

Lifestyles as Social Contracts between Workers and Organisations

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a more individualised world of work does neither reduce the relevance social institutions have for social actors nor the role of social structure in studies on work, employment and industrial relations. Taking up current debates about legal, economic and psychological contract perspectives and their strength and weaknesses, the paper broadens the metaphor of contract by stressing the relevance of milieu and lifestyle studies for our understanding of the employment relationship. Examples from the 'creative industries' will be used to illustrate the role of lifestyle in the constitution of workers' and organisations' expectations regarding work arrangements and the use of labour. In conclusion, co-evolving patterns of workers' preferences and organisations' HR practices will be conceptualised as *social contracts* between workers and organisations.

INTRODUCTION

The employment relationship is often seen as an economic exchange relationship or a legally defined and regulated contract. Changes towards more market-based, contingent and flexible work arrangements (Cappelli 1995) have also inspired social scientists to analyse the changing expectations between employer and employee by using the concept of 'psychological contract' (Rousseau 1995).

Notions of contract, according to Marsden (2004) used in a metaphorical way here, help to consider both the mutuality and the different interests of the parties involved. However, all three perspectives, economic, legal and psychological, have in common that they centre on the relationship between individuals or actors, respectively. As a result, they tend to neglect the social creation and collective character of economic preferences, legal institutions and mutual expectations. The focus on contracts between individual actors is appealing in times of individualisation. Yet this paper argues that a more individualised world of work does neither reduce the relevance social institutions have for social actors nor the role of social structure in studies on work, employment and industrial relations. Rather, the paper will try to show that it is essential for work and employment studies to broaden the metaphor of contract by looking at work-related collective patterns of perceptions and preferences that emerge within an industry, occupational community or profession and co-evolve together with organisational forms, work arrangements and human resource management practices. Such interlinked patterns will be conceptualised as social contracts between employers and employee or, more broadly, between workers and organisations.

The aim of the paper is thus twofold. Firstly, it will outline and discuss the strength and weaknesses of the existing contractualist frameworks in employment studies. Secondly, the paper seeks to elaborate the idea of a social contract between workers and organisations. In contrast to economic, legal and psychological contracts, the concept of social contract aims at linking the levels of social structure and agency. I will draw upon social class, milieu and lifestyle studies (Bourdieu, 1984; Devine *et al.*, 2005; Florida, 2004; Schulze, 1992), which

highlight social distinction and stratification, in order to substantiate social contracts as well as their emergence and dynamics.

Examples from the 'Creative Industries' will be used to illustrate the role of lifestyle in the constitution of workers' and organisations' expectations regarding work arrangements and the use of labour. These case examples are based on qualitative empirical research that was conducted in the context of extensive case studies on theatre (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006; Haunschild, 2003) and digital visual effects (VFX) production (Spelthann and Haunschild, 2008; Eikhof *et al.* 2008).

In sum, the paper seeks to broaden the existing debate on new forms of work and employment by introducing a perspective that contributes to exploring the role of collective cognitive, behavioural and perceptual patterns in employment relationships and thus explicates the collective nature and mutuality of workers' and organisations' strategies and expectations. As will be shown, the research perspective developed in this paper is particularly fruitful in industries or professional communities where HR practices and careers transcend organisational boundaries. Furthermore, the paper argues that the perspective of lifestyles as social contracts can explain some of the difficulties unions have in gaining influence in industries that are characterised by creative or knowledge work and in which workers strongly identify with their work and the products they contribute to.

EXISTING PERSPECTIVES: NOTIONS OF CONTRACTS

Legal and Economic Contracts

It is common knowledge in labour law and economic theory that the employment contract, as a contract of service, features characteristics that make it distinct from sales contracts (Suptot and Meadows 2001; Simon 1951; Williamson *et al.* 1975). In particular its long-term orientation, its limited ex-ante specification as well as limited property rights lead to a relationship between employer and employee which, from a legal perspective, implies rights and obligations beyond a pure economic transaction and, from an economic perspective, implies the need to employ incentive and control schemes. Ex-post negotiations regarding the terms and conditions of this exchange relationship are inevitable and bargaining power resulting from labour market conditions and governance structures is crucial for understanding existing working conditions, task assignments, pay and working time structures as well as work practices. Since employees are reflective individuals with their own will who pursue their interests and act strategically, personnel management or human resource management can be seen as a means for employers to control, motivate, coordinate and discipline employees and their work inputs towards organisational goals (Milgrom and Roberts 1992, Townley 1994). The more employers depend on the creativity, flexibility and autonomous decisions of their employees, though, the more they have to take serious their motives, values and preferences (Deutschmann 2002).

Psychological Contracts

An economic view of the employment contract emphasizes the implicit, non-codified, elements of this contract, but usually lacks an analysis of the content and emergence of mutual expectations between employers and employees. To fill this gap, Rousseau has coined the concept of psychological contract. By psychological contracts she means "individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of exchange agreement between individuals and their organization" (Rousseau 1995: 9), and "a key feature of the psychological contract is that the individual voluntarily assents to make and accept certain promises as he or she understands them" (*ibid.*: 10). These promises can be based on expectations regarding a fair relation between effort and compensation, mutual loyalty and commitment, security and risk sharing as well as stability and duration of contract.

The metaphor of contract stresses the voluntariness and the incompleteness of an exchange relationship and furthermore elucidates that changes can create losses in a mutually beneficial and accepted relationship (Rousseau 1995: 1, 7). Although there are always (at least)

two parties to a contract and Rousseau discusses organisational contract makers (1995: 55-89), her focus is on the individual. Consequently, psychological contracts are conceptualized as mental models (ibid.: 27-34) that, in tendency, are resistant to change (ibid.: 7) and which are influenced by individuals' predispositions such as cognitive biases and motives, e.g. career aspirations (ibid.: 43-44). The concept thus seeks to map *individuals'* commitment and promise keeping.

The concept of psychological contract has proven to be particularly powerful in explaining recent developments from *relational* contracts (long-term, unspecified performance terms) towards more *transitional* (short term, not specified performance terms) or *transactional* (short term, specified performance terms) forms of contracts. Perceived disappointments stemming from these developments have, by many core employees, been experienced as a breach of the 'old' psychological contract (see also Robinson 1995; Sennett 1998). Contract violations are perceived as a breach of contract when individuals regard organisations as able but unwilling to maintain in their view mutually agreed promises, commitments and norms of fairness (Rousseau 1995: 113).

Social Contracts: Rousseau's View

Rousseau's view on mutual promises, commitments and expectations between organisations and individuals mainly focuses on the emergence of psychological contracts in individual-organisation interactions. However, besides the impact of individuals' predispositions she also highlights the role of social norms and beliefs, i.e. the social context of employment relationships. This social context or ecology of contracts Rousseau terms *social contracts*, which "are cultural, based on shared, collective beliefs regarding appropriate behavior in society" (Rousseau 1995: 13) and include, for example, norms of reciprocity: "Social contracts in business are evident in pervasive notions regarding what is fair treatment" (Rousseau 1995: 13).

In her discussion of current changes to psychological contracts, Rousseau concedes "trends in the new social contract", too (1995: 202-224). She refers to increasing degrees of self-management, blurring boundaries of organisations and careers as well as societal changes with respect to new forms of work and organisation in the areas of media, law, industry and education. These developments lead to a change in societal values in general which set a new context for psychological contracts. Beyond these societal context factors Rousseau also introduces the notion of *normative contracts* in order to address organisational cultures or subcultures. "*Normative contracts* exist where the organization has many members who identify themselves in similar ways with it and each other" (1995: 10). Different organisational subgroups (she uses the example of professional subcultures in hospitals) may share different fundamental assumptions, values, behavioural norms and patterns as well as artifacts (ibid.: 46-52; see also Van Maanen and Barley 1984). Rousseau also asserts that there are different contemporary types of psychological contracts matching with particular types of employment relationships (dependent on insider/outsider status and long/short-term orientation) (1995: 103-109; see for a similar approach the identity types in Grote and Raeder 2003).

This account of Rousseau's work clearly shows that by addressing the societal context as well as sub-culture-related collective patterns of norms and beliefs she goes beyond the individual perspective of psychological contracts. However, societal developments and the concrete differences between industries or professions as collective phenomena are hardly theoretically embedded in her conceptual framework which is based on organisational behaviour concepts.

Attempts to further specify these general changes to the social contract can be found in sociological approaches that seek to diagnose "late" or "post" modern societies characterised by individualism, subjectification, project-driven work regimes and the discourse of flexible or enterprising selves (Baumann, 2001; Beck, 1992; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Pongratz and Voß, 2003; Sennett, 1998; Rose, 1999). However, these more general diagnoses of *the* world of work neglect that these collective patterns can differ between groups of workers,

occupations and industries and therefore fail to explain concrete employment practices and preferences.

The Institutional Context: Employment Systems

In his theory of employment systems Marsden (1999) stresses the economic necessity of an inter-organisational institutional framework (employment rule) that governs the exchange relationship between employers and employees. Such a framework enables an efficient alignment of qualifications and job design as well as enforceable rules of task assignment. Marsden argues that labour market structures, training and education systems, industrial relations as well as human resource practices co-evolve and form a consistent and stable institutionalised pattern (*employment system*). Whereas Marsden has initially developed his theory in order to explain societal differences between employment systems in industrial production at a national level, this perspective can also be applied to other industries, professions or internal labour market segments (see Haunschild 2004 for a detailed discussion). Marsden himself (2004) applies the theory to the so-called network economy (knowledge intensive work and creative industries) where work is often organised in projects, workers' inter-firm mobility is high and contingent work arrangements are common. Using the three contract perspectives outlined above, Marsden demonstrates 'new' legal, economic and psychological contracts that delimit opportunism in such employment systems: social networks as bearers of 'psychological contracts' (reputation), deferred rewards (royalty-type incomes; stock options), employment stability and training within an occupational community as well as representative institutions, credible commitments and contract enforcement.

The theory of employment systems adds to the contract perspectives outlined above by looking at highly institutionalised rules at the inter-firm level that shape mutual expectations of employers and employees and increase the mutual predictability of their behaviours and practices. From a functionalist perspective, it shows that between societal norms and values on the one and individual predispositions on the other side social structures at the employment system level exist that have a significant impact on the relationship (and psychological contract) between workers and organisations. However, both Rousseau and Marsden say little about the collective emergence of and differences between individuals' cognitive, behavioural and perceptual patterns and their approaches lack a systematic theoretical consideration of how collectively shaped preferences *are linked* to individual and organisational practices. In particular, it remains unclear why some workers do accept or even favour flexible forms of employment. In the following I will propose class, milieu and lifestyle studies as an attempt to theoretically elaborate this link.

CLASS; MILEUS AND LIFESTYLES

In his famous study "Distinction" Bourdieu (1984) has provided an extensive analysis of the segmentation of French society. He points out that societal subgroups (milieus) differ regarding their objective life conditions and their style or conduct of life. The concept of milieu thus combines Marxian and Weberian class analysis (education, economic capital) with accounts of shared subjective values (Simmel's 1900/1922 "Stil des Lebens" and Weber's 1922/1974 "Lebensführung") and, in Bourdieu's social theory, is linked with other concepts such as actors' practices, societal fields, forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) and the habitus as the incorporated life conditions. Milieus position and distinguish themselves in social space by specific, collectively shared, cognitive, behavioural and perceptual schemes (e.g. tastes, forms of body use, language, aspirations).

Bourdieu's approach has, among other aspects, been criticised for neglecting dynamics and contingencies of milieu characteristics as well the diffusion of schemes between milieus. However, recent milieu or lifestyle studies of German society (Schulze 1992; Sinus Milieus, www.sinus-sociovision.de; Vester 2005) offer illuminating insights into the structure and heterogeneity of current society. Results of these studies have been used by marketing researchers and practitioners in order to target different consumer groups, but, surprisingly, the concepts of milieu and lifestyle have hardly been taken up by work and employment studies. However, the more modern societies are open to the transgression of class boundaries, the

more lifestyles become a decisive determinant of workers' preferences and aspirations (see also Devine *et al.* 2005). The milieu groups identified by Sinus-Sociovision, for example, show that milieus differ regarding their material life conditions (upper, middle, lower class) but also regarding their shared values and beliefs (conservative, modern, experimental) - with all combinations found empirically, e.g. experimental values shared by "hedonists" (lower class), experimentalists (middle class) and "modern performers" (upper class) (www.sinus-sociovision.de). The impact of the belonging to a certain milieu on work, employment and career preferences is rather obvious but has not yet been explored systematically. In the following section I will refer to empirical studies into the creative industries (theatre and VFX production) to illustrate the role of lifestyle for the shaping of work and organisational practices.

EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES: THEATRE AND VFX

The studies referred to in this section are based on extensive qualitative case study research carried out by Volker Spelthann in the UK and the US (VFX) and by Doris Eikhof and the author in Germany (theatre). I will concentrate on main results regarding the observed lifestyles of workers in these industries; for detailed descriptions of the respective employment systems as well as the employed methods and methodologies see Eikhof and Haunschild (2006), Spelthann and Haunschild (2008), Eikhof *et al.* (2008) and Haunschild and Eikhof (2009).

Theatre

Analysing and interpreting material from 40 in-depth interviews with theatre artists, we discovered that theatre artists did not only feature a particularly blurred boundary between work and life, but that this blurred boundary was part of a wider concept, a lifestyle, which we identified as *bohemian*. Based on classical texts on bohemians, such as Kreuzer (1968), Murger (1988/1851) and Stein (1981), we concluded that the bohemian lifestyle is centred around ideas such as self-development, distinction from other parts of society (namely the bourgeois or middle class) by clothing, public behaviour and gestures, spontaneity and provisional life arrangements, rejection of economic principles (see also Bourdieu 1993), devotion of (work) life to the production of art as a greater good, subordination of private life to work and, finally, the interpretation of work life in artistic categories. Re-visiting the empirical data against this backdrop revealed a wealth of practices exhibited by theatre artists that fitted this lifestyle. Theatre artists are flexible, mobile, restless, excessively work-dominated, inconsiderate regarding personal relationships and overtly concerned about employability and their artistic reputation. They rate artistic impact over hierarchical position and artistic reputation over high wages, (net-)work in public spaces (e.g. the theatre canteen or at premiere celebrations) and affirm themselves regularly of their unique- and otherness compared to 'the world out there'. Based on the conduct of life distinctive for 19th century bohemians as found in the literature as well as the case analysis we summarised our findings by identifying five crucial characteristics of bohemian lifestyle: *distinction* from bourgeois and middle-class values, *devotion* to 'art for art's sake', *communication* in public spaces, artistic *perception* of work (neglect of economic logics) and *subordination* of private life to work (Eikhof and Haunschild 2006).

From an employment system perspective, these individual but collectively shared cognitive, perceptive and behavioral schemes play a major role in regulating and shaping inter-organisationally shared work and employment practices. The outlined elements of the bohemian lifestyle allow (theatre) artists to perceive themselves as fully dedicated to artistic production processes, to accept the disadvantages of a work-dominated life and, most importantly, to disguise economic rationales and market forces and integrate artistic and management activities. The bohemian lifestyle therefore helps to maintain artistic work motivation, which is the key input of theatre as a creative industry. While it can be interpreted as an individual coping strategy in a specific situation of work and employment, it also fulfils an important function for organisations and the industry on the whole: It allows them to keep work arrangements temporary and flexible, to offer less extrinsic incentives and to benefit from devotion and creativity and thus makes creative production viable.

Digital Visual Effects

Like theatre, the Digital Visual Effects (VFX) industry, in which moving images are digitally created and manipulated and then composited with live action shots for commercials, music videos and feature movies, belongs to the so-called creative industries (Caves 2000; Deuze 2007). However, a study comprising 42 semi-structured in-depth interviews with a variety of VFX practitioners (VFX supervisors, producers, managing directors, heads of departments, (lead) animators etc.), which was carried out by Spelthann in London and Los Angeles between 2005 and 2006 as part of a wider ESRC-funded research project (cf. Pratt et al. 2007; Eikhof et al. 2008), revealed a partly similar but also considerably different lifestyle from that found in theatre.

Whereas theatre artists perceive themselves as artists producing arts for art's sake (Eikhof and Haunschild 2007; but see also Bain 2005 for the myths and stereotypes behind the formation of an artistic identity), VFX workers see themselves more as creatives and share a fascination for technology, entertainment and 'cool' projects. The workforce mainly consists of independent, mobile young men who strive for fairly middle class activities like playing pool or darts, watching football and 'hanging out with your mates'. For these creatives work is a major part of lifestyle - including sleeping, eating and drinking at work - and cool projects are predominantly located in global clusters and 'cool' places such as London (Soho), Los Angeles (Burbank and Santa Monica), Canada (Montreal and Vancouver) and New Zealand (Eikhof et al. 2008). In contrast to the bohemian lifestyle of theatre artists, the lifestyle of VFX creatives could be characterised as "laddish" or "chummy", centring on coolness, excitement and entertainment. Consequently, VFX firms provide stylish, hotel-like facilities as an environment enabling their workers to combine this coolness and fun-orientation with intensive work. Similar sites and facilities are, for example, known from Google or Pixar offices.

CONCLUSION: LIFESTYLES AS SOCIAL CONTRACTS

The two examples sketched above, theatre and VFX, clearly show that lifestyles as collective patterns of cognition, perception and behavior shape work and life-related preferences of the respective groups of workers. Furthermore, work and organisational (HR) practices in these industries match with the observed lifestyles. Lifestyles can thus be regarded as *social contracts* between workers and organisations: *Lifestyles as social contracts link collective (but group-specific) cognitive, perceptive and behavioral schemes and the resulting work preferences to industry and labour market structures as well as HRM practices.*

This notion of social contract is more specific than Rousseau's view of social contracts defined as the general societal context psychological contracts are embedded in. It also differs from the term social contract as used in political theory (Locke, Hobbes, J.J. Rousseau) to address the relationship between individual citizens (and their liberty and rights) and the government or state (and its sovereignty) or as used by O'Reilly and Spee (1998) who develop the idea of a societal gender contract. Rather, the notion developed in this paper refers to the employment system level and seeks to amend this institutionalist perspective by theoretically and empirically linking institutionalised work, employment and HR practices to individuals' perceptions and reflexions of and attitudes towards work and life.

In doing so, this paper offers a new research perspective which follows up existing studies on work identities. Such identities can be based on destiny or the societal position by birth in pre-modern societies, on craftsmanship or professional background, on duties, commitment and loyalty (old psychological contract), on workplace communities, on solidarity and class consciousness, on social status (hierarchical ranks, uniforms, awards) or on pure instrumentalism with a clear-cut boundary between work and life. The examples of theatre and VFX show a combination of some of these features and, in particular, a strong intrinsic motivation and work-centred life, albeit significant differences between these lifestyles could be detected too.

This raises the question of the generalisability of lifestyles as social contracts. Lifestyles might be a powerful explanatory factor in the cultural or creative industries but not in other

sectors of the economy or among other professional groups. However, in his influential book on “the rise of the creative class” Florida (2002) has pointed out that the portion of creative workers in the “new” or “knowledge” economy with a lifestyle oriented towards a bohemian lifestyle is increasing (see also Brooks 2000 and Friebe and Lobo 2006 with their accounts of bourgeois bohemians or the digital bohème, respectively). Other obvious examples revealing the relevance of lifestyles for understanding work practices are “cool firms” in sports and entertainment (snow boards, skating, mountain bikes) or firms such as Innocent Drinks (www.innocentdrinks.co.uk) where the lifestyles of organisational members and consumers are expected to be strongly associated. More evidence is provided by studies or reports on the (“macho” and competitive but also laddish) lifestyle of financial traders (Abolafia 1996; Anderson 2008; Insana 1996).

It certainly is no new insight that economic action is embedded in social contexts. However, taking up the metaphor of social contract not just adds another dimension to the employment relationship. The paper has shown that the idea of lifestyles as social contracts elucidates the collective nature of workers’/employees’ and organisations’/employers’ expectations and helps to understand the observable preparedness among some groups of workers to accept flexible or contingent work arrangements. Lifestyles can therefore be seen as a crucial concept for understanding work motivation, work-life boundaries and work practices of a growing group of creative workers. Seeing lifestyles as social contracts also improves our understanding of how human resource management practices tend to match with workers’ expectations and preferences, and it suggests a reconsideration of organisational boundaries. Furthermore, analysing co-evolving expectations of both workers and organisations in the way presented in this paper can challenge critical employment or labour process studies that one-sidedly focus on how employers control and exploit labour as well as traditional patterns of industrial relations which do not sufficiently take into account the self-images and lifestyles of creative workers.

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