload, etc.). Stress is assumed to be equally motivated by the presence of these two haunting temporalities, which the subject is sought equipped to discharge him- or herself of. The haunted individual is, according to the prevailing theories and how-to-literature on stress, torn apart between the two temporal horizons, which splits the attention and somehow blocks the entrance to the present situation. The past is a ghost that can reappear in front of the individual at any given moment, and

sends him or her off to emotionally disruptive states of remorse, regret, self-pity, anger and so forth. These are, for instance, the videos that keeps rewinding in the back of the mind, as the stress coach phrases it in a quote above. The future, however, entails a somewhat different function, as a possibility of a disaster that is about to take shape. On this basis, stress is described as being perceptually locked up or nailed to these two temporalities, more or less detached from the present. The question of temporality therefore adds yet another layer of discrepancy (upheld within the employee), that must be balanced out.

Stress coach: It is each and every one of you who are in charge of this process, and managing stress is a lot about taking ownership to the problems you face, of saying, "how do I deal with this problem" ...

Marianne: But let's say that you have a case that is about to come up, and you... and you have to deliver on this, it is very important and there is a lot at stake, because there are a lot of people, of other people who completely depend upon the quality of the work you do, so it is not just about me, how I feel about myself in such a situation, it involves other people... But at the same time you might have other things that are pushing you as well, other things you should deliver... many other things... So what do you say to yourself then, you can't just say, "oh well, I think I'll just slow down today, take it a bit easy, since it's been a bit much lately and then I can just go home and be satisfied with what I've accomplished, even though I didn't manage to get the things done"

Stress coach: Yes, that's one way of putting it, but then I must ask who is, at the end of the day, responsible for you? Who is responsible for your stress? That is no one else but you. It is you who decide if you're going to continue to run around like a headless chicken or if it is better to take a time-out, a deep breath. It is only you who can do anything about that and it is you who have to take that responsibility.

There are seemingly few limits for what can be made into a problem of authenticity. During the course sessions – which also can be witnessed from the quotes – the instructor continuously switches between addressing vastly different issues such as illness, work load, performance or difficulties with superiors or colleagues. However, the way in which these different issues are addressed and how they are problematized remains “un-switched”, because they are incessantly molded into the same problem of language, the authenticity of the self and the contingency of perception. What appears in these efforts to biographize pathology, to alternate the distinction between reality and perception and to furnish an

authentic self, is not, as it might seem at first sight, an overt effort to radically singularize the world of the self. This might come across as somewhat counterintuitive all the while the authentic singularity of the subjects inner “life-world” is at the centerfield of the transformation from the state of stressful to “stress-managing”. Yet, it is not the individualized individual which is the *telos* of the self-transformation being offered to the stressful employee; the instructor cannot simply ignore the reason why these people have showed up at a stress management course in the first place. They are there because they have experienced long-term stress and pressure at *work*, in some cases resulting in illness.

Therefore, upon closer examination, the authentic self is always interfaced with some form of specific, often work-related threatening reality. The stressful employee is confronted with an unmanageable reality, due to his or her own unwillingness to perceive it *otherwise*. The authentic self is merely the means, albeit highly paradoxical, to obtain a subject capable of *managing* reality rather than to become sick, to feel at unease or saturate itself in open antagonisms and resentment (towards management or colleagues). Against this background, the participants are sought to inscribe themselves in an *alternate* field of social relations within the organization they work, including for instance the perception of their work load and experience of illness; that is the aim of their self-transformation. Thus, the incessantly underlined difference between perception and reality does obviously not extinguish reality, but instead *doubles* reality (Luhmann 2000a: 5-8). In this way, stress management serves to unfold an alternate reality in which the subject can mirror itself throughout specific performative “capacities” when faced with pressure, exhaustion and stress, by obtaining an “emotionally enduring”, “self-aware” and “balanced” self: a self that is conscious of how it produces reality as it perceives this reality – and thereby must take the ultimate responsibility for how it has created reality itself.

The stress management course appears to be neutral. It does not take place at work or in some kind of work-related context, such as teamwork or coaching. The service is provided by a third party, that does not have any affiliation to the organizations wherein the different participants work, apart from the fact that they offer different forms of health-related programs to a variety of workplaces, such as psychological counselling, “lifestyle-changes”, weight-loss and nutrition courses and ergonomic guidance on how to facilitate the workplace. The individuals who are present might or might not have been encouraged by colleagues or managers to take part in the course, but it is not a part of any prevention or treatment that has been formalized between the employees and their employers. In other words, no one is there

because they “have to”. There are no sanctions involved if they fail to show up. The stress management course invokes itself as a realm of informality, where, for instance, difficult and “touchy” subjects concerning the work environment, the relation to managers or colleagues and work assignments can be taken up and assessed in a friendly and congenial atmosphere. It is against this background of informality and congeniality – where no direct bonds appear, between the facilitator of the stress sessions and the workplace – that the participants are invited to step into a neutral ground and see things, most notably themselves, in a different light. In the previous part of this thesis we have seen how the subject is assumed to be wrapped up in a tragic narrative of him- or herself, without access to see how it has tragedized itself – and we have seen how the stress management course partly revolves around rendering the individual tragedizing visible to the participants. Perhaps exactly because of the supposed neutrality of stress management, the confronting enactment of making the employees take responsibility for how they perceive their conditions at work, can remain sheltered in its own therapeutic imperative, as if it has no other agenda than to enlighten the self. Yet, it is hard to imagine, even if it is not unthinkable, a manager standing in front of an employee telling her that the incessant demands she experiences, might as well find their solution if she only starts to think about them differently.

Pedersen (2008) has shown how stress management also revolves around creating attachments to the workplace, a form of commitment in which the self at once responds to the needs of the organization, but also learns how to detach and “cope” with the demands and expectations posed by the workplace. The stress coach can enable a linking between the difficulties in the organization with the tragic self-relationship of the employee, exactly because she appears to be neutral; merely a “guide” as she herself phrases it. I am not, however, suggesting that the stress coach is supposed to be understood as some kind of ventriloquist for what in reality are the dubious intentions of the management. The problem is rather that the stress coach cannot conceive how she so effectively can call upon an alternated account of reality, directly linked to the workplaces of employees, exactly because she has no formal link to this workplace herself. The “neutral” realm of stress management makes it possible to demand a transgression of fixed thought-patterns that would, had they been articulated by a manager or an HR-director, most likely also appear as confrontations related to manifest differences, between, for instance, a superior and an employee at work.

In a newsletter sent out by the Corporate Health Service provider, it states that the stress management course aims at helping you, the stressful individual, to become “*more present*”

here and now. This will contribute to reduce your stress and to enhance your capacity". Furthermore, it says that *"there is an ever-increasing amount of scientific evidence that indicates that stress in its various forms is the real trigger behind most of what we refer to as diseases and we are all in need of tools that can help us regain and maintain a balance in our lives"*. The employee is called upon as the carrier of a symptom, which is conspicuously vague, in the form of his or her imbalance. Behind this imbalance, however, there is a very concrete causality afforded between "stress" and "diseases".

In this thesis, the observation of the health, illness and stress of the employee has so far departed from various programmatic efforts of intervention; the sanatoriums in the mountains; the instructions for enhancing bodily energy through exercise; the monitoring brought about to safeguard the body at work; the efforts to improve the wellbeing of each individual employee. These efforts of intervention have in common the articulation of the illness and health of the employee and, furthermore, the rise of the perilous problem of his and her *stress*. While the red line in the inquiry in the foregoing parts have been the subjectification of the employee's health and well-being, I will in the following account target the "self-knowledge" of stress and ask how employees themselves identify with their work and how they experience work load, pressure, relations to managers and conflicts.

CHAPTER 11

Stress and the self at work

In this part, I will turn away from the analytical disposition of the problem employed in the previous pages. So far, we have identified certain traits in the emergence and development of a) workplace health promotion and b) the problem and management of stress. In the following section, however, the empirical locus does not start out from the point of managerial concern and conduct, or from the therapeutic problematization of employees' self-relationship. Instead, the observation is turned towards the experience of stress and pressure at work, as it is conveyed among employees' themselves.

The aim is not to present some sort of "bottom-up" account of the state of stress vis-à-vis the managerial problematics found in the previous sections of this thesis. Instead of investigating a possible correspondence (or absence, for that matter) between stress policies etc. and the self-management of stress, I set out to investigate the phenomena of stress – not in direct relation to specific policies or therapeutic efforts, but as a surface of experience and discourse among employees. The following account is based on 21 interviews carried out between October 2013 and April 2016. Of these interviewees there were five males and sixteen females, aged between 28 and 52, all of whom identified themselves as "knowledge-workers", and with one exception all held a bachelor or master's degree from a university or college. A majority of the informants work in private sector (18), for the most part banking, IT, consultancy and research. Some participants have been recruited by reaching out to various HR-departments who, in the case of successful contact, conveyed an invitation (to all their employees) to anonymously participate in the research project. Others again have been recruited through "word of mouth" or through posters being hanged up in Bergen and Oslo. The interviews were done by me alone or along with another researcher and were conducted as individual and confidential semi-structured talks lasting on average between 70 and 100 minutes, which then were recorded and transcribed. All quotations have been translated from Norwegian to English.

Based on Steinar Kvale (2007), the interviews were carried out by following the informants' own observations on how they have experienced stress and pressure, and how they related this to their daily work, work environment, collegial relations and relations to managers (among other things). In addition to their self-assessments and attitudes, I have also sought to gain information on their concrete "everyday-routines" at work, how they interact with

colleagues and management in tense and pressured situations and how conflicts have been handled, by themselves and managers. The interviews will therefore be read as “symptomatic”, centering in on the interviewees variety of experiences at work and their own views and considerations. The reason for this is that I have sought to gain knowledge on the specific situations that have left them with a sense of unease or stress, in order to discuss their stressful experiences on a more general note. I have therefore mainly been interested in a) how their everyday practices and experiences at work relates, in their own opinion, to their stress and b) how stress, at a phenomenological level, is experienced as such. The informants have been recruited based on their experiences with work-related stress, as a strong negative impact in their lives, of which about half of the interviewees reporting on stress leading to sickness leave.

What I want to gain insight into is how stress is problematized by those who have encountered it as a source of tension, pressure and sickness. We have seen, in the previous part of this thesis, how the discourse in management- and how-to literature as well as the practice of stress management brings about an ideal balanced subject capable of mastering new, demanding surroundings. As such, parts of workplace health promotion and stress management revolve around utilizing and enhancing certain forms of “self-mastery” (such as self-assessment, efficacy and performance, “emotional conduct”, social competence). What I also ask in the following section is how individuals respond to the strong notion of stress as a matter of advanced self-mastery and as a problem that needs to find its solution in the inner vaults of themselves.

When the point of observation here is moved from different forms of problematization of employees (found in management literature, stress management etc.) to the self-assessment of individuals, it is also an epistemological move that requires some further consideration. The move is motivated primarily by an effort to “dig out” another tenet of the problem at stake here, which is not only contained at the level of semantics and “programmatic” practice (such as self-assessment strategies, stress management courses), but also appears at the level of individual self-assessment. Based on Foucault’s notion of the subject, I will argue that, in the case of the “stress problem”, it makes sense to continue and broaden the scope of inquiry to also include individual experiences. For the purpose of analyzing the management of stress and its interlinking of illness, power and the self, I have tried to carve out how these employees are made into subjects of an “inner reference” in the foregoing pages. However, subjects are not entirely constructed from above and beyond, it is also something that takes

effect from the “inside” of human beings. As Foucault notices, “(T)here are two meanings of the word “subject”: *subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to*” (Foucault 2000: 327). In this section, I will therefore attend to how individuals turn themselves into subjects when it comes to such an increasingly charged identity as that of work (and what happens when this leads to pressure, conflict, illness and so forth). To paraphrase Foucault, I turn the attention from a set of “dividing practices targeting the subject” (for instance, stress versus balance, authentic speech versus self-subjugation) to the modes in which people recognize their own identity as employees (Foucault 2000: 326-327). The point of observation no longer departs from the external efforts of intervention, but instead poses the question of how the problem of stress (and other work-related issues) is “internally levied” among the employees themselves. Because I am dealing with a set of individual interviews, the following pages does not follow the same “strict” criteria of an analytical strategy which underpinned the previous parts of this thesis. Instead, as already noted, I seek to grasp how individuals identify with work and how they participate or oppose to such a discourse of identity and how their concrete environment of tasks, managers and colleagues can relate to their experiences of stress and illness.

In continuation of this, the questions I want to follow here is not primarily whether the interviewees consider stress to stem from their own lack of strength, capacity, discipline etc., but how the experiences of stress and illness unfolds at the level of meaningful ascription. For instance, when interviewees experience stress as a result of their own inability to prioritize etc., what kind of “status” is attributed to this stress, as opposed to the stress they experience as “coming from above”, e.g. the organization? Furthermore, are the various accounts of self-imposed stress conceived of as distinct from the stress thought to derive from “above”, or do these two reference-points, the organization and the self, “mold” into the same substance, when work can be related to engagement, passion and self-realization?

Obviously, the ambition here is not refurnish the division between cause and effect brought forward by both the physiological stress research and practices of stress-management. The primary question at stake is therefore not what really is the cause of stress. Instead, I will try to move along the explicit discourse of the interviewees and ask a simpler question: How is stress perceived and interpreted among employees? Furthermore, how do they relate it to their work?

“Workmania”

The discourse on stress among the research participants moves across and in between a wide range of different registers of emotional, physical and cognitive experiences. For some, the experience of stress is linked to a sense of severe physical exhaustion, while others again denote stress more as a general condition surrounding them, which they struggle or fail to keep on an arm’s length. Some also hold forth stress as a part of their strive towards a work life balance, where the schedules and demands of family and work become entangled and sometimes collides. In other words, the concrete application of the concept of stress and the actual experience of it among employees ranges from that of a certain pressure on the practical arrangements of family life and work to inner pathological turmoil or a potentially “infectious” circumstance at work. Underneath these differences in personal experience, there are some strong commonalities between the different interviewees, most notably the experience of “losing oneself” in one way or another. Several interviewees describes the experience of stress in existentially threatening terms as a “black hole”, a “darkness” or a “bang”. But what is exactly this experience within the “black hole” and how do they describe reaching that point of all-pervasive numbness or dissolution?

Peter, a man in his late forties, describes himself as someone who has “worked his way up” in a corporation where he eventually was made a regional director. He describes the work environment he has been a part of as hectic and ambitious, characterized by the fact it is a regional firm, which over the course of a decade and a half grows into a significant international corporation. Peter refers to the term “mania” in order to describe his experience of and attachment to work, a term he relates to a sense of losing sight of himself, of simply becoming blind. During our conversation, he describes a series of episodes in which he encountered an acute sense of such “blindness”, where his body simply collapses or all of a sudden, he becomes unable to solve what usually would be simple tasks.

“It was the first Tuesday after the Pentecost. I was going to do a presentation in Oslo that Wednesday, so I choose not to go in on the office and just sit at home on this Tuesday in order to get it done. While I was sitting at the kitchen table, writing on the computer, my fingers just fell down all of a sudden, on the keyboard and there were all this letters that just paced across the sheet. And I just wondered: “Whose hands are these?” And then I fainted. Ehh, and then I woke up on the floor and I just took a sip of water and got back to work. The presentation was finished until Wednesday. So you might say that you are blinded by this, I

think you are. I think you're in a mode of autopilot and there is just full throttle! A lot of times I have sat myself in the car to drive off at work, in the middle of the night, at 2.30 AM. And I might have gone to bed around half past ten, and then I can't sleep any longer until 2.30, because then there is something that just keeps spinning around my head and I think "Well, I'll just get off to work and fix it". And then I'm at work at 2.30 in the middle of the night, but might not be at home until half past four the next day. So I think it blinds you, yes, either that or you work so excessively that you become unable to "catch" yourself"

Peter refers to several similar incidents. Due to lack of sleep over a long period, he faints as he is on his way out from a plane, heading for an important meeting. After having been examined by medical personnel at the airport, he decides to go straight to the meeting, despite being urged to immediately seek a thorough physical examination at a hospital. On the question of why he actually chooses to go into a meeting, in situations like these, where he obviously is experiencing some sort of breakdown, Peter says:

"I have thought about that on a number of occasions, as to why I didn't pull out, or seek any help. I must have been very blind. I have experienced these things time and over again. Once, I was in Bergen and I was going to drive to Oslo, a trip I've done so many times I should be able to do it in my sleep. But this was in a period where I was working extensively, I think I worked the clock around several times prior to the trip. And I was going to Oslo, but once I was about to reach the city, I simply couldn't find my way around. I was on a detour. And I ask a guy at a gas station if he knows the way and I drive off in the direction he points out to me. But after a while I start to think "I'm in the wrong direction here. I'm turning around!" Then I turn, just to discover that, eventually, I am back where I first went wrong. After several detours I manage to get back to Oslo, but I couldn't really remember how I got there"

Again, Peter reaches for the term of blindness in order to describe why he decides to go into a meeting, when he is advised to seek immediate medical help. In this context, blindness denotes a paradoxical state, as a sense that signifies a non-sense, or a sense of something that cannot (or can no longer) be sensed. On the one hand, he speaks of a particular blindness that makes him unable to "see himself" and makes him overlook certain conditions that, in the rearview mirror, should have alerted him. However, the blindness to which he refers, also invokes a lost experience. As can be seen from the quote above, Peter explains the blindness that makes him lose sight of himself by referring to episodes where he literally goes blind, where he faints or loses basic skills. This blindness unfolds in a realm of lost experience:

These encounters with a “force” so strong that his body becomes unable to run its most elementary operations, momentarily disabling his vision, his ability to speak and orient himself, is for the most part only recollected in small fragments and more or less erased from his memory. For the most part, Peter refers to it as experiences recollected by his body, which “recalls” how the stress permeated his basic senses and numbed his ability to perform elemental tasks, such as typing or driving. Another striking expression conveyed in Peter’s account above, is the alarming phrase “to pull out”. He speaks of not being able to pull himself out of his work, as if he was trapped inside a building on fire, almost as a form of self-imprisonment.

When the blindness “hits”, he simply becomes paralyzed. For Peter it seems hard to offer any explanation as to exactly why and how things could get out of hand. When he interprets his own experience of psychic and physical turmoil due to the stress at work and how he let things get out of hand and how he did not reach out for help, he does it through the “prism” of his own personality which, according to himself, is prone to become fixated on certain things. When trying to explain his experiences, Peter reaches for his own lack of sense of himself, of becoming obsessed and having disproportioned “values”, in such a way that his job became the main source of well-being and contentment.

In a similar vein, Lisa, a research consultant in her early thirties, describes an experience of everything turning “pitch black”. As Peter, she also describes her work environment as ambitious, buzzing and hurried, and a workplace that “infuses energy”. Prior to her experience, she has worked intensely for several weeks:

“We were going out to have seven meetings that day, I think it was, and I got down there and then everything turns pitch black. I didn’t know where I was heading or anything, so I just had to pullover and call our secretary and say that, well, “I think I’ve become sick, somehow”. Then I called my doctor and she asked me to come down right away, because they thought that it could be something very serious. But after she conducted some tests on me, she told me that I needed to take some time off, “you need to go home and sleep”. So that’s how it all started. There I was, “bang!” I was completely overloaded. I was on sick leave for about half a year, I think. After two or three months I started to see a therapist and I started to try to unravel everything, how it came about, and they helped me get me back on my feet again.”

On being asked how things were before the bang occurred, Lisa says:

“Well, it was busy, very busy, I knew that. I didn’t sleep well and I was very stressed. And we had tried to hire someone, but it didn’t work out so... well, it was so busy, I could feel my pulse going up and I felt the stress, but it didn’t occur to me that I was coming that close to hit the wall, I didn’t even consider it an option. But when I arrived at my doctor’s office that morning I was just sitting there, screaming and laughing in turn, I was completely gone. And that was when she told me that “you just have to get home right now and go to sleep, and we can pick up on this later today or tomorrow”. But it was a very peculiar experience, because there were all of these physical manifestations of it as well. I got reactions on my skin, and I gradually started losing my hair, I lost a lot of weight and didn’t get any sleep. Yes, it was all of these typical... I became very forgetful, didn’t recall any names anymore. I could wash my hands and discover, later, that I kept the water running. The door on my fridge was open half of the time. After a while, after a week or so on sick leave, I went to my parent’s place and just stayed there for a couple of months. So it was very “bang” just all of a sudden”

Both Peter and Lisa describe experiences of strong physical and mental reactions. In order to depict their experience of a breakdown, they invoke metaphors and sayings that refer to basic experiences of deprivation, such as “pitch-black darkness” or blindness.

For some interviewees, the experience of stress is described as something that suddenly creeps into their bodies, as an unexpected and sudden reminder of their own vulnerability. Karen, for instance, explains how the stress in certain periods simply “*makes my body react instantly*”, without being able to detect any “triggering” signs in advance. Vivian, on the other hand, says she initially had a quite strong “suit of armor” against stress, but after a series of personal incidents, her tolerance for stress gradually deteriorated. After that, stress has become a “*button that is switched on, and then I lose the ability to think straight*”. In a vein similar to Peter and Lisa, Vivian also experience stress as a sudden emotional and physical rush that completely detaches her from a state of “normal” functioning, a state which blurs her mind and sets her apart from her immediate surroundings.

Despite the descriptions given above, of being brought to an existential verge, stress is usually not experienced as a disease, but a peculiar state that materializes itself in their bodies that they both are aware of and not. Peter and Lisa speak, in this regard, of having worked themselves to a point where the body stops to function properly, where “alarm bells” goes off, and yet they feel unable to change the situation. How are we to explain such seemingly extreme encounters with work?

Within the field of sociology in general and particularly within Critical Management Studies, stress and anxiety is often placed alongside the new “spirit” of autonomy, individualization and authenticity that is assumed to permeate ever greater parts of present-day work life (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Ekman 2012). Some observers have placed the phenomena of stress at a pathological intersection between self-doubt and self-realization, fueled by a so-called “entrepreneurial” subjectivity put forth as an ideal across different domains of our society, including the organizations of work life. Accordingly, it is pointed out that the excessive demands of self-fulfillment produced within contemporary organizations is “*an important stress factor behind the numbers of mental fatigue diagnoses*” (Thunmann 2012: 56). I consider this research to hold significant accounts of the consequences and effects of contemporary work life. However, the prevalent diagnosis of neo-liberalism found in much critical research on contemporary work life tends to function as a magic formula, in which everything finds its natural explanation once it is said out loud. What I find troubling is not the critical assessment of neo-liberalism, but that the label of “neo-liberalism” itself occasionally leads researchers to “leapfrog” across the urgent analytical question as to exactly *how* neo-liberalism produces anxiety, self-doubt and stress among employees today. Perhaps the formula of neo-liberalism is too easily brought forward when analyzing the current regimes of managerial practice, in such a way that all forms of anomaly (such as stress and work-related illness) can appear as a pathological “outcomes” of a supposedly increased individualization and neo-liberalism, without providing the necessary level of clarity on the pathologies themselves, how the organizations handle them or how they are experienced by employees. To give an example, it is suggested, that among stressful employees, certain discourses are “*markedly absent, such as political perspectives that highlight the need for social change. Instead, desires for change are directed away from the socio-political sphere and turned inwards. Social critique is transformed into self-critique, resulting in a prevalence of self-doubt and anxiety*” (Scharff 2016: 198). I find readings such as these problematic for a number of reasons. First, they tend to produce an ideal state – in this case the ideal of a well-founded political or social critique – that is found to be absent among the research participants. This points towards a peculiar form of historization, which assumes that employees, on a general note, previously advocated social critique, whereas they now only find “biographical explanations” to their own experiences of unjust, pressure, exhaustion etc. This is not to say that there previously might have been, as Ulrich Beck claims, a sort of

collectively engaged experience of social misery among workers, leading to politically motivated struggles, which by now obviously has disappeared (Beck and Williams 2002: 164). There is, however, never rarely any patient, empirical analyses put forward to support the thesis of a simultaneous rise of individualism versus the fall of political collectives (and how this help explain why we what we do), only a “goes-without-saying”-sense of general decay. Within Critical Management Studies, the idea that “*social critique is increasingly replaced by self-critique*” therefore often tend to produce an already set narrative of alienated, de-politicized individuals due to the arrival of an alienating, de-politicizing neo-liberal regime (Saleci 2010: 31). In other words, these analyses tend to tautologically revolve around what people (stressful employees) do *not* say and do *not* do and then hold this absence accountable for the de-politicizing of individuals within a current neo-liberal regime. Second, in continuation of this, what is “found” and brought into light in these articles, tend to lose sight of the actual sense of pathological and stressful experience among employees, while analytically “favoring” these employees’ lack of a particular agency. Third, the research also tend to lack an interest to pursue the strong ambiguities expressed among employees on the experience of workplace stress, which I find to be among the conspicuous and consistent issues brought forward by interviewees. By ambiguities I refer to how, for instance, employees voice dissatisfaction and critique of the management and organizations, but similarly also often sustain a strong critical assessment of themselves and their own performance and achievements. I suggest that the attribution of stress, as it is expressed among the interviewees, is therefore not solely found in a mode of “interiorization” of conflicts, in which “structural” antagonisms are seamlessly transformed into an individual project, that are contained and sought resolved within the self (Lazzarato 2013: 187). There is, in other words, not necessarily an either-or for the interviewees, between voicing critique of poor management and problematic work environments, and conveying a strong sense of stress as a “self-produced” problem. Perhaps it is even possible and more clarifying, at least in the case of a number of the interviewees in this case, to say that both the critique and self-critique voiced by employees often stem from a strong identification with the workplace as such. In the next few pages I will describe the way in which the informants seem to recognize and “discover” their own identity at work.

Work as identity

The topic of attachment to work resurface throughout many of the interviews. As we have seen, Lisa, for instance, speaks of work in very vital terms, as something that infuses energy and makes her crave for more. Similar views appear among other interviewees. Siri, an economist in her forties, states at one point that if she didn't have any family to take care of, she could easily end up "*working all the time, just eat, sleep and work*", because it gives her so much joy. She expresses a strong identification with the firm, in which she is hired:

"When I am offered the opportunity to take part in it [developing strategies etc.], everything is more fun. For me, it makes my work more than just work, it becomes a part of you. My work is great part of who I am as a person... And, well, I am myself influencing the organization and the work is a part of my personal development. Because when you spend so many hours at work, it becomes a part of you. And I am very much like that, when you are working with numbers you can basically do anything, but the things is to identify with and feel that you are a part of this house, even though I haven't taken part in everything, but there is a "we" and this is not just a place you work, this is actually a "we"."

Mona, an ambitious solicitor, poses the problem somewhat differently: *"Well, I think it is pretty hard to work only eight hours a day. I try, but... I had this period were I was very exhausted last year, I got a coach and I was challenged: "Now you're going to work only eight hours a day for two months straight"! And then, to just leave after eight hours, not working on Saturday, not working on Sunday, that is incredibly hard, it is extremely tough! And I have had periods, especially when I was single, when I didn't manage to distinguish between, well, people used to say "oh, it's you who is ASAcorp", if I was at a party, and then it turned out like that, "I am ASAcorp". But then, no, "ehh, ASAcorp is a firm and you are only a small piece of that" - that is what I have been practicing"*

Karen speaks of a similar experience: *"I feel that [having this job] sometimes can be a bit double-edged, because you sometimes get so excited and dedicated and concerned with how important this is that you can easily forget yourself and your own wellbeing, when do you reach a point where it is enough? I guess that is the greatest challenge. And I see that among many of my colleagues as well, there's many very committed people who are on the verge of becoming completely exhausted. We consider our work important and then it's easy to just step on the gas... That sense of purpose and engagement at our workplace, it's a bit double-edged".*

What Karen and the other interviewees describes as dedication and commitment holds a strangely infectious quality that simultaneously provides a “drive” and threatens to consume you from within. The commitment, dedication and sense of purpose adds up to a “joker” with two faces, a face of destruction and a face of construction (Serres 2007: 67). However, it is not given when the “joker” appears as destruction, there’s no hint in advance, apart from occasional “wear and tear” on the body or small “*scratch marks in the back of your mind*”, as Lisa puts it. Mona speaks, in somewhat ironic terms, of “being” the corporation and having to struggle with herself not to become completely immersed in the identity of the organization she feels such a strong bond and commitment to. All of the quotes above indicate work as being a potential “trap”; the cost of commitment is hard to realize when work also is such a strong source of excitement, recognition and meaning, as Karen point towards.

On the one hand, we have the testimonies of a strong personal commitment and sense of well-being that is realized through work (and which might become a “trap”). On the other hand, there are also many who point towards a sociality at the workplace, which indirectly leads to a pressure to “deliver” and perform at work, in a pace and in a volume that they might not be comfortable with. This is not necessarily directly related to managers who demand stronger performances. The work environment previously described by Peter and Lisa, for instance, will probably sound familiar to many people working within so-called knowledge-based professions, where ideals of employee “autonomy” and “flexibility” are valued as significant qualities. Peter indicates a very competitive work environment, where his own mere presence at the office the morning after a very late night at work gives him a sense of victory and where people are “showing off” by turning up in the office during weekends or holidays. At the same time, he never experience any pressure from his managers to go beyond the regular working hours or demands of increasing workloads. On the contrary, Peter describes a work environment where both the demands of work and preconditions for advancement rarely is explicated.

The condition of fluid and indeterminate organization has been described as key features of modern work life, in the transition to a so-called post-industrial society, accompanied by a proliferation of knowledge-based work (Bell 1974). The transition has, according to some observers, undermined traditional notions of authority and transgressed the explicit division of labor found in the disciplinary mode of organization at the height of modernity (Foucault 1995). The supposed demise of hierarchical and rigid top-centred forms of steering within organizations has been handled thoroughly in both management literature as well as

sociological and organizational studies. Rather than to exercise traditional control and surveillance, management now aims to facilitate processes and support the self-fulfilment and autonomy of each employee (Thompson 1998; Goleman 2000). The time of clearly guiding management principles and strict division of labour is thus said to be long gone (Gibson and Vermeulen 2003). What has emerged instead is a salutation of autonomy, conviviality, multitasking and spontaneity as prolific qualities of the employee and organizational environment. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 97), these are qualities taken *”directly from the repertoire of May 1968”*. In the flexible organization, employees are encouraged to bring along their personality to work and to put it at stake; the employee should reflect upon how his or her personality is being performed in the organization (Townley 1995). The tools of the management of involvement in organizations range from the use of dialogue schemes and team-building exercises to play (Andersen 2008). It has been proposed that the engaged and autonomous employee gets locked up in an image of a free-willed identity, which really is out of their control (Deetz 1998: 168). On a similarly critical note, Richard Sennet (2006) and Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 101-102), suggests that the autonomous and flexible working environment first and foremost renders possibilities of new and sophisticated forms of employee surveillance. The function of workforce in management has come to represent far more than a set of competences to fulfil specific, given tasks in the organisation, as employees’ potential “meta-competence” has become a predominant virtue: the competence to develop his/ her own competences, setting goals and articulating visions for the future of the organization (Andersen 2007, 2012; Du Gay et al. 1996, Donzelot 1991: 280).

Instead of entering a realm of pre-defined authority and set work-tasks, the employee’s conditions of work is in contemporary work life increasingly confined to a space of negotiation and self-development. To take responsibility in such a realm does no longer simply imply conscientiously solving a number of set work tasks. On the contrary, such an attitude towards work might easily seem rigorous and “out of tune” amongst many people in knowledge based organizations today. In line with this argument, one might say that the expectations towards what and how work is fulfilled is sought to remain open to such an extent that both the individual employee and the organization continually can add new prospects to the question of how work is solved or what tasks are found to be of interest.

The stress of solitude and managerial withdrawal

In continuation of this, some interviewees adduce the conflict between retaining a strong independence in their fulfilment of work, on the one hand, and a sense of being “left alone”, on the other hand. The sense of being alone is not only a negatively connoted experience. Among the interviewees, the sense of solitude can designate a physical “fact” (sitting much alone in the office or at home), as well as a structural condition of the organization and a “management problem”. The physical “fact” of solitude at work is described by Lisa as a result of a very lax organization, where there are few demands coming from above, in terms of when the employees have to be present in the office. When she arrives at work well before noon, they are often no more than ten people at the premises, despite counting a staff of 43. Not all colleagues find this particularly troubling, according to Lisa, who point out that such flexible arrangements make things much easier on her own part, with the whole “family-logistics” that must be taken care of every day.

Yet, she also describes her position as that of a “lone rider”, which is a label she would put on most of her colleagues, due to the highly individualized work tasks and lack of constraints on their presence. As long as the work is done, nobody really cares where they are. In addition to sitting alone most of the time, Lisa also feels that the possibilities for developing new projects and finding “common ground” with other colleagues are suffering because of these flexible arrangements. During the interview, Lisa keeps lurching back and forth between endorsement and suspicion of the flexibility “regime” at her work, which both allows for easygoing arrangements in her private life, but also situates her in a solitary enactment with the work, with quite few options of collegial support when things “tightens”. This again leads to another form of pressure, which Lisa describes as being stressful at times.

The sort of flexibility she describes seems to be quite unusual when considering the group of interviewees as a whole. None of the others speaks of a work environment similar to that of Lisa, where no one really takes notice of whether or not people show up at the office. While most of the interviewees describe relatively “loose” demands on when they have to be present, they do not describe a similar lack of plain and simple interaction with other colleagues on a daily basis. The most common feature of flexibility characterizing the work environments of the interviewees leans more towards a freedom of tasks than of presence. How they fulfill their work and the specific content of their tasks are often rather malleable and non-specified, of which many of the tasks are temporarily, based on specific assignments

or projects. Considering the quite diverse background and workplaces of the interviewees, these structural conditions (work hours, how to fulfill tasks etc.) found in their work environment can sometimes seem to remain beyond generalizability. However, while the work environment of Lisa seems to be characterized by a far-reaching and quite untypical form of “laissez-faire”, there are nonetheless certain strong resemblances with the other workplaces in this regard, as it expressed among most of the interviewees.

This brings us to another kind of solitude, namely the loneliness of the work itself, as an ongoing enactment. What just above was described as Lisa’s lurching back and forth between endorsement and suspicion of the flexibility in her organization, can be found throughout many of the accounts put forward by the interviewees. The flexibility that, according to organizations, is designed to promote autonomy and self-fulfillment seem to rely on a certain disentanglement of the relation between employee and superior. To phrase it like a question: How are demands articulated upon employees in an environment where they themselves are expected to find and develop their own “projects” and where the specific content of their position rarely is explicated?

The flexibility does not by any means seem to dissolve the relation between employee and superior as such, but seem to entertain a certain “wooliness” in terms of how the different tenets of work is specified. Vivian, for instance, expresses a sense of diffusion of management: *“There is no manager as such at our workplace. There is a manager for the whole section, but that covers so many people that we don’t know him”*.

Further into the interview, she outlines how this leads to a lot of uncertainty on her part.

Vivian: *“I feel that I do know who makes the decisions here”*

I: *“And that is something you feel induces stress, somehow?”*

Vivian: *“Yes, because I never know what is about to come. And what this job is actually all about”*

I: *“Is this something you experience a lot?”*

Vivian *“Yes, a lot of times”*

Instead of being addressed as an individual with bonds of specific obligations, that are supposed to be fulfilled according to explicate demands (issued and continuously assessed from above) the employee is now expected to increasingly rely on techniques of self-assessment and “self-enrolment” in work. Work becomes a project itself, as a rarely defined

“entity” under continuous construction (Jensen 2009: 120-121). Another informant, Marie, repeatedly uses the word “freedom” to describe the upside of her job. On being asked what she associates with freedom, she says that *“well, it is working with the kind of assignments that I find relevant for my area of expertise, not just doing anything. I am put here to do a job, even though I don’t have a job description, hardly, I don’t know if anyone of us has such a thing. It’s back to this thing again, somebody would like something. The freedom consists in me doing my own things”*. Marie associates freedom almost immediately with the absence of a job description and of not having a set list of tasks. Freedom is connoted as a *project* that involves creating her own position.

In many so-called “flexible” jobs (to various degrees), the specific content of work as well as the job description, tasks, work hours, and even the workplace itself has become a matter of the single employees’ own preference and interest. This again relies on a whole new plane of self-reflection and self-regulation on the part of the individual employee. The question I have tried to bring up during the interviews, is if and how this new expectation of individual engagement can intensify certain type of conflicts or difficulties at work, while others might be tuned down? The “wooliness” echoed in the often informal or random procedures of feedback and acknowledgement, which was described by Vivian, are examples of reoccurring conflicts, among several interviewees. In two cases, interviewees describe feedback and acknowledgement as being close to non-existing. Many others also bring up the frustrating experience of lacking a counterpart that can give feedback or occasionally provide more specific requirements as to how their job could be performed.

Marie describes her position as having been completely “invented” by herself from the very first day she came into the organization. According to her, she was appointed to a vague area of responsibilities when she first entered the organization, which she has since developed and clarified. On being asked whether she experience any regular feedback at work, Marie says:

“Ehm, in the form of “maybe you can take charge of this as well”, which is an indirect response implying you do a good job. That was our former director, though. But there is not much asides from that, no. You get a bit discouraged, especially if you are in need of a specific feedback on “should I go in this or that direction?”, like I am doing with this strategy now, where I try to draw out some topics and questions, “should we do it like this or like that, do you want to emphasize that part?”. Then I have just been told that, well, “you’re best suited to figure that out”. And than I’m just deadlocked, now I’ve tried three times to get

a response without any luck, I am going to throw in the towel and say “someone else have to take care of that”, because it is simply beyond my imagination what they want”

Marie conveys a strong sense of not being “seen” and properly acknowledged in her organization, despite having put down an enormous effort to build certain parts of it up. While she often has a completely packed schedule, her colleagues or managers does not really take notice, among other things because a lot of her work involves “out of the house”- assignments. Thus, the primary recognition she experience is an occasional new assignment, which might lead to an even heavier workload than what she already has. Yet, she is far from obliged to take charge of the projects that managers or others propose to her. In the quote above, Marie outlines what seems to be a form of protest against the lack of feedback from the management, where she simply passes over the task to someone else. Her “silent” objection is aimed at the silence of her superiors, who does not provide any responses and decline to involve themselves. Put differently, one might say that Marie describes a frustration of being rendered without any counterpart that can offer a discussion and arguments for or against.

On the one hand, Marie is trying to involve her managers and colleagues in a strategic priority, which she considers important for the organization. In a peculiar form of negotiation, Marie’s manager points towards her particular competence, in order to “warrant” authority (to make the decisions on the strategic priority), which is a move she does not care for. As she explains it, the whole point is to try to create a sort of resonance throughout the management on this specific issue, not to be “rewarded” with the exclusive authority of solely taking charge herself. The conflict at stake here, as interpreted by Marie, does obviously not revolve around unreasonable demands being put forward or of an employee being overruled by a superior. It rather seems to be the opposite problem, where an employee fails to require a feedback from the management and is instead left with an unintended surplus of authority and responsibility. Yet, on the other hand, Marie also employs the same means of “mute tactics” herself. In the set-up she depicts, the conflict taking place is not really allowed to be played out as a conflict, as she never bring forward any explicit dissatisfaction. “Conflict” remains just one out of several possible interpretations of the silence surrounding both of the involved parties. Her superiors does not want to be involved, unknown why and Marie reacts by handing over the task to someone else, but it is not brought to the surface why she does so.

This can be considered a symptom of the flexible arrangements themselves. When there are no manuals at hand, making it clear who is in charge of what, the questions of delegation, authority, responsibility and feedback can easily become points of negotiation, which might be intentionally sought to remain unfixed (from the organizational point of view). While this mode of “fluidity” might designate, more or less precisely, the forms of flexible arrangements and the possible undercurrent of disentanglements (of authority, delegation, responsibility, content etc.) accompanying them in the “flexible” organizations, the question of how the *incommunicability* of conflict itself seems to be such an intrinsic part of the experience of stress must be considered more carefully. In other words, when the “mute tactics” and (occasionally) incommunicability of conflicts is such a prevalent characteristic of how work and stress is linked according to several interviewees, how can we understand these testimonies of struggles and predicaments, that are not “allowed” to become conflicts because they remain unspoken?

The intersection between the responsibility of the employee and the demands voiced by the management often does not constitute a primary division of authority at the workplace, according to most of these interviewees. In other words, there is not anyone telling you exactly what to do next, or how you could have resolved that task more effectively. Furthermore, in several of the organizations, the very question of who the “manager” is becomes re-configured from one task or assignment to another (in the form of, for instance, a succession of “project managers”). Yet, the division between employee and management remains intact, even though it might be unclear from day to day. Some of the interviewees point to instances of different forms of “managerial withdrawal” as a source of great frustration, due to both the uncertainty involved (of how they perform, if it could have been handled differently etc.) as well as the lack of recognition. This is, by some, held in direct continuation of their experience of illness and stress at work. Despite a workload that at a certain point made her ill and take sick leave due to stress, Marie’s experience of discouragement in the organization stems mainly from the lack of acknowledgement, according to herself. In other words, Marie is more concerned about the heavy workload not being seen and recognized by her managers, than about the workload itself. It is as if the load literally gets heavier when she does not receive any attention or recognition by a manager or co-workers.

At the same time, we can also see that Marie, like most of the other interviewees, alternates between pouring out frustration over her solitary position in the organization and

continuously highlighting the necessity of retaining a strong independent position. In other words, the sense of unease when someone actually do intervene “from above” seems to be just as commonplace as the frustration of “managerial withdrawal” and being left alone for most of these interviewees.

Expectations as self-expectations

When asked about what kind of expectations they experience in their everyday work life, several interviewees immediately relate it to their *self-expectations* towards the fulfilment of work. To a certain extent, their testimonies of expectation are in line with what the stress management coach, encountered in the previous section, describes as “*your responsibility and no one else’s!*”. As such, expectations are seldom explicated without conjuring up themes of personal responsibility and performance at work. In continuation of this, the interviewees’ reflections on these themes are often directed towards boundaries which, as they express it, rarely are definitely set, in the form of explicit demands or expectations on work hours, workload, initiative etc. Several interviewees express a wish for an organization that can somehow can restrain their own desires for work, but not to a degree that would rein the possibility of unfolding their self-expectations at work too strongly. Peter, for instance, proposes more strict *regulations* as a means to make boundaries more visible: “*Well, the freedom I have at work is amazing on several levels, because you can basically do whatever you want. But at the same time, if you’re a “yes-man”, you will end up working at all waking hours. But if you actually had some restrictions on this, saying you shall not receive an e-mail after four o’clock, you shall not work after four o’clock... these things should actually not be necessary*”. For Peter, as he explains it, the possibility of saying no to work often remains beyond his options, because he is so inclined to take care of anything that turns up at his desk. In his case, the boundaries that regulate hours and workload remain unreachable, even beyond the possibility of actual confrontation, because they are not there to begin with, as he perceives it. In other words, what he finds deeply troubling is not so much the fact that work hours, for instance, occasionally are converging into his private life. It rather seems to be that he remains unable to make his work distinct from everything that is not work in his life. Peter experience his work environment as abundant with self-regulation, where he solely decides when, how much and to a certain extent even where to work. However, in spite of the wish for a more “old-fashioned” and regulated organization, Peter interprets his experience of

ailments provoked by work load or overtime exclusively as an “internal struggle”, which has unfolded at the level of conflicting self-expectations. He clearly blames himself for having “faded out” and becoming “blind”, and points towards his own personality traits, such as “the yes-man”-syndrome, as an underlying and omnipresent explanation for his extremely consuming experience and encounter with stress. For him, the illness due to work is to some extent considered a repercussion of his own personality, rather than a consequence of a “culture” or environment at his workplace.

Others, however, do not report the same kind of experience of a negative and complete absorption of work, as Peter does, but highlight freedom as a defining positive feature of their work. For instance, several interviewees point towards the freedom to organize the workday as they like, or to choose what kind of projects they would like to prioritize, as intrinsic for their own engagement with work. Freedom is therefore usually brought about as a specific kind of “self-involvement” by the interviewees, an involvement that holds the possibilities to take charge of tasks, projects, resources etc. Ane, for instance, states very clearly that the freedom she has available at her work is very important to her:

“To me, this is sort of the freedom: How do I solve this? How do I organize it? I like that very well. To have that much time for myself, or to make these decisions on my own, it really appeals to me. There is no one else telling me what to do. Other find that very distressing, but I find it appealing, to take care of things myself”

Still, Ane holds forth that her freedom is “relative”. On the one hand she finds it very intriguing to be in charge of her own time, that she can plan projects and have money and resources available to do so. It gives her a sense of confidence, she says, to feel that she is solely responsible for the quality of what she delivers, and that there is not really anyone else to blame if things get “jammed up” and she fails to deliver in time. She speaks of this freedom in terms of a “positive stress” and a strong motivation to perform well. At the same time, the work also requires her to be in a steady flow, where the option of taking things down a notch rarely is present. In such instances, where she simply cannot keep up with the flow, the freedom “switches”, according to Ane, into pure responsibility: *“But once you cannot provide that extra effort, it just becomes an incredible load. Then the freedom turns into just responsibility”*

Freedom is thus only an ideal insofar as it works “with” and not “against”. Ane considers the freedom she has at work to be a kind of fuel, which enables her to hold a steady pace and

enhances her performance, but at the same time this freedom can turn against her and make her even more drained and exhausted than she would be otherwise. For her, the problem is that the freedom she praises functions just as “effectively” as a motivation as it does in the opposite direction, when it becomes a fuel for her own exhaustion and stress. Freedom holds a similarly peculiar quality among several interviewees: In periods where they cannot keep track with the pace or flow at work, the freedom implodes into excessive demands, which they are not able to satisfy. There is in other words always a shadow hunting their freedom, which, when it eventually surfaces, threatens to turn all their positive connotations of personal initiative and self-regulation into a sense of mere duty or responsibility. These “shadows of freedom” are conveyed very differently. Some speak of the “boring” part of autonomy, while others denote freedom as a “privilege” that comes at a certain price. However, the “shadows of freedom” is something all the interviewees brings about during our conversations.

Expectations towards self-performance are also put forward and explicated as intrinsic for the experience of a meaningful job, a career or “self-development”. The various expectations towards work, and the sense of freedom and responsibility attached to them, are conversely allocated to the two “spheres” of organization and individual. During the interviews, which is evident in the stories of Peter and Ane, it becomes apparent that these two references of expectation continuously enmesh and are, to a certain extent, interchangeable. For instance, the lack of clear-cut responsibility is considered a problem, while it at the same time is viewed as a precondition for the possibilities of self-development and (in some cases) self-control. The question of responsibility is at once sought to remain negotiable, open and unfixed, while the actual attribution of such qualities are also put into question by several interviewees, who voice disregard for a flexibility that “*tends to only work the wrong way around*”, as Mona at a point phrases it. The point of interest in this case is not to show how the interviewees contradict themselves, but how they express and deal with the contradictions and ambiguities that seem to be intrinsically linked to the experiences of freedom and responsibility and thereby also their understanding of stress. These ambiguities go beyond a contradiction between the two opposing ideals outlined above (in the form of a “clear-cut” division of responsibility on the one hand and unrestrained possibilities of self-fulfillment and freedom on the other hand). However, there also are some forms of pressure which are seen as more legit than others. In the following pages, I will take a closer look at a certain “ethics

of exhaustion”, which seems to be at play in the justification and self-interpretation of stress among the interviewees.

The ethics of exhaustion

When Max Weber described a concurrence between a protestant ethics of vocation and specific modes of capitalist enterprise (by Weber entitled “spirit”), he did so with reference to a number of canonized theological treatises and writings, produced at the time of and in the aftermath of the Reformation (Weber 1995). This was an ethics that, more than anything else, revolved around the rewards inherent to the very act of work itself and the equally unrewarding state of idleness, through which the waste of time was considered the worst of all sins.

The present interviewees often persistently allude, not to an ethical stance on the “salvation” of work itself, but to an ethics of exhaustion and pressure that finds a foothold once it corresponds with a sense of “personal fulfilment” and “higher purpose” or “sacrifice” on behalf of colleagues. This is typically related to overwork or having tasks that exceed their capacity. In other words, ethics (albeit never explicated as such) is primarily introduced by the interviewees when the topic of conversation relates to how their work intervenes into their private spheres, or, for instance, when they reach points of severe physical and psychological tiredness. Although, what concerns idleness, none of the interviewees exhibit any kind of “condemnation” or disregard for the state as such (or for people unemployed) but confronted with the hypothetical prospect of not being financially dependent on work, almost no one could imagine quitting their job. For some, this was simply due to imagined horrors of boredom, while others spoke of the necessity of a purpose, despite experiencing the job as difficult and even unrewarding at times.

The reason I choose to introduce the notion of ethics in this context is mainly due to the “ethical” position taken by so many of the interviewees themselves throughout the interviewees, without really having been asked to. However, this was something that I only discovered after having read the interviewees both two and three times, because it was not really on my mind to begin with, but underneath a lot of the reflections on workload, time pressure and conflicts.

Karen, for instance, describes herself as very ambitious and the kind of person who always has “*very high expectations to herself*”, both as a student and later working as a consultant. She considers her work environment to be infused with “dedication” and people who genuinely cares for their work place. When asked about what kind of expectations she experience in the organization, she says:

“Well, I think we are many soulmates here [laughs] in this work environment. There is no one who take things very lightly, you do your things properly. And that is an expectation in the whole organization actually, that things should be done properly. So I feel that we all want to contribute and build this organization, we want what is best for it”

Karen invokes a communal spirit in order to describe her work environment, even alluding a somewhat sacral language. She considers herself to be a part of a work environment in which they seek to do what is best for the organization, evoking a sense of “higher cause” and affiliation with a devoted community.

For Siri, both the expectations concerning work-hours and the specific work load are “grey-zones” which, for her, remain undetermined. She describes how she always has the possibility to ask for less work, but says at the same time says that she has never voiced any such need towards her superior, despite experiencing considerable weariness at work sometimes:

“[...] But I really like my job and I like to feel that what I deliver is good and well done, so I don't really mind working. But of course it feels better to bring along work at home if I really want to, rather than because of a deadline. And if I absolutely have to get things done I can also manage that for some periods, but if you sit and always feel that you have to get things done, then things can get a little bit... Well, I am a very relaxed person, so when I go from work I “switch off” and “switch on” again when I go back to work”

On being asked how many hours she works during a week, Siri laughs and says:

“No, I don't want to know. Because there is something about the way you work here, so, I think if I had looked at the number of hours, well, I might have been able to perform more efficiently, but then that would have had some sort of consequence at home. So you might not work as efficiently as you could, but the whole of your life adds up, somehow. So I haven't

“clocked down” my hours and I don’t want to think about that. As long as it is not too much of a hassle for me and as long as I think it is ok”

But when you sit at night and work, do you consider that to be overtime?

“No, with a position like mine there is a responsibility in terms of what needs to be done and to me that is very clear. It is my responsibility to let people know if I am unable to finish my work and to say no, if I am unable to take any more tasks. And that is fully recognized. So I am the one in charge of that”

So you have experienced situations where you had to say no?

“No, I can always manage it somehow, but I have experienced that I had to jostle for some deadlines, that reports were sent out a bit later than what they’ve supposed to. I only have 24 hours a day as the rest of us and we all have to sleep”

In a similar way, several interviewees often express a clear distinction between justified and unjustified forms of stress, pressure and workload, and these distinctions are very often rooted in an inner motivation, such as what feels engaging and not, and the pressure that comes from “within” opposed to pressure due to problems “on top” of the organization and poor management decisions. What is considered the causes of stress, such as a high and intense pressure at work or a disproportionate workload, is therefore in some instances regarded a necessary evil or sometimes even a positive example of unrestrained enthusiasm or self-sacrifice for the greater good of the organization.

Throughout these interviews I found, in other words, two different forms of justification revolving around either a communal spirit or an individual desire. These justifications were often brought about when the interviews tuned into the contradictions between (expectations of) clearly set boundaries and (the expectations of) being able and free to define the content and execution of work individually. In line with this, as we will see in the coming pages, the interviewees also often invoke their own personality as an explanation for the stress and pressure they experience.

“I have a stressful personality, I guess...”

Many of the research participants invoke their own personality as a vantage point for assessing their sense of wellbeing or performance at work as well as the “failure” of over-performance leading to stress. Peter, in a way that is typical for many of these interviewees, voices concerns for his “inability” to step things down and detach himself from work and says that his work at times have been “omnipresent”, partly due to technology.

“I have always worked a lot. And that is my weakness, I have always, well, I become very obsessed and then I basically can’t stop working. Because I find it so interesting. This hasn’t bothered me, really, but at some point I have worked so much that I can’t see the forest for the trees”

As such, they do not only link their personality to a determining “path”, leading up to the education and work they have or, alternatively, should have chosen instead. The personality is also something that often is affiliated with the experience of stress and illness in relation to work. As such, the notions of personality traits and suitability is actualized as a lens, through which the interviewees consider how they are able to deal with disruption or pressure at work.

Vivian considers her life to have come to a halt, because of her “*tragic choice*”. While she could have been perfectly fitted for many other careers, her decision to venture into an academic career has been an unforeseen, but somehow still predictable tragedy. For her, the tragedy consists in not having considered her own personality when initially embarking on a career: “*I have trained myself to a job I am unfit for, because it is so stressful*”. Vivian considers her personality to “stand in the way” for her performance at work, because she so easily becomes emotionally distracted by even minor occurrences that gets her off track.

As we have seen in a previous paragraph, Vivian also display the opposite view on her own personality, stating that she initially has been good at handling stress and pressure at work and that this tolerance simply lowered at some point. The theme of a “tragic” destiny is something Vivian brings up when we are discussing how she reckons the future will look like, considering she is still on sick leave when the interview is conducted (due to stress, among other things). The prospect of going back to the same stressful working conditions makes her feel at unease, she says, and points towards her own inability to cope with the stress: “*I am afraid that it is too stressful, that this work is too stressful for me and that I have to find something else*”. When specific prospects of the future are brought about Vivian starts

to conjure up her own personality, which she considers to be fragile and emotionally disruptive, as destined for another kind of work. Similar views are proposed by other interviewees as well, without putting the same emphasis on a “tragic destiny”.

Karen also invokes the topic of personality, when the interview turns towards expectations to work in general: *“It’s in my personality, I guess. I am always doing my best. And everything is fine as long as I feel that I have done my best. The result is not always optimal, it’s not, but I don’t feel there’s any consequence when that happens, apart from thinking that I might try to do things another way next time”*

Karen: *Now I can handle the stress a lot better and somehow manage to be more of a “master in my own house”, in terms of handling my situation properly. Maybe because I am not a rookie anymore, in work life.*

So you think not being a rookie anymore is the most important thing?

Karen: *I think it matters a great deal that I myself manage to take charge and not only let the job control everything. You have to take measures yourself. With the framework I am provided now, where I am, I feel that I can take certain measures and that is absolutely fine. In my previous job, I felt that there was not really any accept for that, because it wasn’t really in line with the work environment and the market conditions at the time. So I think it’s a very important aspect that you feel that you have the space to mark your own limits*

Karen compares her old job to her present one, in which she is able to take charge and control. As she describes it, stress accounts to a regular and recurring experience at both her former and present work, and she considers it an indistinguishable part of the work environment and the career she has ventured into, signified by a heavy work load, strict deadlines and an expectation of employees pursuing their own projects. In such an environment she must be in a position to prioritize, and sometimes also say no to work tasks, a possibility she associates with both personal experience and the specific work environment that surrounds her. Conversely, Karen interprets the stress that eventually made her ill in terms of not being “properly equipped” and sufficiently experienced to handle the pressure at work. She speaks of handling stress as an *ability*, which coincide with and is conditioned by personal experience and a sense of authority, which can enable her to mark the limits. However, the inability to handle stress is also associated with a sense of lack of support in the surrounding work environment. Stress is thus ascribed to a temporal dimension of personal

experience and a social dimension of fluctuating market mechanisms and an unsound work environment.

Vivian, on the other hand, keeps returning to what she describes as her “perfectionism”. She experiences this as a trait that she now has overcome. She points to the perfectionism as a burden that remained with her from childhood well into working life, but that she now is relieved from it. However, this perfectionism is a recurring point of conflict in her working life, because her manager keeps bringing up perfectionism as a barrier that stands in the way for her wellbeing and performance. Vivian says that *“I do not think that I am an ambitious person, not at all. I was a perfectionist when I was younger, but I thought that I’d gotten rid of it. That is also one of the things with my manager, she keeps implying that this is the reason I am so stressed, that I make too much out of everything. I should do things easier, but I don’t feel it is like that. I just feel that I do what I have to do.”* In other words, Vivian’s personality is not only an explanatory scheme she provides herself, in order to pinpoint her severe difficulties at work. Her personality becomes the center of a peculiar negotiation between her and the closest manager, as a source of dispute and assessment of the general conditions of her work. Vivian does not consider “perfectionism” as a meaningful explanation for how or why she experiences stress. As she sees it, the stress derives from both her own poorly equipped personality, which is unable to handle hurried working conditions *as well as* a lack of resources to support and fulfil her work. In her own words, the stress she experiences, is the result of a “doubled deficit”: her own lack of personal resources as well as a lack of support from the surrounding work environment. Her manager, on the other hand, considers Vivian’s stress to derive from an opposite direction. In his opinion, Vivian is stressed due to a surplus of expectations, which is impossible to realize. The scene is at once puzzling and striking, but perhaps not all that unfamiliar: The very personality of an employee becomes the center of a negotiation of workload and pressure.

One could think that someone like Vivian, who sees her own personality as the source of so much turmoil and pressure at work, perhaps would opt for a more simple vocation, if she had the chance, at least hypothetically. During the interviews, the participants are shown a picture depicting a factory with a large number of people working on assembly lines, slaying fish. The intention of this was to trigger some reflections on the relation between different forms of work and stress. The responses were far from as unanimous as I initially had imagined but ranged from appraisal to complete dissociation. Some interviewees thus responded they considered the assembly line work to be more important than their own work, because

producing and providing food has a greater impact on people's lives than writing reports. On the other hand, many interviewees also suggested such a job would easily tear on their wellbeing, because of the stress and strains attached to it. When confronted with the image, Vivian exclaims that the work looks awful and that it cannot be anything but "death" to be confined to work in such a place. Asked if she thinks this might be a less stressful kind of work, she says that "*As long as I don't collapse, I'd rather have the freedom*".

Summing up shortly, throughout these interviews, stress appears as a part of a work-life discourse through which a number of different problems and issues are raised and interpreted, such as severe illness, hurriedness, responsibility and self-fulfillment. Once the topic of stress is introduced, it tends to make individuals reach for their own personality traits, or their own failed or successful prioritizing as key explanatory schemes. In other words, the topic of stress – in many cases – makes individuals bring forward their whole "inner life", mobilizing it as a primary source of encoding the vast range of difficult and positive experiences at the workplace as well as the source of possible solution to these difficulties. Based on the knowledge gained in the aftermath and reading of the interviews, the point has also been to display the diversity of experience that is attached to the notions and experiences of stress at work, that also includes a vast number of personal issues, such as conflicts with colleagues or superiors, workplace bullying and other experiences of poor work environments.

On the one hand, the notion of "personality" seems to serve the function of allocating both the disappointments and "biographical disasters", but also their exposition and clarification, to a realm of self-assessing individuality. On the other hand, the notion of "personal fulfilment" and "community" at work is voiced as an ethical stance, which can "legitimize" experiences of pressure and stress.

CHAPTER 12

Conclusion

This thesis started out from a quite simple puzzle regarding how the phenomena of stress in work life today is attributed with strikingly contradictory qualities, as at once a source of productivity and sickness. This point of departure then led to trailing the history of the very notions of health and illness in organizations and how the problem of stress emerges and becomes the center of such commanding attention at the present moment. In other words, my own initial irritation of how things are dealt with for the time being, eventually grew into an archive consisting of hundreds of articles, treaties and books as well as interviews with both employees and managers. Furthermore, it has brought me into an examination of such diverse fields as medicine, physiology, therapeutic intervention as well as self-help literature and HR-strategies, with the intention of understanding how the language afforded to us by health promotion and stress management has been developed.

In the latter part of this thesis, I have analyzed the accounts given by employees themselves on their experiences of stress and work, in order to see how they respond to the questions of responsibility and performativity that pervade the self-help literature and HR-strategies. When explaining the stress making them sick, many have pointed towards a “shadow of freedom” at work, with a lack of feedback or lack of possibilities to prioritize and negotiate work, often related to work environments that renders them without a clear counter-part to negotiate with. Others point, in relation to this, towards the dangers of “grey-zones”, in which work load and work hours become very fluid and undetermined, where they are never off, but almost always somehow at work, for instance by checking up on e-mails and calls throughout the day and evening. What is most striking is in these accounts, however, is the difficulties and challenges many report on, related to making their work less invasive in their lives, despite a work life that already is strictly regulated, by law and contract, in terms of work hours. The stress many of these employees report on is centered between demands of self-realization, on the one side and the challenge, on the other side, to negotiate the materiality of work, such as the mentioned work hours, workload, and responsibility. The thesis explores what measures are taken by the organizations themselves, when their employees become sick due to their work and how their illness is perceived, from the organization’s point of view, as a problem to both the organizations and the employees.

Hopefully, it is by now clear that stress is not only a bodily reaction, but also a concept that carries a history with several peculiar lineages, reaching back to sanatoriums and medical diagnoses long gone. Moreover, the way stress is currently dealt in contemporary work life is not a merely a fashionable tendency or, for that matter, simply a practical solution to the issues and challenges faced by the individual employee. Stress, as it made into a problem in work life, inscribes itself in a long trajectory of health promotion that has become increasingly concerned with the individual's sense of well-being and attachment to the workplace. These are qualities that "everyone" can agree on, who would want less well-being at work? For this reason, they might also be very hard and challenging to oppose or withdraw from, once they are on the offer. As I have tried to show in this thesis, when the employees' (in)ability to meaningfully attach to their work is made into a pathological threat, it also comes at a cost. We might call this the cost of acquiring meaning, which can be, as we have seen in the analysis of a stress management course, a much more ruthless and dramatic exercise than what it might sound. Before we go further into this, I will shortly summarize the historical background in the development of health promotion at work.

From around 1920 we see that health revolves around disciplining the behavior of workers, so that they do not put their own or others' health at risk. A lot of effort is put into developing a "safety conscience" among employees, in which their bodies are seen in direct continuity of the environment of machines and production. Health has a negative appearance, as an absence of disease, injuries and accidents. At the same time, the body (and mental capacity) of the worker is also seen to carry the destiny of organization, so that his physical capacity is equated with the productivity of the organization. From around 1937, this boundary between the healthy body and the organization changes, when a number of "hygienic" initiatives disperse throughout the field of health promotion, in which the concern for the individual's private life is installed as a premise for obtaining and nurturing "healthy bodies". Several new concepts appear in order to handle the need for a continuity of healthy conducts from the sphere of work to the private domain of the employee, such as "lifestyle" and "employee hygiene". The body is hereby temporally intensified, because its potential illness is sought prevented throughout all hours of the day. In the period ranging between 1940 and 1980, the "humanness" of the employee is discovered and made into a pivotal precondition for health promotion. Up until this point, the employee has been considered a "human material", from which the emerging human semantics presents itself as a radical and abrupt break. The health and illness of the employee now becomes "symptomatic", wherein physical illness, for

instance, can appear as tangible symptoms of an inner state; loss of meaning, dissatisfaction, maladjustment or emotional turmoil. The organization now also starts to consider itself as a source of pathologies in a new fashion, such as ruthless management or asocial work environments. In relation to this, the advocates of a new “human factor” proclaims that illness can only be prevented through taking the emotional life of the employee into account. When ideals such as satisfaction, thriving, well-being, contentment, the human factor, productivity and community assembles into a new semantics of health, there are likewise also new threats emerging when and where these ideals fail to be realized, such as passivity, negativity and conflict-ridden attitudes. From around 1980 onwards, we see that the vocabulary of health promotion is increasingly problematizing the employee’s relation to the workplace as a particular kind of self-relation, charged with emotions that can pose a considerable danger towards the employee’s health. Several interventionist programs are therefore launched to map the attachment and sense of well-being and unease of the individual employee and to make the employee handle his or her emotions more strategically, including programs such as the personal interview, breathing exercises and stress management courses. In these exercises and tools, the pathologies of work are located in the conflicting emotions of the self. As it typically is phrased: *“The point is to avoid becoming a victim of your own negative thoughts”* (Personal og ledelse [Staff and Management], no. 6, 2008: 20).

This brings up the question of what happens, at the practical level of health promotion, when the relation between work and illness is semantically interlinked through a therapeutic lens of self-assessment? Asked differently, how does stress management center in on the self-relationship of employees who have experienced illness and pressure due to their work? To answer this, I have analyzed how stress management requires a management of language, and how the notion of the self as self-pathologized demands a reclamation of the way in which people speak of themselves and their surroundings. Both in the “how-to”- literature on stress and in the stress management course, we most commonly find two steps that are pinned out, according to which stressful individuals can transform their pressure into “balance” and “regain” themselves. The first step consists in making the subject realize how it has inscribed itself in a tragic narrative; how you are thinking too much, driven by emotions and having too negative feelings, and how you have become trapped in the demands and expectations posed by yourself. The next step consists in a second act of “suspending the tragedy”, through which the individual is sought equipped with an authentic voice in order to release itself from its own negation. In this manner, the subject is called upon to detach from and exorcise the

story of itself and the language it has, it is claimed, immersed itself in and become a captive of. To suspend the tragedy, stressful individuals must engage in acts of re-writing the plot of themselves and their work, as if the reality they experience could be authored differently and thereby simply become different.

My analysis of these steps, that seeks to guide stressful individuals towards a self-transformation, follows two key points. First, I have shown how stress management assumes individual's stress as a case of self-imposed emotions and thoughts that must be disentangled from the actual situation at work. However, these enactments of therapeutic confrontation also produce a sociality when it holds a up a mirror of persistent "what-if's" against the concrete experiences that has led these employees to a stress management course in the first place; "what if you just say no"; "what if you don't listen to your own negative voice in that situation" etc. The individual still retains his or her workload, responsibility and expectations at work after the sessions of stress management are over but is now asked to see things from a different angle or disengage with negative emotions as if these things then would become less demanding, uncomfortable and stressful. In other words, stress management brings about a realm that encourages employees to re-invoke their experiences of work through a different language, on the premise of these experiences' plasticity, which are then supposed to spill over into their future experiences. Second, I have shown how stress management through these language-exercises emerge as a technology that enables a coupling of power and illness. Stress management assumes individuals that no longer can handle their own surroundings because they are disempowered; they do not have the means, by way of "emotional capacity" and language, to see things differently and script alternate accounts of their own experiences. Illness thereby becomes contingent upon a transformation, from scarcity to surplus, from alienation to authenticity, through the enactment of "empowering" language. I have shown how the themes of responsibility, authenticity and performance in this coupling becomes opposed to illness in a striking fashion, that requires individuals to cancel out their own self-image in order to become healthy and balanced.

To shortly sum up, the "problem" of stressful employees, rather than to be understood as a singular event, is a part of a movement in which health promotion at work have become increasingly centered upon employees' emotions, such as their attachment, satisfaction, thriving and well-being, which comes to serve as an explanatory index and a primary source of mapping, prevention and intervention in the health of employees. If we are to capture this movement in a single sentence, one might call it the *pathologization of emotions*. This

involves a therapeutic vocabulary that centers in on the self as the cause and effect of both illness and health. It is assumed that employees' self-relationship, on a general note, now constitutes the main risk towards his or her own health, but also its "redemption" and sound development. In stress management, the individual is encouraged to look at itself with a distanced gaze and turn itself into a case to find the "real" causes of emotional conflict and disturbance, that supposedly appear underneath his or her illness or general sense of anxiety or stress at work. But the enactment that must be set in motion in order for the subject to reach such a state of authenticity and self-recognition, presuppose a self that has lost itself in one way or another. The employee is thought to have inscribed itself in a tragic narrative of itself and the resolution to this state can only come about by engaging in different forms re-narration and speech acts, so as to create a new world wherein the possibilities to act are radically altered and changed. This "revolution within" is, phrased differently, thought to initiate an alternation of the previous constraints and disturbances that has led the subject to its misery in the first place. I have looked upon the paradoxes unfolding in this process.

The immediate paradox of this intervention is how stress is both considered harmful and productive, and how the state of scarcity, on the part of the employee, is sought turned into a surplus of "positive" energy, well-being, and productivity for both the individual and the whole organization. On the one hand, the individual here becomes an all-encompassing address of transformation and plasticity, supposed to reside over immense resources of change by the mere act of imagination; imagining its own outlook differently, re-adjusting its own voice, expectations or sense of responsibility. On the other hand, the individual can only become the object of such a transformation by, first, inscribing itself in a set and self-tragedized storyline, in which it has lost its own true self. The subject is encouraged to turn itself into a source of superior power on the condition of its self-inferiority.

The employees' state of turmoil, tiredness or stress can thereby be suspended provided he or she can be enabled another voice to describe itself and its surroundings. Stress management centres in on different forms of language-exercises, that appear to offer improvements of the employees' conditions at work. Language is itself framed as potentially harmful and as a source of pathological intrusion, where the words used to express the experience of reality are thought to directly possess this reality. Employees are therefore called upon to take responsibility for how they think and speak, and thereby how they "create" their own world. In continuation of this, language becomes endowed with the quality of a counter-structural media, that can bring about a resilience against the various difficulties the employee might

experience at his or her work. The language of employees is by this means sought to be closely interknit with the conditions of the sociality of work; how they experience their work loads, work hours, tasks, responsibility, relations to clients, managers or colleagues. From this situation, a peculiar relationship emerges between the employee and the organisation. It is assumed that the language of the employee creates his or her own very reality, but this also situates the employee in a new form of sociality, that seeks to reconfigure his or her relation to the organization, strictly on the part of the employees' imagination and language. The pathologies of work can thereby be located in a "failed" ability to imagine and put the surroundings into words differently.

This thesis is written as a contribution to the sociology of organizations. With the historicizing of the concept of illness in organizations, I have sought to make it less clear and obvious how illness, and particularly the case of stress, is dealt with in contemporary work life, as an individualized pathology that requires an incessant work on the self. Moreover, I have also sought to challenge the preconceived narrative which often tend to guide critical studies of health, work and organization, where the current "individualization" is framed as a novel emergence, involving new power regimes leaving behind a "golden era" of collective "action" and solidarity. The historical account shows that the employee's health throughout the 20th century, has been strictly assessed in his or her individuality by the organizations, but we see a number of shifts in this regard, from an individualization of the body and cognitive capacity to an individualization of emotions, language and authenticity. The reason I choose to bring this to the surface, is because it also points towards the necessity of not taking anything, as far as the sociological study of our recent history is concerned, for granted. If we accept the narratives "out there", whether they are handed over to us by assumptions, common-sense or guided by our own political sympathies, the result can only materialize into journalism and not sociology. This brings me to a closing remark. It seems clear to me, after conducting this study, that "balance", "well-being" and "authenticity" is something that organizations want their employees to "invest" in, as a form of prevention. They become expectations that lay themselves on top of other expectations, which it is no reason to believe makes it less demanding or pressuring to fulfill one's job. Within the field of organization studies, there is by now fleshed out a whole edifice of studies that seek to detect a lack of balance, well-being and authenticity as "health threats", but these studies rarely engage in the question of what this teleologies are an answer to. One could ask with what concepts do we

problematize and study social reality, in this case the interlinking of work life and health, and from where are these concepts derived and who observes with them?

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