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# TENSIONS BETWEEN (POST)BUREAUCRATIC AND NEO-NORMATIVE DEMANDS: INVESTIGATING EMPLOYEES' SUBJECTIVE POSITIONS AT EURAIRPORT

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# **TENSIONS BETWEEN (POST)BUREAUCRATIC AND NEO-NORMATIVE DEMANDS: INVESTIGATING EMPLOYEES' SUBJECTIVE POSITIONS AT EURAIRPORT**

## **ABSTRACT**

The introduction of a neo-normative discourse in a (post)bureaucratic organisation can result in tensions between the neo-normative injunction to be authentic and the exhortations to fit with the (post)bureaucratic ideal organisational subject. Focusing on how shopfloor workers subjectively experience the tensions between neo-normative and (post)bureaucratic demands, this empirical investigation yields two major contributions. First, our case helps better distinguish normative and neo-normative control on the basis of two tensions, i.e. authenticity vs. conformity on the one hand, and conflation and differentiation between life and work on the other. Second, it identifies four distinct subject positions that demonstrate how organisational participants are able to creatively appropriate and strive to resolve these two tensions in a work-setting which mixes normative and neo-normative control. As such, it pinpoints and addresses significant gaps in existing studies of normative and neo-normative control.

## **Keywords**

Authenticity, neo-normative control, (post)bureaucracy, subjectivity, tensions

## INTRODUCTION

From the 1980s, a growing trend began for organizations that includes reducing formal levels of hierarchy, promoting flexibility, decentralizing authority and replacing control with trust (Hales, 2002; Josserand et al., 2006) most often captured under the label of post-bureaucracy (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005). While bureaucracies are characterized by a culture of obedience, post-bureaucracies demand ‘genuine subjective attachment’ from the employees (Fleming, 2013, p. 10), thus operating as a ‘softer’ form of domination (Courpasson, 2006; Hales, 2002; Sturdy et al., 2016).

New managerial initiatives, however, do not take place in an organisational void but rather combine with existing ones. Indeed, while mainstream academics and management gurus present post-bureaucratic organisations as ‘anti-bureaucratic’ (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1997; Peters, 1992), critical management scholars point out that bureaucratic sediments still remain in so-called post-bureaucratic contexts (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Studies about post-bureaucracy have established that post-bureaucratic practices often combine with older bureaucratic ones, leading to organisational hybrids that we will refer to as (post)bureaucratic organisations (Clegg *et al.*, 2011; Josserand *et al.*, 2006; Sturdy *et al.*, 2016). Far from suggesting an over-simplified distinction between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy, we will use (post)bureaucracy as a label to capture the complex hybridization that characterize many contemporary workplaces.

More recently, scholars belonging to various research traditions have underlined an emerging managerial discourse encouraging organisational participants to ‘be themselves’ (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014; Cable *et al.*, 2013; Ekman, 2013; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011) and presenting work as a source of ‘true’ self-expression, authenticity, but also inclusion, fun, harmony and life happiness (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014; Fleming, 2013, 2014b; Kuhn,

2006; Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2016). In contrast with the normative control characteristic of (post)bureaucracy, some researchers have talked about *neo*-normative control (Endrissat *et al.*, 2017; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Jenkins and Delbridge), defined as ‘an emergent approach to managing employees which emphasises “being yourself” through the expression of fun, individuality and difference’ (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, p. 569).

The introduction of a neo-normative discourse in a (post)bureaucratic organisation can result in tensions between the neo-normative injunction to ‘be yourself’ and the exhortations to fit with the (post)bureaucratic ideal organisational subject (Cable *et al.*, 2013; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011). Although some accounts have started to explore how organisational participants subjectively respond to neo-normative discourses (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Kinnie *et al.*, 2000; Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2016), there is so far no study of employees’ responses to tensions created by the introduction of neo-normative demands in (post)bureaucratic settings. Accordingly, our aim is to explore how shopfloor workers subjectively experience the tensions between (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands. To do so, we investigated empirically the introduction of a neo-normative discourse in a medium-sized European airport, as well as how shopfloor employees experienced it.

Our empirical investigation yields two major contributions. First, it helps to distinguish normative and neo-normative control on the basis of two tensions, i.e. authenticity vs. conformity on the one hand, and conflation and differentiation between life and work on the other. Second, it identifies four distinct subject positions that demonstrate how organisational participants are able to creatively appropriate and strive to resolve these two tensions in a work-setting which mixes normative and neo-normative control. As such, it pinpoints and addresses significant gaps in existing studies of normative and neo-normative control.

After reviewing the literature on the two main tensions manifesting between (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands, we present the method adopted in our empirical investigation, before reporting our findings and finally discussing our contribution.

## **TENSIONS BETWEEN (POST)BUREAUCRATIC AND NEO-NORMATIVE DEMANDS**

Two main tensions arise between (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands, differently impacting people's subjective experiences: authenticity vs. conformity, and conflation vs. differentiation between life and work.

### **Authenticity vs. conformity**

Post-bureaucracy has been presented as an extension of bureaucracy, distinguished from the latter insofar as it instrumentally controls human conduct more completely than does bureaucracy, including people's identities (Maravelias, 2003), shaping employees' minds and thoughts so as to fulfill corporate ideals (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Knights and McCabe, 2003; Townley, 1994). In more traditional bureaucratic contexts, employees are only expected to conform to prescribed organisational behaviours, possibly by 'playing' their organisational role (Maravelias, 2003).

Existing studies suggest that organisational participants can adopt three different kinds of subjective position in the contemporary workplace: 'conformity', 'resistance' and 'distance' (Collinson, 2003). 'Conformist selves' (Collinson, 2003) incorporate those who fully recognise themselves as 'bewitched' by the enterprising figure (Knights and McCabe, 2000) but also all those who regard (post)bureaucratic demands as opportunities for professional empowerment

(Musson and Duberley, 2007). ‘Distant selves’ (Collinson, 2003) maintain distance with enterprising discourse, considering it as an irrelevant rhetoric (Musson and Duberley, 2007). Finally, ‘Resisting selves’ (Collinson, 2003) are ‘bothered’ (Knights and McCabe, 2000) by the enterprising rhetoric (Musson and Duberley, 2007), adopting attitudes such as dis-identification and disengagement (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and showing cynicism, irony, scepticism, humour, fantasy and ambivalence (Collinson, 1988, 2003; Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2007; Gagnon and Collinson, 2017; Knights and McCabe, 2000). Beyond the analytical distinction between these positions, individuals can show identity struggle (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), oscillate between resistant and compliant behaviours (Ybema and Horvers, 2017), and even experience self-alienation, i.e. a feeling of inauthenticity when they ‘realise that “who they really are” is increasingly the alien self of corporate life’ (Costas and Fleming, 2009, p. 374).

In view of the limitations of conformity-based (post)bureaucratic control, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) show that neo-normative control has shifted the focus from conformity to fostering authenticity through self-expression (Ekman, 2013; Fleming, 2009; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017), associating authentically positive states with work, such as employee enjoyment, fun and happiness (Fleming, 2009; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017). Neo-normative control can serve to distract employees from their working conditions. Studies of call centres note how workers are pushed to enjoy their job, despite materially difficult circumstances (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Kinnie *et al.*, 2000). In the same line, service workers are asked to be ‘plain’ and ‘true’ and communicate their authenticity at work (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005). As such, neo-normative practices seek to exploit sources of individuality and diversity for productive ends (Fleming, 2013). For instance, workers are asked to mobilise their creativity and subjectivity

(Weiskopf and Munro, 2011, p.2) or to utilise ‘their life-style experience to build empathy with customer needs’ (Kinnie *et al.*, 2000, p. 980).

However, the hybridisation of (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands can lead employees to experience tension; this is notably because of the possible perception of a contradiction between the neo-normative injunction to be one authentic self and the (post)bureaucratic injunction to conform to the norms associated with a unitary corporate culture (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011). Fleming and Sturdy (2011) describe an attempt at producing a discourse of ‘freedom around control’ that aims at reconciling the two injunctions by asking individuals to express themselves freely in activities around the main tasks – such as parties or ‘away days’ – while conforming to highly normalised norms in task-oriented work. The authors suggest that this ‘freedom around control’ discourse leads to contrasting subjective experiences for the employees, including forms of resistance and contestation (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). However, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) only provide generic insight, suggesting but not exploring the contrasting experience of workers confronted with the injunction to be themselves while conforming to the (post)bureaucratic cultural ideal.

### **Conflation vs. differentiation between life at work**

The normative control associated with (post)bureaucracy aims primarily at creating a divide between work and life (Fleming, 2014a). Workers are asked to reject competing ‘life projects’ (Willmott, 1993), and to prioritise their professional life over their personal one, especially when the latter could result in decreasing their involvement and professional success (Fleming, 2014a; Maravelias, 2016). In brief, the personal life can be summoned to support these managerial performances, but only as much as it contributes and aligns to them; otherwise, the private life should be excluded from the professional sphere or possibly reformed. For instance,



Maravelias (2016) shows how workplace health programmes promote a ‘good and healthy’ life that will contribute to professional success. Consequently, workers risk feeling ‘always at work’ (Brocklehurst, 2001) and struggle to find a balance between their private and professional life (Maravelias, 2003).

Contrary to (post)bureaucracy, which attempts to confine and/or normalise life, neo-normative discourses present work as the realm reconciliation between personal and professional life (Ekman, 2013; Fleming, 2009; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017). Enrolling wider aspects of workers’ lives at work may include encouraging them to verbalise their ‘true’ opinions (including disagreement), to display their personality through clothes, hairstyles or tattoos, express their sexual orientation, political beliefs and emotions and use their personal networks and informal know-how to do business, all the while enjoying themselves at work (Fleming, 2013; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009).

As such, the neo-normative discourse involves the ‘enlistment of the private dimensions of employee selves’ (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, p. 571) and incorporates private life into work through ‘subjectification mechanisms, generating employees who fuse private and public realms, offering existential raw material to the instrumental processes at work’ (Ekman, 2013, p. 1162). This blurs the boundary between work and life and can lead to a conflation between the two spheres (Fleming, 2014b; Frayne, 2015; Land and Taylor, 2010). For instance, service work has been reconfigured to blend work and non-work spheres by conferring new meanings on work as an arena for self-expression and enchantment (Endrissat *et al.*, 2015; Endrissat *et al.*, 2017; Ritzer, 2005); companies put the leisure activities and lifestyles of their employees to work and contribute to their branding exercise, thus jeopardising the distinction between work and life (Land and Taylor, 2010).

While the promise of neo-normative control was one of reconciliation between work and life, our review of the literature suggests that, in a hybrid context, organisational participants can experience a tension between the (post)bureaucratic injunction of differentiating life from work and the neo-normative injunction of enrolling life at work. While we know that organisational participants struggled with work/life balance in a (post)bureaucratic context (Knights and McCabe, 2000, 2003), we know very little of the subjective experience of organisational participants when also exposed to a neo-normative discourse that conflates the very notions of work and life.

So far, existing literature has paid limited attention to investigating employees' subjective experiences of neo-normative demands in a (post)bureaucratic setting. Relatedly, Fleming and Sturdy (2009) argue that more research is needed to examine 'the varied employee responses to such a [neo-normative] regime' (p. 580). The breadth and nature of workers' experience around tensions derived from the introduction of neo-normative initiatives within a (post)bureaucratic environment needs further exploration.

## **METHOD**

### **Case context**

Contemporary organisations are complex (post)bureaucratic hybrids that keep stratifying their managerial practices (Brocklehurst, 2001; Ekman, 2015; McCabe, 2008). In this paper, we investigate how shopfloor employees subjectively experienced the tensions between (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands within the (post)bureaucratic setting of a medium-sized European airport (EurAirport). We chose EurAirport because airports have a highly regulated bureaucratic base that has been modified with layers of post-bureaucracy in

the context of air transport liberalisation (Jarach, 2001). Indeed, most activities in airports – including check-in, security inspection, customs control, boarding, disembarkation or luggage delivery – involves very formalized and codified sequences of actions. At the same time, liberalization involves for many airports as Eurairport that revenues increasingly depends on commercial activities (Graham, 2009) rather than airport taxes. Eurairports has thus promoted a customer-oriented culture typical of postbureaucratic organizations (Du Gay, 1997, 2001; Gleadle et al., 2008). Furthermore, airports can be defined as ‘pluralistic organizations’ (Denis et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Fenton, 2006), since they bring together employees performing very diverse professions (e.g., parking agent, security agent, customs’ officer, assistance agent, salesman, etc.). We could thus reasonably expect to have access to a great variety of subjective experience.

In this context, EurAirport deployed a new managerial initiative, the Improve Customer Satisfaction (ICS). ICS notably included a major training programme called SPIRIT (its real name). Over 1,500 employees from all firms operating in the airport (airlines, handling, catering, duty-free, etc.) attended the sessions over a period of two years. Consistent with previous studies in air transport and tourism (Guerrier and Adib, 2003; Hochschild, 1983), ICS requests employees to display a sense of authenticity and enjoyment in front of customers as in their airports which are currently subject to neo-normative practices (Wattanacharoensil *et al.*, 2016). Although developed in a highly regulated setting, ICS practices display a hybridisation between (post)bureaucratic practices and neo-normative initiatives, which led to tensions between (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands.

## **Data collection**

In order to explore the ICS corporate discourse, we conducted non-participant observations (Patton, 2002) and semi-structured interviews, and collected extant documentation (working

documents and official communications). We observed ten training sessions (seven recorded) and took extensive notes. The sessions included a 'SPIRIT charter', videos demonstrating customer-oriented and non-customer-oriented behaviours in work situations, and exercises aiming at helping employees realise their customer-oriented 'spirit'. We conducted eight semi-structured interviews with the project's steering committee (including the airport CEO) and with key personnel involved (duty terminal manager, human resources director, and reporting supervisor).

We explored how shopfloor employees experienced ICS via 22 semi-structured interviews. Informants included two customs officers, two waiters, three liaison officers, two police officers, four security agents, four salespeople, two car park attendants, one airline officer, one airport officer, and one restaurant worker. In order to understand employees' reflected experience rather than their immediate responses to a single stimulus, the interviews were conducted at least six months after each individual's training.

We asked research participants about their personal background, current job, customer relationships, life situation, life aspirations and professional ambitions. We also asked them about their reaction to the messages of the training programme and about the changes introduced by ICS. We used the critical incident technique (Bryman 2015), asking participants to tell us about their best and worst experiences with a customer, revealing salient aspects of their practices with customers and their subject positions in relation to their work.

## **Analysis**

We adopt a critical interpretative perspective (Alvesson and Deetz, 1999; Deetz, 1982, 1992), the goal of which is to 'uncover the structures of meaning in use in a setting and to synthesise

an image of that group's reality' (Deetz, 1982, p. 138 after Smircich, 1981, p.10) by revealing how meaning structures 'naturalise' experience by 'position[ing] the person in the world in a particular way prior to the individual having any sense of choice' (Alvesson and Deetz, 1999, p. 199) and how these meaning structures are shared or resisted. We use the distinction between two dimensions that are at the heart of (post)bureaucratic/neo-normative tensions as a starting point of our analysis: authenticity vs. conformity and conflation vs. differentiation between life and work. This helped us to interpret people's positioning vis-à-vis the hybrid tensions experienced.

We adopted a configurational method to identify the different types of subject positions of research participants, grouping individuals presenting a similar 'constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics that commonly occur together' (Meyer *et al.*, 1993, p. 1175). Each configuration reflected similar patterns in the experience of work at ICS. We adopted a two-step process. First, we coded the 22 interviews, starting with the two broad dimensions characteristic of hybrid tensions. Second, we compared the 22 individual profiles and grouped those presenting similar statements across these two dimensions. Our interpretation of how the interviewees made and gave sense to ICS practices lead us to identify four different subject positions.

## **FINDINGS**

### **ICS is neo-normative and (post)bureaucratic**

***SPIRIT is about being you.*** The ICS programme prescribed a customer-oriented ethos aimed at reflecting employees' authentic selves. The emphasis during the training was on encouraging employees to take the initiative by improvising and following their personal judgment. As the trainer in one session described: '*You cannot always do what he did there* [reference to a video].

*Only you can judge what can be done. But do not restrict yourself from doing what you think is good*'. The trainer also exhorted employees to adopt a playful approach with customers by being 'cool', 'friendly' and 'relaxed', and even pushed the idea that unpleasant passengers were 'part of the game'. Employees were told that they should play with customers and enjoy themselves: *'If you don't enjoy what you do, then it becomes difficult and the passengers will also sense that*'. Encouraging the fun side at work was one of the trainer's recommendations for fostering workers' authenticity, while inviting them to offer some extra gifts to customers: *'In your respective professions you also have the possibility to offer something extra to the passengers, [...] that's on your own initiative*'.

***But not any version of you.*** The training also included directly specified normative content, with indications as to how employees should behave. EurAirport devised videos showing concrete behaviours to which employees had to conform that were described in moral terminology as 'right' or 'wrong'. The stated goal was to provide 'guidelines indicating the correct attitude to take towards passengers' (from video) while fostering a customer-oriented spirit, for instance the training programme tagline was 'A good welcome is a state of mind'. Employees were expected to be proud to serve (S for service), to love and be passionate about customer relationships (P for passion), to show initiative in initiating these relationships (I for initiative), to be aware that in their work they are representative ambassadors for EurAirport (R for representation), to be 100% involved with customers (I for involvement) and to leave customers with good recollections or traces in memory (T for trace).

The programme emphasised that employees should be good people who share the values of SPIRIT and be willing to imbue such values into the way they present their authentic selves at work. Even following 'common sense' was one of the levers by which to foster conformity to

prefixed norms: *‘Courtesy is simply common sense, it’s just good education, it’s saying “hello”, “thank you”, “goodbye”, “have a nice trip”. And it makes all the difference’ (Trainer).*

In sum, the presence of two contrasting aspects of SPIRIT – that is, ‘SPIRIT is about being you’ vs. ‘but not any version of you’ – denotes a hybridisation between the neo-normative injunction of authenticity with subtle attempts to define what ‘authentic’ should look like. It normatively attributes value to the ‘good’ manifestations of authenticity that are preferred, and the ‘bad’ that are to be avoided.

***SPIRIT conflates personal and professional life.*** The training encouraged employees to conflate wider aspects of their lives with their commitment to work, leading to a promise of fulfilment. The trainer exhorted workers to harmonise their personal and professional lives because, if they did so, they would benefit from good memories of the workday they lived: *‘If you manage to remember these events a little, that little bit more you did, the passenger you had good interaction with, then that’s what you’ll remember at the end of the day’*. He further expounded how SPIRIT was not just about customers, but also about employees’ happiness, both in and outside of work: *‘Do I love my job? This is an essential question; this is essential to be happy in life’ (Trainer)*. There was also a demand to blur the boundaries between work and non-work time. For instance, the trainer suggested people should always be on watch, helping customers during their free time at the airport (including their breaks and beyond clock-in hours): *‘As long as there is some clear sign that you work at the airport, customer don’t know whether you are on a break or not. At the end of the day, you are representatives; you are all ambassadors for the airport’ (Trainer)*. SPIRIT thus contains injunctions to conflate

the boundaries between personal and professional life; it also provides a justification for this conflation, since it would lead to positive outcomes both for individuals and the organisation.

***SPIRIT differentiates personal and professional life.*** SPIRIT also stresses that personal life should not negatively contaminate professional life. Indeed, the trainer shed light on the importance of managing difficult situations people can experience in their private lives. For instance, during the training process, when an employee from the airport complained because his motorcycle was stolen, the trainer replied: *'I understand very well that for you this is a tricky moment, but this problem does not come to encroach on your work and on your relationship with customers'*. The trainer made recurring suggestions on how to differentiate one's private life so that it doesn't impact work, for example, late parties should be an *'exception'*; parties, indeed, *'shouldn't become a habit'* because workers should commit to their *'lifestyle choice to work at the airport'*.

In brief, SPIRIT comes with two opposite managerial demands on workers: on the one hand, encouraging a conflation between the private and the professional sphere, so as to allow for a unique and authentic experience for workers and customers, while, on the other hand, asking employees to keep their private lives separated from their professional ones, so as not to negatively impact the work activity.

### **How do EurAirport's employees position themselves in relation to ICS?**

We present below our empirical investigation that documents the diversity of employees' responses to SPIRIT. The four subject positions identified differed in terms of positioning in relation to the two tensions between a) the sense of authenticity vs. sense of conformity, and b) conflation between life and work vs. differentiation between life and work. Our findings



are detailed below and summarised in Figure 1.

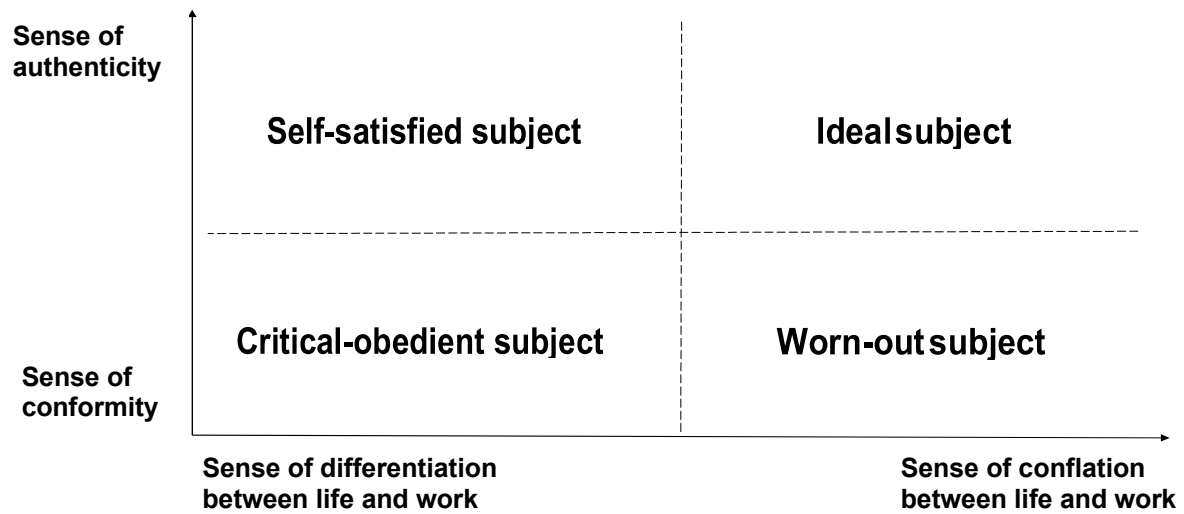


Figure 1. Employees' subjective responses to neo-normative/(post)bureaucratic demands

### The 'ideal subject'

Six employees felt that customer SPIRIT, including values of helpfulness, generosity and service, fit with their authentic selves. They argued that such inclinations towards others corresponded with their true character. Salesperson\_3 is illustrative: *'It's my character; it's natural [...] By nature, I'm someone who really likes the clientele, who likes to talk a lot. I cannot imagine myself behind a desk'*. Ideal subjects indicated that such values were 'natural' to them. For instance, Salesperson\_2 claims: *'It is also perhaps linked with my culture, where we are very welcoming and try to help people'*. All these elements highlighted around people's true self ('it's my character'; 'it's my culture'...) shed light on the fact that ideal subjects positively welcomed SPIRIT. For them, having fun and play at work was also a way to be who they truly felt themselves to be:

*He [the trainer] was talking about humour, and to do this and this... I thought: but that's my nature, so why not? (Salesperson\_3).*

Some said adopting a playful approach with customers meant they felt *'confronted with new challenges every day'* and that it sometimes felt *'like a game to find solutions'* (Liaison Officer\_1). They recounted episodes with customers that clearly showed how they embraced the spontaneity that came with SPIRIT:

*There was a customer who said to me, 'I have brought my Swiss army knife with me and they're going to take it at security.' [...] So I spontaneously replied, 'Give me your address and I'll put it in an envelope and send it to you' (Salesperson\_2).*

They explained how they frequently helped customers beyond working hours, especially during breaks, before clocking in or after clocking out: *'My job is to try to be welcoming, to be especially helpful, even if it is in a very short period, like a break, when I am having a walk around the airport'* (Salesperson\_2). They reflected on their performance after completing work: *'There have been days when I've said to myself, "I have not been good, I have to start again"'* (Salesperson\_1). Furthermore, ideal subjects recounted how work served to define who they were: *'Your attitude with the customers is the image, the image... of you personally'* (Salesperson\_1). Another person explicitly made parallels between both aspects of life (professional and private):

*Just because a customer is worked up it doesn't mean that we have to tell them to get lost; it's like at home with our children or with our wife, or with our family: we don't tell someone to piss off just because they're angry (Salesperson\_3).*

Once more, 'work' and 'home' activities are positioned in the same level, as complementing each other. Ideal subjects insisted also on the *'pleasure'* of having the opportunity to *'meet interesting people'* (Salesperson\_3). They highlighted the *'personal satisfaction'* that they experienced on a day-to-day basis; a feeling that infused their personal life: *'He [a happy*

*customer] gave me a kilo of chocolate; it's great fun! It's super satisfying when you go home'* (Salesperson\_2). Ideal subjects' personal lives thrived through working in contact with customers:

*I know that, before, I wasn't always very confident. I was quite ill at ease... I was quite shy... This job, where I'm in contact with people and having to meet challenges every day, and every day is different, helped me to become more confident (Liaison Officer\_1).*

### **The 'worn-out subject'**

Four individuals were associated with the 'worn-out subject' type. Worn-out subjects recognised that they had a lot of difficulty expressing their authentic selves at work, and that they regularly experienced discouragement and frustration, associated to the stress derived from conforming to organisational norms:

*It's true that we should smile ten hours a day, but it is difficult to do that all the time; I know that working here has been draining because there is a big influx of people, so it's inevitably more stressful [...] We should really deal with each customer in the same way, but, well... (Waiter\_2).*

As a result, these employees were less helpful and courteous than they would have liked to be.

*At some point, fatigue mounts because often, very often, we are insulted or something like that during security checks [...] Then, towards the end of the shift, we want to defend ourselves, too [...] So sometimes there are clashes, absolutely! (Customs Officer\_2).*

Problems with airport infrastructure, bad working conditions, the frenetic pace of work and

unpleasant customers meant these employees described work as stressful and painful, not fun:

*You have days where you blow a fuse. At the moment, I'm fed up... But I try to do my job properly... the proof is that I'm still here, I don't stay at home, I go to a lot of effort... that's my nature. I tell myself, 'You should be conscientious,' but frankly, as time goes by, you freak out. You are fed up (Security Agent\_4).*

For worn-out subjects, work has colonised personal life to its detriment.:

*I sometimes feel that my blood is boiling, but you're forced [...] You cannot externalise your feelings here and be rude or vulgar with customers; you still have to be... have a lot of restraint and then that's it. Once you feel that inside, [that] you're going to explode, you need to hold back. I don't explode here; I explode in my garden (Customs Officer\_2).*

Coping strategies, included having plenty of sleep and eating a balanced diet:

*I work in the evening so I have to organise my time so that I'm not too tied up during the day or too involved in my private life to be able to cope with the whole evening [...] You need to manage all these things; your behaviour, your health, you have to eat well [...] Food is very important, yeah! (Customs Officer\_1).*

One employee sought to do nothing and avoid people after work to recover physically and psychologically:

*I do not want to see people anymore. In fact, when you've finished seeing customers here, you feel like you have a problem; when you come home, you do not want to see anyone anymore (Security Agent\_2).*

### **The ‘critical-obedient subject’**

We categorised four employees as the ‘critical-obedient subject’; they typically rejected SPIRIT while adapting to ICS standards in order to avoid sanction. For these people, SPIRIT was unethical due to its slavish nature and the acceptance of all forms of passenger behaviour. For one, ICS training meant that ‘the passenger has all the rights’ (Security Officer\_2). They expressed their strong disagreement: ‘You can’t let everything go by on the pretext that they’re passengers; people have to have a minimum standard of behaviour too’ (Airline Officer\_1); and explained that Spirit did not correspond to their values: ‘I am a human being too; I should have the right to say, “Listen, respect me. I’m doing everything I can. If you keep insulting me, I’ll stop”’ (Car Park Attendant\_2).

Despite their opposition, critical-obedient subjects felt obliged to display conformity, believing that they were unlikely to receive support from management in the event of a customer complaint:

*When we feel that the customer is going to complain – as there is really this focus on the customer – there is this desire to avoid the problem at any cost. That is [...] we prefer to do anything and everything as long as there’s no problem; if there is a problem, we won’t receive any support from our superiors (Car Park Attendant\_2).*

For critical-obedient subjects, customer relationships were not fun because ‘people are rude’, ‘snarling’ (Airline Officer\_1), ‘aggressive’, ‘unpleasant’, ‘unbearable’ (Security Agent\_2), or even ‘heinous’ (Security Agent\_1). When faced with aspects of people’s worst selves, maintaining a facade of happy engagement was difficult.

Critical-obedient subjects described specific changes as either counterproductive to customer satisfaction, impossible to follow, or even dangerous due to their lax nature. Inconsistency between SPIRIT's exhortation to be playful and have fun with customers, and to have a professional attitude, was noted:

*If it beeps [at the security checkpoint] and you start the discussion with a big smile, the passenger will tell you to get lost [...] When you look a little less happy, passengers begin to be receptive. They understand that we are not here to watch a movie together (Security Agent\_2).*

In any case, critical-obedient subjects sought to dissociate thoughts from actions, performing calmness in order to avoid sanctions. Exercising self-control when faced with some customers' behaviour left them feeling very frustrated: *'[exasperated tone] I've got to keep cool, I've got to keep cool, I've got to keep cool, I mustn't be too authoritative [...] We can't act anymore'* (Security Agent\_1). When pressure was particularly high, anger was discharged by insulting unpleasant passengers behind their backs (Car Park Attendant\_2).

Critical-obedient subjects also dissociated work from their personal lives: *'We should not mix things up, I do not mix things up [...] what happens at work stays at work; I will not bother anyone with my problems'* (Airline Officer\_1). Compartmentalisation enabled distance from difficulties experienced with customers upon finishing work: *'Yes, it pisses me off [...] I try not to get upset too much and when I clock out I do not think about it anymore; I move on to something else'* (Security Agent\_2). Out of the work sphere, the first thing to do was to just 'move to something else' in order to avoid 'to get upset'. Critical-obedient subjects had no personal satisfaction from customer relationships: *'People are difficult, they are boring – they are! They get on their high horse right away, they think that they are always right [...] As time*

*goes by, I find that it is less and less easy*' (Airline Agent\_1). Yet critical-obedient subjects emphasised the priority of their personal lives: *I have two kids [...] I do my things, I have my own life. It's much more important than all this*' (Car Park Attendant\_2). In brief, these subjects had become classic 'instrumental workers' (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1969): they earned their pay without seeking or expecting to find inner satisfaction.

### ***The 'self-satisfied subject'***

The 'self-satisfied subject' (eight employees) saw SPIRIT as corresponding with their character, education, and background, being *'logical, so normal'* (Waiter\_1). According to Salesperson\_4: *I cannot even imagine coming across someone and not saying hello*'. This means that they perceive SPIRIT as not relevant to them, the content being simplistic, with Security Agent\_3 claiming: *This training is not useful [since] it is an obvious thing to do*'.

Furthermore, in adopting behaviours that align with the 'good' behaviours promoted by SPIRIT, these employees differentiate themselves from others, including younger people: *'[For] me, it's not the same thing; I have a lot of experience. It's different from youngsters who are sometimes... who don't give a shit'* (Salesperson\_4). Self-satisfied subjects reported that they didn't need SPIRIT since customer service came naturally to them and happened automatically:

*It can be crowded or not, it's the same. The smile is there, the 'hello' is here, the 'goodbye' is there, the 'thank you' is there [...] It's been my job all the time. I did an apprenticeship in sales then I worked 15 years in the restaurant; it's my thing. I mean, I'm good with people but I know it's not easy for everyone* (Security Agent\_3).

For these employees, authenticity was also represented through heroic stories illustrating their

dedication to be and to do the best for customers. Finding unique solutions for customers, doing the job of others to help customers, or dealing successfully with particularly difficult customers or situations were examples: *'I had a lady who arrived and was crying [...] Someone in her family had died, so I boarded with her; she was about to miss the plane but, thanks to me, she made it'* (Airport Officer\_1). Their mastery was an expression of *'diplomacy'* (Salesperson\_4), *'feeling'* (Airport Agent\_1), *'maturity'* (Liaison Officer\_2), *'strong experience'* (Salesperson\_4), and their excellent professional background. Self-satisfied subjects include previous *'strong'* professional experiences into their current work at the airport. For instance, Waiter\_1 had *'worked in restaurants that had a discipline; that had a way of doing things. Obviously, that stays with you'*, and didn't believe that *'the people who work here'* were capable of similar levels of discipline.

Such employees chose to be employed in a customer-contact job because they derived personal gratification from satisfying customers. Airport Agent\_1 said that, unlike for many others, it was his choice to work there and to *'do things well; more than well because I love it! I love to serve passengers. Sometimes I'm told, "You do too much" and "it's good you can limit yourself to this or that", but you don't need to do it as much'* (Airport-agent\_1).

Although self-satisfied subjects did not mention helping customers in their personal time, or during breaks or outside formal work hours, they did find time for personalised contact with customers, even when the pace of work was particularly high: *'They [the colleagues] tell me, "But we do not have time to chat." I tell them, "That's not true. We have time; we have time to speak with passengers." And I proved that by doing A plus B'* (Car Park Attendant\_3). They did not take things personally when dealing with difficult customers: *'With life we learn*



*a lot: we learn precisely not to get upset, to take things with a pinch of salt' (Liaison Officer\_2).*

To avoid 'to get upset', the liaison officer separates the work sphere from the private one. Indeed, for self-satisfied subjects, professional life did not take precedence over personal life, but a better work–life balance was sought:

*Here I have a regular schedule and it's continuous, whereas where I worked before, I had to work in the morning, then there was a break, and then I had to work in the evening [...] I made more money than now, but it is more important to be... to have a better quality of life in the sense of working with more continuous hours... to organise my personal [life a] little better (Waiter\_1).*

The differentiation between work and life was evident also in employees affirming to derive satisfaction in their private lives from activities that did not concern work, such as, for instance:

*I like DIY, I like reading... and I also have my sea rescue, not only at the weekends but on weekdays, too. There are people on the lake in the weekdays, as well [...] Yes, there are other sources of satisfaction than work, but I like my job (Car Park Attendant\_3).*

Underlining that 'other sources of satisfaction' can also derive from extra work activities sheds light on the fact that, for self-satisfied subjects, it is important to differentiate the work and life spheres, so as to derive the maximum degree of satisfaction from both.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our investigation of the ICS's hybrid practices, combining (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands, and the ways in which employees experience its introduction, yields three major contributions. First, it helps to distinguish between normative and neo-normative control on the basis of the two tensions identified. Second, it sheds light on four distinct subject positions that show how workers are able to creatively appropriate and strive to resolve the two tensions experienced in a (post)bureaucratic context which mixes normative and neo-normative control. As such, it identifies and addresses significant gaps in existing studies of normative and neo-normative control.

### **Authenticity under control**

Our literature review showed that two main tensions can arise between (post)bureaucratic and neo-normative demands: authenticity vs. conformity and conflation vs. differentiation between life and work. Fleming and Sturdy (2011) researched one-way companies' attempts to resolve these tensions by introducing 'freedoms around control': workers in a call centre were expected to conform with a highly normalised (post)bureaucratic system when performing their work tasks but were encouraged to express their authentic selves when undertaking activities *around* work. However, their findings allude to the fact that 'freedoms around control' lead to contrasting subjective experiences, with some workers expressing resistance and contestation. It is indeed easy to understand that workers would struggle to keep a sense of authenticity when being asked to conform to a highly normalised system when performing tasks, while simultaneously behaving outside the norms around their tasks. ICS also encapsulates refined distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of conflation between work and life, with a claim of improved work–life harmony.

Our case documents an alternative, and potentially more insidious and powerful, method with which to resolve these tensions, one that we label 'authenticity under control'. Indeed, ICS

combines neo-normative injunctions for authenticity with loosened normative (post)bureaucratic prescriptions, presenting both as appropriate. ICS thus encourages self-expression on the one hand, while simultaneously and subtly limiting forms and expression of authentic selves at work, pushing towards conformity to pre-established organisational norms.

The ‘just be yourself’ discourse (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011) is evident when ICS explicitly encourages employees to express their ‘true’ selves, and to draw on personal qualities and capacities in order to provide customers with an authentically unique service. The neo-normative side of these practices seeks to draw on people’s personal, inner aspirations (realness, freedom, happiness and harmony) (Fleming, 2009; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017; Picard and Islam, 2020) and thus to enroll an organisational participant’s ‘whole’ person into the productive processes of work (Fleming, 2014b). Relatedly, exhortations to express one’s self authentically encourage organisational participants to conflate work with life until the two become increasingly indistinguishable (Endrissat *et al.*, 2015; Endrissat *et al.*, 2017; Fleming, 2013, 2014b; Ritzer, 2005) and unite in one ‘true’ self (Holmqvist and Maravelias, 2018; Kuhn, 2006; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2016). In brief, the ICS programme expects employees not only to operate via the expression of their personal selves, but also to appropriate the life they lead outside formal work (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2016; Weiskopf and Munro, 2011). ICS, indeed, encourages employees to remember ‘good’ customer experiences when at home, and to use breaks and time walking around as unique opportunities to ‘freely’ express their ‘real’ sense of customer orientation.

The (post)bureaucratic logic was manifest in the delineation of the type of self-expression that was acceptable. Indeed, ICS encourages organisational participants to express their true self, while suggesting concurrently that they embody the six key attributes of customer-oriented

SPIRIT. The trainer encouraged employees to express freely their unique personalities with customers, while also suggesting that they might take inspiration from videos showcasing examples of typically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ attitudes and behaviours with customers. Informal discussions between the trainer and organisational participants about specific events with customers also contributed to providing the latter with a collection of exemplary anecdotes.

Collectively, these apparently prosaic examples constituted a heterogeneous collection of broadly defined sets of advice, rather than precise and imperative prescriptions with which to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of self-expression on the one hand, and between acceptable and unacceptable forms of conflation between work and life on the other. Concretely, this appears as a way to deal with the inherent tension between employees’ self-expression and employees’ conformity, a key managerial challenge in achieving success (Cable *et al.*, 2013, p. 2; see also Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014). The association of strong neo-normative principles with loosened normative (post)bureaucratic practices suggests a complex hybridisation of power logics (Josserand *et al.*, 2006), which are interwoven in ‘tandem’ (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004).

### **The creative appropriation of authenticity under control**

We found that ICS did come with the promises of happiness and harmony between life and work that are associated with neo-normative discourses (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014; Cable *et al.*, 2013; Ekman, 2013; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011). However, this subtle discourse of authenticity under control did not magically and unproblematically deliver harmony at work or between work and life. Indeed, the four subject positions that we described show how workers critically appropriated the discursive elements that they were presented with while navigating the tensions between authenticity and conformity and work–life conflation. In doing so, we show how the subjective experiences of employees presented

with a hybrid (post)bureaucratic/neo-normative discourse also subtly varied from those described in former research conducted in (post)bureaucratic contexts.

Ideal subjects resemble ‘conformist selves’ (Collinson, 2003), they are ‘bewitched’ by the enterprising figure and regard corporate demands as opportunities for professional empowerment (Musson and Duberley, 2007). However, their identification with the corporate discourse goes one step further, compared with conformist selves. Indeed, they fully appropriate the neo-normative discourse of authenticity and make ontological claims by emphasising that SPIRIT helped them in being their true selves in the organisational setting. They thus do not have the impression to conform to corporate prescriptions but to have the opportunity to express themselves authentically. In this case, and contrary to the case of the self-satisfied subject, the neo-normative injunctions offer them identity resources on which organisational participants build to constitute themselves as authentically conformist selves. Beyond being an opportunity for professional empowerment, ideal subjects also see the neo-normative discourse as one for personal empowerment. As such, they do not prioritise their professional life over their personal life as prescribed in (post)bureaucratic settings (Fleming, 2014a; Maravelias, 2016). They reconcile both aspects by authentically embracing the same enterprising ethos in their personal life and professional life. They emphasise how each aspect positively contributes to the other in helping them to progress in both their professional and personal lives. They thus build on each aspect to serve an ontological quest oriented towards blossoming by being authentically themselves.

Neither conforming, distancing or resisting, the worn-out subjects argue that they are unable to express their ‘authentic self’ at work and to reconcile their professional and personal lives in a harmonious way, despite their willingness to do so. While they accept the normative

foundation of SPIRIT and the injunction to behave in a certain way, they find themselves unable to conform. They receive the discourse on authenticity as a supplementary source of stress since, contrary to the critical-obedient subject, they are unable to distance themselves from it. They experience a tension between their desire to conform and how they behave, who they would like to be and who they perceive they are. They describe how their private life becomes contaminated and constrained by work leading to physical exhaustion.

Critical-obedient subjects present similarities with the ‘resisting selves’ (Collinson, 2003) observed in (post)bureaucratic settings. Indeed, they are ‘bothered’ (Knights and McCabe, 2000) by the corporate rhetoric (Musson and Duberley, 2007) and say that they prioritise their personal life over their professional life (Knights and McCabe, 2003), thus adopting a ‘it’s just a job’ attitude’ (Hamilton and McCabe, 2016); however, and like the resisting selves, they globally conform with organisational norms by ‘faking it’ in order to avoid sanctions (Collinson, 2003; Goffman, 1959) and only express their discontent through minor discursive forms of resistance, such as cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), scepticism (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) or humour (Ezzamel *et al.*, 2001). In particular, they criticise not only the inauthenticity of the ‘just be yourself’ discourse, but also make ontological claims emphasising that the corporate figure that is promoted does not correspond with their ‘authentic self’ and that they can express their ‘true’ self outside work. They thus turn against the neo-normative discourse to nurture their resisting position.

Finally, self-satisfied subjects resemble ‘distant selves’ (Collinson, 2003). More specifically, they distance themselves from the normative prescriptions of SPIRIT, discarding them as over-simplistic and irrelevant for them. However, they selectively appropriate the ‘just be yourself’ discourse and report a sense of being themselves at work that is particularly strong.

Distancing themselves from the normative components of SPIRIT becomes a key means for constructing an alternative sense of ‘true’ authenticity that would be independent of corporate injunctions and correspond to higher normative standards. Relatedly, they explicitly reject the conflation of personal and professional life, but this differentiation of both spheres is also nurtured by a sense of self-worth and ‘true’ authenticity, affirming life as entailing much more than being well-performing organisational participants.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Managerial experiments with authenticity are not the benevolent endeavor to promote harmony between life and work that they pretend to be. We showed how workers selectively appropriate the emerging neo-normative discourse when they combine with (post)bureaucratic injunctions into complex hybrids, unexpectedly shifting the subjective experience of workers. While some workers did respond according to managerial predictions, embedding authenticity in ontological claims that transcended their private and personal life, most did not. In particular, the worn-out subjects experienced a tension between their desire to conform and their perceived incapability to do so that progressively contaminated their private life. When organisational power seeks to impose on all of ‘life itself’, questions need to be raised as to whether the brunt of what is demanded can be borne by all. An unintentional form of resistance occurs as a result of the unexpected consequence of too-strong conformity rather than an expression of freedom. Such resistance is not the result of deliberation about the value of the prescribed organisational ideals but the accumulation of collateral damage from the corporate demands that require organisational participants to adopt very normed behaviours and attitudes while promoting a ‘just be yourself’ discourse.

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