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# Complementing psychological approaches to employee well-being with a socio-structural perspective on violence in the workplace

An alternative research agenda

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**Complementing psychological approaches to employee well-being with a socio-structural perspective on violence in the workplace: An alternative research agenda**

**Abstract**

Social, political, and economic changes affecting labour markets and human resource management (HRM) practices continue to shape employee well-being into the twenty-first century. In this paper we argue that much influential work on employee well-being has focused on individualistic, psychological conceptualizations at the expense of a more interdisciplinary approach that takes wider social and contextual realities more fully into account. In particular, we critique the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility underpinning work on positive psychology, the psychology of happiness, and resilience in relation to employee well-being. We next draw upon inclusive socio-structural conceptualizations of violence – defined here in terms of the use of power in the employment relationship to implement workplace practices that cause harm – to provide a more contextualized, politicized, and interdisciplinary conceptualization of employee well-being in relation to HRM. Finally, we outline an alternative well-being agenda for research and practice, based on investigating socio-structural types of employee violence transmitted through various HRM practices, types of harm and manifestations of resistance and nonviolence. We argue that such an approach to well-being can, through its greater acknowledgement of types of violence, indignity, and inequality in social systems, complement prevailing psychological approaches and compensate for some of their limitations.

**Keywords:** Employee well-being; violence; positive psychology; resilience; neoliberalism

## **Introduction**

Employee well-being, a central tenet of post-war, twentieth century management practice, has long struggled to fully reconcile its aims of ensuring happy, healthy employees with parallel work objectives of productivity and competitiveness (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001; McGregor, 1960). The nature of any relationships between human resource management (HRM) practices in workplaces and employee well-being is therefore of continuing concern to workplace practitioners and governments (e.g. Affinity Health at Work, 2014; UK Gov, 2013). However, the term well-being covers a potential range of physical, psychological and social concepts and lacks a clear, consistent definition (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007), with the boundaries between well-being and associated concepts, such as stress and health, often remaining blurred in research and practice.

Definitional issues notwithstanding, many developed and developing nations are experiencing turbulent macro-economic conditions in the twenty-first century that appear to be putting the well-being of their citizens and employees under great threat (e.g. Springer, 2016). Against a broader backdrop of neoliberal policy agendas that favor the promotion of free market competition and reduced social provisions from national governments, these international conditions have also included austerity policies, intensified patterns of globalization, widening income inequality, poverty, and elitist financialization dominating markets and economies (Davis, 2009; Springer, 2016; Thompson, 2013).

In turn, labour markets have witnessed a corresponding increase in ‘precarious’ work that is temporary, casual and flexible, as well as often being low-waged (Kalleberg, 2012; Standing, 2014). It appears that changes to working conditions have resurfaced as a public health issue to some extent, where longer working hours, job insecurity and intensified performance demands are associated with increased reporting of poor well-being amongst both

employees and the unemployed (e.g. Ostergren & Canivet, 2014). Large international retailing, logistics and services organisations such as Amazon.com and Sports Direct have had the work conditions in their warehouses (or ‘workhouses’ as protesting employees have described them) exposed as brutal, humiliating and even life-threatening (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015; McLennan, 2015). Where workers are unionized, the aggression and harm can be redirected back at the employers in protest, as in the case of Air France KLM’s CEO and HRM executive, who were mobbed by angry employees after announcing job cuts (Stothard, 2015).

In the UK, 41% of a large and diverse sample of organisations reported having seen a recent increase in reported mental health problems (CIPD, 2015), suggesting increases in well-being issues may exist across workplaces more generally. Indeed, **the power relations between managerial elites and interns in the financial and banking sectors, both before and after the global financial crisis in 2008, have also been related to violently harmful work conditions and practices leading to exhaustion and humiliation (Kerr & Robinson, 2012)**, with HRM practitioners often complicit in shaping them, or at least feeling powerless to challenge them (Martin & Gollan, 2012).

Overall, evidence thus suggests that working conditions for many populations of employees in many settings may be becoming increasingly harmful to their well-being, particularly via the mutually reinforcing links between neoliberal capitalism, managerialism and highly rationalized, instrumental employment relationships and HRM practices.

In this paper we first argue that current psychological understandings of employee well-being are critically limited in explaining the more social and political issues outlined above, and can even serve to aid and abet them to an extent. This is due in part to their almost exclusive focus on the individual, their emotional and psychological states, and how such individuals should manage and take responsibility for those states in relation to definitions of performance.

Having reviewed emerging themes critiquing well-being approaches along these lines, we propose a complementary, alternative approach to conceptualizing employee well-being based on an inclusive definition of the concept of *violence*. In particular, socio-structural definitions of violence (e.g. Berlingieri, 2015) can be more inclusive in the sense of going beyond daily individual or interpersonal physical acts, experiences and relationships to connect them with greater social and economic forces, where power is linked to the implementation of HRM practices that may cause various types of harm to employees, for example. This approach draws on interdisciplinary literature on defining violence (e.g. Bufacchi, 2005; de Haan, 2008; Henry, 2000), and we echo and extend parallel, recent calls to incorporate power, types of violence, and socio-structural antecedents into understandings of HRM practices and bullying (e.g. Beale & Hoel, 2011; Berlingieri, 2015; D’Cruz, Noronha & Beale, 2014).

Just as with these developments in workplace bullying research, our contribution is to complement psychological perspectives on well-being with a more contextualized, interdisciplinary approach that incorporates sociological, political, and industrial relations concerns into HRM scholarship and practice too (Godard, 2014; Hoel & Beale, 2006). We believe our emphasis on violence helps more fully engage the darker sides of employee well-being, and could render more concealed, harmful workplace dynamics more visible. Such an approach is also foregrounded in and better recognizes the existing links between well-being and public health (Schulte et al., 2015), HRM practices and the employment relationship (Beale & Hoel, 2011), as well as the harmful overarching political, economic and work conditions created by neoliberal ideology and policy (Springer, 2016). We conclude this paper by outlining some of the main areas an alternative well-being research agenda based on socio-structural violence might encompass, including ongoing attempts to understand and measure

the types of violence transmitted through HRM practices and work environments, as well as types of harm and manifestations of resistance and nonviolence.

### **Well-being and work: Themes of revision and critique**

Well-being is implicated across a range of interdisciplinary research, with some consensus that at the core of the concept are three inter-related dimensions: physical (health), psychological (happiness), and social (relationships) (Grant et al., 2007). A broad, holistic definition of well-being with reference to workplaces is “the overall quality of an employee’s experience and functioning at work” (Warr, 1987, cited in Grant et al. 2007: 52). The psychological or subjective aspect of well-being is arguably the most contentious dimension; typically captured by self-reported measures of quality of life and happiness (Layard, 2010), forms of job and life satisfaction (Helliwell & Huang, 2010), or specific affective states and emotions (Warr, 1990). Improved psychological well-being is held to promote positive work outcomes via the ‘happy-productive worker thesis’ – stipulating that happier employees exhibit better job-related performance than unhappier employees (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). Empirical support for this proposition, however, remains equivocal (e.g. Wright & Staw, 1999).

We argue here that approaches to well-being which privilege psychological states, often positively labelled (e.g. happiness, wellness, or resilience), are problematic for improving understandings of how HRM practices relate to employee well-being. Themes of this critique are briefly outlined below, but they all relate to the limitations and negative effects of the excessive individualism, contractualism and neoliberal instrumentality underpinning a psychological focus on employee well-being. Such a focus tends to neglect more socio-structural themes of power, practices and control, as well as explicitly or implicitly shifting responsibility and risk for well-being largely onto the employees themselves (Beck, 1992;

McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008). Employer expectations of wellness and by extension, positivity and resilience also put HRM in a problematic, pressured situation by reinforcing an over-simplified and decontextualized view of what a normal or functioning employee looks like or should look like.

### *Critiques of positive psychology, happiness and wellness*

Discourses of positive psychology have been critiqued for their general potential to reduce complex notions of mental health to a singular, idealistic personality type (Miller, 2008). Furthermore, Foucauldian understandings of positive psychology link happiness to themes of power, discipline and control, where well-being becomes a desirable managerial imperative, extensively imposed on and expected of employees (McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008). Culturally and politically, positive psychology can be argued to privilege an individualistic, ethnocentric, westernized view that endorses one vision of well-being and the good life over equally legitimate alternatives (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). While there is a concern over traits and processes inherently beneficial for well-being, these relationships can vary in opposite directions if contextual information is taken into account (McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Critical organisational scholars have thus warned that the discourse of positive psychology and well-being carries the risk of unduly accentuating the positive, while eliminating or downplaying the negative (e.g. Fineman, 2006).

Populist critiques of positive psychology, happiness and wellness have continued to emerge (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2010). In particular, Spicer and Cederström (2015a, 2015b) have critiqued growing obsessions with well-being in corporate life as a harmful 'wellness syndrome' putting employees 'under the whip of wellness', resulting in harmful, overlooked and unintended psychological, social and moral side effects. While it has

long been known that emotions can come under managerial control in the form of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), these recent critiques also see happiness becoming an industry for selling a commodified notion of well-being (Ahmed, 2007; Davies, 2015). Happiness and positivity become desirable states, which are then taken as a proxy for success (Ahmed, 2010), while broader societal concerns, and the multidimensional costs and benefits of so-called negative states are more neglected (e.g. Lilienfeld & Arkowitz, 2011).

### *Critiques of individual resilience*

Another popular concept argued by psychologists to bolster employee well-being is that of individual resilience, positioned as a crucial source of psychological capital for ensuring that high levels of well-being are maintained during crises, through a lens of positive emotions (Avey, Luthans, Smith, & Palmer, 2010). At this individual level, resilience can be defined in terms of the ability to survive or even thrive under adversity (Luthans, 2002), although it is often critiqued for ignoring ethical concerns and over-generalizing its beneficial effects (e.g. across military and non-military contexts; Friedman & Robbins, 2012). Employee resilience is often conceptualized psychologically in these ways, remaining de-politicized as a result (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015).

In terms of neoliberalism, resilience can be politically critiqued as representing a form of governmentality, via policies and practices which emphasize ideal citizens with full responsibility and adaptability for securing well-being (Joseph, 2013). A lack of resilience here implies an individual deficit or pathology, rather than seeing employee states as being more significantly shaped by societal structures and practices (Ahmed, 2010). The emerging discourse of resilience can thus be argued to instill a destructive acceptance by individuals of danger, risk, responsibility and vulnerability as inevitable features of human and organisational



existence and social contracts, which must be honoured rather than despaired of, protested, or evaded (e.g. Evans & Reid, 2014).

However, employee resilience seems likely to be severely tested by the nature of the changing workplace and wider patterns of political and economic stressors (Sparks, Faragher, and Cooper, 2001). Broader contemporary political and economic conditions shaped by neoliberalism and austerity inevitably have profound effects on people's health, bodies, and well-being, typically through a battery of conditions, including job or income insecurity, status anxiety, work intensification, barriers to labour market entry, welfare cuts, and heightened demands for certain skills (Hall & Lamont, 2013; Stuckler & Basu, 2013). To date, such health and disease issues that may arise from workplaces seem to have been recognized more by those working in epidemiology and public health (Benach et al., 2014), but crowded out by, and disconnected from, a focus on individual psychological states and their promotion. Resilience-enhancing HRM practices have been increasingly adopted alongside frequent organisational change, not always genuinely safeguarding well-being, and even undermining it (Bardoel, Pettit, De Cieri, & McMillan, 2014). Resilience training, for instance, has been shown to have some effectiveness in enhancing subjective well-being outcomes in only some studies, although not physical outcomes, and with no consistently superior format or mode of delivery being identified (Robertson, Cooper, Sarkar & Curran, 2015).

### ***The social dimensions of employee well-being and psychological states***

What tends to be missing from these predominantly psychological accounts of employee well-being, emotions, health, and the body is the more social and political emphasis on how wider frames of reference can profoundly challenge and affect their meaning on an everyday, value-laden basis (Rose, 2001). Ahmed (2010, 2014), for example, identifies a 'good' emotional

encounter between persons in terms of its implied levels of mutual agreement. However, when those parties disagree, the corresponding ‘bad’ feelings need not imply blockages to progress, rather they can be a process and opportunity through which to learn that these affective experiences and their impressions, distribution and organisation are meaningful and should be carefully interpreted (Ahmed, 2004). In short, it can be valuable to move beyond viewing bad feelings as backward and conservative while viewing good feelings as forward and progressive (Ahmed, 2010). Otherwise these views can maintain forms of inequality and prejudiced, categorical thinking, such as prevailing definitions or false dichotomies of well-being (re)producing ‘ableism’, or the dominance of the ‘well’ over the ‘ill’ or disabled (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). Similarly, feminist critiques have suggested that the construction of emotions, health and well-being through various psychological measures and tools can fail to reflect the powerfully gendered social constructions and behaviors surrounding health issues at work and in society (e.g. Gibson, 1996).

Psychological understandings of employee well-being thus tend to be incomplete and have been criticized for being too individualistic, decontextualized and as implicitly and uncritically reinforcing socially oppressive, neoliberal structures of control and managerialist HRM practices (Godard, 2014; Thompson, 2013). This leaves HRM potentially complicit in the unchecked use of managerial power to emphasize high performance, while largely transferring risk and responsibility for well-being to individual employees, under the misleading guise of positivity and change (D’Cruz et al., 2014; Thompson, 2011).

Accordingly, we believe that new research agendas on employee well-being are needed that better account for the darker socio-political sides of well-being; the harmful working conditions and practices with roots in socio-structural power imbalances inherent to neoliberalizing economies and employment relationships influenced by capitalist and

managerial imperatives (Klikauer, 2015; Springer, 2016). We thus turn to a consideration of interdisciplinary literature on violence to develop a more holistic, complementary approach aimed at a more complete understanding of employee well-being.

### **Introducing a socio-structural perspective on violence to employee well-being**

We believe that a shift in emphasis towards better understanding societal aspects and processes of violence allows for employee well-being to be more fully and explicitly related to HRM practices and policies and their effects. *We want to draw upon this socio-structural perspective on violence here by using interdisciplinary definitions of violence that emphasize deliberately broad, inclusive conceptions in terms of the use of power that leads to any forms of harm, disadvantage and injustice (Bufacchi, 2005), incorporating them into a more fully social conceptualization of well-being.* This move towards violence thus represents a complementary reconceptualization of well-being away from being a solely individualistic set of psychological states toward reflecting the types of harm that may or may not be experienced as a result of ongoing, processual interrelations of social relations and practices (Walby, 2013).

This approach does not fundamentally change general definitions of well-being, but it adjusts them towards more explicitly recognizing that well-being reflects any harms experienced from within an inter-related socio-structural system made up of neoliberal policies, characteristics of the organisation, employment relationship and the implementation of HRM practices. Unlike in psychological accounts, these harms will inevitably often be shared along social and political lines, and typically occur as a result of the power exerted on employees.

### ***Defining violence inclusively***

Work in philosophy, human geography and sociology, among other disciplines, has been committed to creating a more inclusive conceptual space for violence to be viewed as representing a variety of well-being effects that range from highly individual suffering as a result of physical force through to more complex social processes shaping experiences of harm, oppression and degradation (de Haan, 2008; Springer, 2016; Walby, 2013). Fundamentally, violence can be defined in two main ways; either in minimalist terms such as “bodily harm by physical use of force” (de Haan, 2008: 31), or in inclusive terms such as “the use of power to harm another, whatever form it takes” (Henry, 2000, cited in de Haan, 2008: 32).

Although both definitions have their strengths and limitations (Bufacchi, 2005), the more inclusive and comprehensive definition connects violence to considerations of any use of power that could potentially cause harm, allowing for a wider variety of contextual, economic, structural, and ethical forces to be taken into account (Henry, 2000; Jackman, 2002). For example, in feminist analyses of violence, acts of sexual harassment are recognized more explicitly as sexual violence (Kelly, 1988; Fitzgerald, 1993), and figures in critical theory such as Bourdieu, Habermas, and Foucault have described symbolic violence, structural violence, and disciplinary violence in their accounts of society, respectively (Bourdieu, 2004; Foucault, 1979; Habermas, 1987). Finally, peace and conflict studies views many non-physical forms of violence as interrelated with overt, physical forms, with the former often serving to legitimize the latter more widely through ideology, language, religion, or science (Galtung, 1990). **Thus we argue for linking a more inclusively social, and less individualistically psychological, definition of violence to shape a corresponding reconceptualization of well-being.** We leave certain issues, such as how exactly to best represent different interrelated sources and forms of violence and types of employee harm (e.g. psychological, financial, social, rights-based) open to refinement via an agenda for future research outlined in the concluding section of the paper.

In sum, for understanding organisational settings, a narrower perspective on violence on its own is likely to be rather reductionist. Indeed, the purpose here is to acknowledge that any physical or material manifestation of violence at an individual or interpersonal level is simply a momentary outcome in time and space arising out of a broader processual flow of social relations and practices in context (Springer, 2016). To ignore this would risk lapsing into some of the individualistic shortcomings of the psychological approaches to employee well-being critiqued above. Physical, observable violence is thus not disregarded; rather, investigations work backwards from it and around it to try to better understand the violent social processes and relations that produce and accompany it.

### ***Socio-structural violence in the workplace***

Workplace violence literature has generally tended to focus on physical assault (e.g. Neuman & Baron, 1998), which, as noted, can limit the extent to which broader processes involving power and harm can be considered. A slightly more inclusive definition might include aggressive threats, abuse, intimidation, and humiliation of employees (van den Bossche, Taris, Houtman, Smulders, & Kompier, 2013). The incidence of recorded workplace violence seems to be rare overall, but these low levels are likely influenced by limiting the focus to physical harm in certain occupational settings (Piquero, Piquero, Craig & Clipper, 2013).

More recently, HRM and workplace research has been most pushed towards more inclusive, socio-structural views of violence in terms of workplace bullying. Bullying can obviously have nonphysical (and technologically-mediated) elements, as well as labor process elements where personal and organisational circumstances co-occur and become embedded within controlling HRM practices and employment relations in an ‘organisation-as-bully’ conceptualization (Beale & Hoel, 2011; D’Cruz et al., 2014). Related to these developments,

Berlingieri (2015) has proposed a continuum of violence extending beyond physical, interpersonal acts through to symbolic and structural forms of oppression. Here forms of violence, including but not limited to bullying, are treated as interrelated and mutually constitutive, with power at the centre. This approach therefore goes beyond individualized, psychological approaches to violence and bullying in ways we have argued should also be extended to well-being accordingly. Violence is acknowledged as a social process, extending beyond the time and space of individual acts, and all its forms are seen as interrelated and shaping employee well-being through patterns of power, inequality and disadvantage. Acts of violence may occur in many types of interpersonal relationship, but such relationships are also inevitably rooted in the socio-structural conditions of the organisation (Waddington, Badger, & Bull, 2005).

As well as in work on bullying, critical and sociological work on health and social care organisations and new public management has at times theorized how market reforms, organisational structures and HRM practices can shape forms of violent oppression – institutional and managerial in their origins and character – that ultimately harm employees (e.g. Baines & Cunningham 2011; Holmes, Rudge & Perron, 2012). Evidence from public and third sector settings reveals broader social processes of violence underpinning physical incidents (e.g. bullying, silence, blame), stemming from the way the work is socially constructed through the labour process in terms of political economic pressures to deliver a nonprofit ethos in spite of neoliberal and managerial reforms (Baines & Cunningham, 2011; Holmes et al., 2012).

Taking a socio-structural perspective on violence further, we can now begin to reflect on the power and potential to do harm to employee well-being inherent to HRM practices and employment relationships – influenced more distally by overarching neoliberal policy at

national and international levels – that could be described as being violent. From a perspective of social exchange or the employment relationship as psychological contract, certain practices and/or agents may be said to breach and *violate* – a Latin root of the word violence in ‘violare’ meaning to outrage or dishonour (Bufacchi, 2005) – the expectations employees hold about their work, resulting in negative effects on employee well-being and attitudes (e.g. Conway, Guest, and Trenberth, 2011).

We thus argue that violence extends back into the intimate clashes of interest that occur in social and organisational life, as actors question the social structures, relationships and power imbalances underpinning the implementation of HRM practices such as organisational change and restructuring (e.g. layoffs, business process reengineering), performance management and leadership development (D’Cruz et al., 2014; Grint & Case, 1998; Harrington, Warren, & Raynore, 2015; Martin & Gollan, 2012). Critical theorists of violence have even noted how it can, somewhat paradoxically, involve inaction, banality, and invisibility, with a lack of violence suggesting a triumph of power (Arendt, 1970; Žižek, 2009). HRM practitioners, for example, have been found to be relatively inactive in challenging harmful, violently dehumanizing layoff practices (D’Cruz et al., 2014), or in changing aggressive performance management and corporate governance practices significantly in banking in the wake of the global financial crisis (Martin & Gollan, 2012).

### ***Socio-structural violence and political economy***

Tracing further back from HRM practices and employment relationships leads to neoliberal and capitalist forces. **At more macro levels of analysis, social and structural power relations may be transmitting pervasive structural and symbolic violence toward** both HRM and employees from a distance through the pursuit of aggressive, financialized agendas that have

knock-on effects on the configuring of entire markets and workforces (Kerr & Robinson, 2012; Thompson, 2013). For example, Beale and Hoel (2011) argue that downward bullying is a way for managers to control and exploit workers in capitalist employment relationships; through intensifying work, ensuring compliance, and using fear, shame and humiliation as ways of boosting short-term productivity. **Internationalization of work arrangements, public sector austerity, chronic forms of job insecurity and other HRM and labour market practices may thus come to represent violent forces in organisations that give rise to various forms of harm.**

At the level of political economy, under neoliberal regimes where the scope of the welfare state is reduced, socio-structural patterns of violence relate to the critiques of well-being based on individualistic notions of risk and responsibility outlined earlier in this paper. Neoliberal strategies of rule urge individuals to freely manage their own well-being and pressure them into taking responsibility for maintaining it with reference to certain performance standards (e.g. Larner, 2000). Although research on neoliberalism and governmentality has generally limited itself to broad analyses of governments (Hall & Lamont, 2013), employee well-being, happiness, and resilience can be argued to resemble specific neoliberal projects embedded within broader agendas (Joseph, 2013).

Full accounts of well-being must then consider how societal and organisational power, via work conditions and HRM practices, serves to affect employees' freedoms and sense of self (McNay, 1999). Political and economic conditions like neoliberalism and globalization have been argued in part to disrupt and do violence to the very fabric of society; playing a role in creating entirely new classes of employee consciousness and shared experience. For example, a 'precariat' class experiencing chronic poverty and degraded citizenship as a result of being trapped in precarious work (Standing, 2014), wasted lives that appear to have fallen behind as unimportant to societal progress (Bauman, 2013), and those imprisoned to work in



relative slavery, poverty and inequality via neoliberal policies and institutions (Crane, 2013; Wacquant, 2009).

Hence we argue that our account of violence is needed in HRM to critically challenge the individualized ways of talking about employee well-being, happiness, or resilience that are in a sense performative; performed to make things seem relatively unsayable, un-showable or unthinkable, protecting governments and organisations from deeper critical examination and scrutiny (Butler, 2006). Such protections reinforce harmful structures of power and inequality in organisations, upholding a positive emphasis while deflecting more critical attention from revealing the violent HRM practices and managerial actions inherent to harmful, unjust aspects of employment relationships. This ultimately brings well-being full circle with psychology and the struggles of individual employees in everyday experiences of work. For instance, a study by Bishop, Korczynski and Cohen (2005) found that employers denied the existence of job-centre workers' experiences of customer violence, rendering it invisible and a matter of individual responsibility or performance, while the employees (largely women), clearly recognized these incidents as systemic, violent and traumatic.

### **Integrating violence and well-being in organisations: A future research agenda**

In this paper we have argued, in ways similar to Godard (2014) on HRM in general, and Hoel and Beale (2006) on bullying at work, that research on employee well-being needs to move beyond being dominated by an individualistic, de-contextualized psychological focus on positive emotions and states. Such a focus neglects the social and political forces shaping employee well-being long recognized elsewhere in the social sciences – public health, sociology, industrial relations, new public management – and can even constitute a political force itself, framing well-being as a risk and responsibility to be managed by individuals made

to fit a competitive, self-reliant neoliberal ideal (Springer, 2016). As a result, popular HRM outlets ironically couple stories of violently harmful social and economic conditions with mismatched individualistic solutions for employees to learn mindfulness techniques, laugh more, play games, and stroke pets (e.g. People Management, March 2014; Purser & Ng, 2015).

We have thus argued that adopting an inclusive definition of violence can help complement and counteract these issues by grounding well-being and HRM more firmly in important issues of working conditions, work intensity, performance management and industrial relations (Thompson, 2011). **Violence is defined inclusively here as a social process involving the use of power underpinning a continuum of interrelated forms of harm that mutually sustain and reproduce one another (Berlingieri, 2015)**, distally through neoliberal forces of political economy, and proximally through employment relationships and the implementation of HRM practices. Tracing these socio-structural processes of violence can help us to better understand the antecedents and contributory factors shaping shared experiences of employee harm that may ultimately result in the individual psychological states observed at any particular place or moment in time.

Accordingly, we conclude this paper with the brief outline of an alternative research agenda for HRM scholars investigating employee well-being that incorporates socio-structural views on violence in organisations. We highlight three main areas with implications for research and practice – studying HRM practices as types of violence; incorporating types of harm into definitions and measures of employee well-being; and finally, investigating emancipatory forces of resistance, counter-violence and nonviolence in relation to well-being.

First, HRM well-being research can allow psychology and sociology to complementarily meet halfway if multiple levels of analysis and contextual analyses of workplace stressors and conditions are taken more fully into account. The individual and group

psychology of well-being can be bridged upward to complement the sociology of violence and practice-based frameworks of HRM (van de Voorde, Paauwe, & van Veldhoven, 2012). A social and political understanding of violence should help link well-being more firmly to antecedent HRM practices. These practices can then be measured and modelled in terms of employee perceptions of the harm inflicted via power, injustice, inequalities and working conditions. In doing so, HRM researchers should also draw on and refine interdisciplinary theories and frameworks on different types and levels of socio-structural violence, related terminologies and the ideologies underpinning them (e.g. Galtung, 1990; Henry, 2000; Walby, 2013), to better appreciate their effects in various workplace settings.

Similarly, one unresolved issue from workplace bullying research is how to better understand how both personalized and depersonalized forms of violence can co-occur, and how to disentangle their influences (Beale & Hoel, 2006; D'Cruz et al., 2014). HRM researchers thus need to better account for and source the relative importance of structures, agents and shared responsibilities in exerting powerful influences on well-being via different types of violence (Hayward & Lukes, 2008). Critical theoretical interpretations of the power, knowledge and control effects of well-being discourses will also be helpful for showing how even the most well-intentioned well-being rhetoric and interventions may be depersonalized, ineffective or subversive in denying socio-structural issues of violence and harm (e.g. Foucault, 1979). In contrast, traditional psychological approaches relying on positivist applications of self-report questionnaires alone are unlikely to be adequate for achieving more holistic understandings of employee well-being and violence (Baumeister, Vohs & Funder, 2007).

Second, we recommend HRM research link violence and well-being by looking at how to incorporate definitions of types of harms into existing conceptualizations and operationalizations of well-being. Stretching well-being to include harms experienced through

everyday sexism, harassment and discrimination (e.g. Powell & Sang, 2015), for example, can help HRM build a useful bridge between well-being and diversity concerns, given that the latter are often kept completely separate from psychological accounts of the former. Violence effects may end up ‘leaving their mark’ on how diverse employees feel about themselves and their bodies and appearances, also doing further harm where they serve to shut down the expression of difference and enact oppression (Pullen & Rhodes, 2013). Furthermore, some organisational voices are seen to be more credible or objective than others, and prevailing conceptualizations of employee well-being may persist in (re)producing discriminatory or exclusionary notions of health and ill-health. HRM scholars and practitioners thus need to be more active in embracing a variety of perspectives which help overcome unspoken biases about well-being, given that even knowledge can be violent if it harmfully excludes and denies (Fricker, 2007).

Harm can also help HRM link well-being to ethical considerations if defined in terms of experiences of social and organisational injustice and perceptions of unfairness (Butler, 2006; Otaye-Ebede, Sparrow & Wong, 2016). HRM practices may lead to employees feeling harmed if they perceive themselves to be unfairly losing out from a decision-making process, in terms of the psychological, financial, or social harms incurred as a result. Again, by drawing on interdisciplinary literature on violence, HRM researchers can investigate how practices lead to additional different types of harms. There are ‘harms of reduction’ that actively diminish aspects of a person’s functioning, and ‘harms of repression’ that deploy power to systematically limit another person’s capability of achieving various outcomes conducive to human flourishing (Henry, 2000; Henry & Milovanovic, 1996). HRM practices and working conditions may also subtly harm employees by distorting their ethics over time, leading them into harmful situations, perhaps of their own unwitting creation, where their abilities to reason morally have eroded or broken down (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). In short, well-being

should be more closely linked to types of harmful experience where ethical neglect of employees or employee norm or rights violations are occurring.

Methodologically, some management survey studies appear to be taking their lead from public health and epidemiology by measuring more explicitly the socio-structural economic and political factors shaping national mortality and health spending, such as unemployment, job insecurity, organisational injustices, lack of health insurance, and long working hours (Goh, Pfeffer, & Zenios, 2015). This approach would offer HRM scholars a fuller picture of socio-structural harms as part of well-being. Similarly, a variety of ethnographic methods could be used to more directly observe material and cultural aspects of the well-being harms and injustices inflicted in workplaces - in terms of the violence dynamics surrounding belonging and dispossession of property and status, for example (Ahmed, 2014).

Third and finally, we urge HRM scholars to recognize the more positive, liberating aspects of integrating violence into well-being. Namely, by recognizing that violence can also be theorized as a constructive force, particularly in terms of potential workplace patterns of counter-violence and resistance (Fleming & Spicer, 2008; Lawrence and Robinson, 2007). As noted earlier, sometimes it may be paradoxically considered more violent for HRM practitioners to do nothing in some situations, or to simply be a bystander to other types of harm or violence (Arendt, 1970; Žižek, 2009). More HRM research then on bystander effects or interviewing parties complicit in sustaining socio-structurally violent conditions would thus be welcome, as well as research on the beneficial effects and political dynamics of resistant counter-violence and nonviolence. Research could investigate moral criteria that determine whether workplace violence is perceived to be justified (i.e. for a just cause, with good intentions, as a last resort, approved by legitimate authorities; Cady, 2015). Industrial relations disputes and ethical scandals and crises, historical and contemporary, could also be studied in

terms of their violent and nonviolent dynamics to understand where well-being interests are being most threatened or protected.

Most positively from the current perspective, it would also be provocative for HRM researchers to ask what the opposite of violence would look like, and to part-reverse much of the preceding discussion to consider how HRM practices can minimize harms to employee well-being. Discourses and metaphors of peacefulness and healing could be used to analyze workplace well-being, as leaders dismantle sources of socio-structural violence to allow organisations to recover and regrow (e.g. Powley & Piderit, 2008). In some cases, it may be known what the nonviolent version of an HRM practice looks like – a downsizing that explores and exhausts alternatives to layoffs, while planning carefully to treat employees with sensitivity, transparency and fairness, for example – but HRM may need to challenge senior management and other power structures to mitigate any violent effects on employee well-being (D’Cruz et al., 2014). We believe these issues all bear further research and reflection within the field of HRM if employee well-being is to be widely protected and assured in future.

In conclusion, it bears saying that we are emphatically *not* advocating that HRM scholars and practitioners abandon the insights and practices of psychological well-being approaches. What we do urge is a fuller account and recognition of how the power and politics involved in implementing neoliberal policies, corresponding HRM practices and even well-being solutions themselves can have violent and harmful effects on employees. We have tried to show how adopting a more inclusive definition of types of violence and harm can flesh out some darker sides of well-being concerns more fully in their social and political context and (re)connect well-being with important related HRM issues of diversity, justice and ethics.

We believe the word violence should not be avoided, but used as an opportunity to reflect on types of violent effect in organisations, and how far the concept can be reasonably

extended to delineate them. Otherwise shocking examples of workplace violence are likely to continue to surface, in striking juxtaposition with positive, individualistic well-being narratives. However, with greater attention in accounts of employee well-being given to types of socio-structural violence and harms inflicted through practices, some initiatives may go beyond individualized assistance with well-being, and attempt more radical, systemic efforts at what might be called nonviolent, pacifist, or even healing HRM strategies to address harmful working conditions.

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