



Health, Athletic Competitiveness and the Corporate Elite

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Introduction

Studies of work site health promotion programs in organizations have shown that healthy lifestyles have become important parts of individual's employability [1]. In line with these findings this paper accounts for a study of corporate executives who strive to improve their employability by undertaking various health oriented activities both in their free time and during the working day. Yet, as we will see, the corporate executives' understanding of and strivings towards health differ from that which we conventionally find in work site health promotion initiatives in organizations. While the latter generally sees health as matter of establishing balanced, well-informed and self-conscious lifestyles, the corporate executives see health as a matter of athletic and often risky competitiveness.

This will lead me to develop two general arguments, one empirical and one theoretical: Firstly, contemporary labor markets, athletic competitiveness has in this connection become a central marker of how corporate executives distinguish themselves as superior to other non-executive employees. Secondly, I argue that the corporate executives' ambitions of developing athletic competitiveness is an interesting example of post-disciplinary principles of managing individuals in relation to the demands of the labor market. Foucault [2] and organizational scholars using his work [3,4] have shown how 20th century organizations are built around disciplinary principles. Discipline is then shown to be distinguished by the way it corrects deviance from organizationally set norms, thus keeping individuals in place and within limits. Yet, alongside disciplinary correction, argues Foucault [5] post-disciplinary forms of control begun to develop in the post-war era. These are distinguished from conventional discipline, firstly, in that they largely emanate from the individual him or herself, and secondly, in that they do not focus on how to correct deviances from norms, but on how individuals' already existing characteristics can be used as resources, which increase the individuals' performance and helps him or her transcend norms.

Based on the account the paper shows how WHP in general and the corporate executives' ambitions of developing their athletic competitiveness in particular are examples of post-disciplinary self-management procedures, which are important in employees' ambitions of proving their employability and in corporate executives' their strivings to prove their 'true' competitive skills at work and thus their right to belong to an elite class of executives.

Work Site Health Promotion and Healthy Employees

Studies have shown that Work Site Health Promotion programs (henceforth WHP) have become increasingly important in helping employees build not only their health, but also their employability [1]. The studies show that WHP involves a range of professionals, most commonly medical doctors, but also therapists, and health promotion coaches, that put together specialized programs for groups of employees. Through extensive mapping of employee's daily routines, the programs seek to help employees develop and maintain routines with regards to how they eat, exercise, cope with stress, balance work and private life, and so on, which are at once healthy and spontaneously motivating [6,7]. While the term WHP seems to emphasize the work site as a locus of investigation and intervention it is notable that the main focus of WHP is not what employees' do at work. Rather, the focus of WHP programs is employees' lifestyles and in that connection, that which is seen to largely determine them lifestyles, their personalities. This focus follows logically from the concept of health that WHP is built on. It is taken from the World Health Organizations' definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease" which makes health closely associated with dreams and ambitions of a better life (www.WHO.com).

Advocates of WHP have interpreted this definition of health as a way of underlining that health is not just an objective condition but also the subjectively driven process of wanting health,

improving health and having the capabilities of doing so. In other words, to advocates of WHP the capability and motivation to work on and improve your health is part of the definition of whether or not you are healthy. You may pass a clinical test and still be defined as lacking in health if you are not active and motivated to improve your health. That health promotion is basically a matter of promoting a particular personality and lifestyle became salient to us in our studies of the international bus and truck producers Scania and Volvo [1]. Both Scania and Volvo have invested heavily in occupational health service departments that put together WHP programs for the employees. A catalyst of these investments was a transformation from a Tayloristic to a Lean management production philosophy that both companies initiated in the 1990s.

The introduction of Lean Management proved to be a challenge to both companies, a challenge which in turn proved to be associated with health. Lean Production presupposed “a different kind of worker”, the **global manager of Scania’s production** explained. He continued: “the crucial issue in implementing Lean production has not been employees’ skills but their mind-sets. I mean, we can recruit individuals with appropriate technical skills or, if they lack particular skills, put them in training. But to make sure that our employees have the mind-set that makes them up to the challenges that come with Lean production has proven to be a lot more difficult”. What characterizes individuals with the “right mind set”? A recruitment manager explained that “two decades ago, you could more or less recruit anyone, give him a week’s training and place him in the factory. That is no longer possible; many people are far too passive to be able work in our factories.” In this connection, a transmission assembly worker at Volvo said: “Old-school workers expect to be told what to do, and nothing is ever their fault. It is management that has not thought things through. But, you know, that is no longer how things work here.” As these quotes indicate, the “good” and “employable” worker in the new Lean Management environment is an active, social, communicative, improvement oriented and above all, self-managing individual, very different from the worker fit for the old Tayloristic production regime.

It was here; in relation to these issues that the investments in health that begun in the 1980s took a new turn. Gradually the occupational health services departments at Volvo and Scania focused less and less on defending workers against hazards in their work environment and instead more and more on how to help the executive boards in their ambition of developing the employees as strategic human resources fit for Lean production. As said by one of the executives in a board meeting we attended at Scania: “the health department is now our true HRM department”.

Hence, what our and related studies show is firstly that WHP focuses on and defines individuals’ health based on the extent to which they lead active, self-conscious and self-improving lifestyles. Secondly, they show that definitions of health hereby

become very closely related to definitions of employability. The active, self-conscious and self-improving individual is at once healthy and employable. Third, they show that WHP is not about creating healthy lifestyles or about fundamentally changing employees’ lifestyles so that they conform to particular norms of health and employability. WHP, as the name say, is about promoting good characteristics and capabilities that already exists so that other, not good, characteristics and capabilities are pushed aside or disappear altogether.

From Discipline to Post-Discipline

Organization scholars such as Townley [3] Covaleski et al. [4] Maravelias (2016) have made use of Foucault’s [2] work on discipline to show how organizational control works itself into individual’s subjectivity and identities. The factory, the bureaucratic office, the school, etc., it has been shown, are all based on abilities of observing employees’ conduct for the sake of accumulating knowledge about the employee taken as an individual subject. Based on that knowledge, organizations typically seek to correct the employee in relation to set organizational norms, circumscribing the good, employable employee. In line with Foucault’s [2] own studies, it has been pointed out that disciplinary correction is not primarily undertaken by organizational authorities, but by individual employees themselves. Since the employees know that they are always potentially observed and always potentially caught ‘mis-behaving’, they gradually adopt organizational norms as their own and correct themselves accordingly. Hence, discipline, it has been pointed out, works itself into employee’s subjectivity.

Foucault [5] showed that in the 20th century disciplinary institutions like the factory, the bureaucracy, the school, etc. begun to be criticized for being closed and for stifling individuals’ freedom of movement. In open, consumer oriented societies, disciplinary institutions begun to be seen as impediments to the free movement and the breaking of norms that consumer markets increasingly presupposed. Hereby, disciplinary procedures and institutions begun to change. Munro [8] and Maravelias (2016) have developed how post-disciplinary procedures differ from their disciplinary predecessors. Whereas discipline, they argue, relates to a particular closed space, the factory, the school, the office, etc., post-disciplinary procedures tend to focus on the milieu in which the individual moves and circulates, the network, the team, etc. Furthermore, whereas discipline seeks to correct and change individuals in relation to particular norms and values, post-disciplinary procedures seeks to define the individual in his or her present reality, for the sake of singling out who is valuable and who is not, which individual characteristics that are potential assets, which characteristics that are not, etc. In this regard post-disciplinary procedures come forth as less intrusive and ambitious because they do not seek to change the individual, but to make him or useful based on his or her already existing faculties and conditions.

WHP, which focuses on employees' lifestyles and that seeks to find in those lifestyles already existing inclinations and faculties for the sake of promoting them, is as I have argued elsewhere (Maravelias, 2016) an interesting example of a post-disciplinary procedure. As we will see below, the corporate executives' ambitions of developing their employability and exclusivity through various athletic activities is another, related, but nevertheless distinct example of a post-disciplinary procedure.

The Competing Corporate Elites

In our studies of WHP at Volvo and Scania and latter at professional service companies such as Astra Zeneca, Systembolaget and Adecco we also began taking an interest in the corporate executives' relation not only to their employees' health but also to their own health. We found that they too seemed to have embraced the idea of a healthy lifestyle as a way of asserting their status and elevated work ethics. In general, the traditional image of the corporate executive as someone who marks his distance to his subordinates by smoking cigars and keeping a slight overweight (indicating that he does not carry out physical labor neither at work nor at home) appeared to be long gone and replaced by the image of a well-toned individual that cares for his health and is in perfect control of his body.

In this respect, our studies point to that the executive elite shares the professional middle class' ambition of maintaining a healthy image built on self-control and an active lifestyle. Yet, our studies also point towards a couple of noteworthy differences between these groups. First, with the exception of occasional team building events where WHP activities may play some part, the executive elites do not take part in WHP programs. Instead they engage personal trainers, specialized physicians and nutritionists and the like. In general, the executive elites engage in individual health activities, not in WHP programs which are perceived by them to be planned and arranged for collectives of individuals.

Second, the executive elites do not just strive to maintain a healthy lifestyle, they go further and pursue athletic, endurance oriented and above all competitive sports activities, which are sometimes quite dangerous and which thus in fact might jeopardize their health. In that connection, the executive elites seldom partake in team sports such as football or ice hockey. Almost exclusively they engage in individual sports such as tennis, long-distance running, cross country skiing, alpine skiing, cycling and so on, where their individual performance is displayed and measured.

Third, while regular employees carry out health activities primarily in their spare time, the corporate executives engage in sports activities also during working hours. In fact, our studies indicate that the distinction between work and leisure, between work and sports, is not necessarily made by the executive elite. In particular, sports such as tennis and golf are part of the execu-

tive elites' routine networking activities. Several of the executives also emphasized that: "my job is basically a way of life. Apart from when I am with my family, I do not leave my job behind; I constantly carry it with me." That type of relation to work seemed to imply not only that work seeps into executives' private life, but also that playing tennis or golf with a business colleague is treated as parts of executives' work. Or, to be more precise, it seemed to imply that playing tennis or golf with a business colleague is neither leisure nor work, it is part of an executive's life. An assistant of one of the executives told us that "I manage my boss' agenda. This involves setting up meetings with business associates, but it might also involve booking a tennis court and notifying my boss' tennis partner about the time."

How did the corporate executives motivate their sporty lifestyle? While they typically mentioned the win-win relation between organizational effectiveness and employee wellbeing as basic argument for investing in employees' WHP activities, the arguments for their own engagement in health and sports related activities were of a more symbolic and personal nature. On the one hand they emphasized their role as symbols for the values and the attitudes they hoped would permeate their companies' "culture". Most corporate executives underlined that they want a moderately competitive, doer oriented corporate culture and that they see themselves and their competitive sporting activities as symbols for that culture. One expression for this view was a "culture forming project" in a large firm where the CEO let a professional photographer follow him around, taking pictures of him as he trained at a gym, played tennis and golf, participated in cross-fit sessions, paddled his kayak, and so on. The pictures were then put into a folder that was distributed to all departments in the firm. He explained: "As CEO I am important as a symbol for the company. I want my employees to see that I stand for health, competitiveness, hard work, but also for the importance of having fun."

Even though most executives that we spoke to do not distribute folders with pictures of them competing in a multitude of sports activities, we found approximately the same pattern and the same mixed messages in all firms. On the one hand, the executives' competitive sports activities are not hidden from the employees, but used explicitly to symbolize the values and attitudes the executives hope underlie employees' work: activity, competitiveness, a doer mentality, self-control, team spirit, and so on. The executives emphasize that they have to "walk their talk", that they have to display the characteristics they in turn expect from their employees. On the other hand, however, the executives want their own sporty lifestyle to remain but symbolic to the employees of their firms. A symbol is something that stands for something else; a rock stands for stability and solidity, a heart for love and affection, and so on. The sporty lifestyle of the top executives is meant to stand for competitiveness, self-control, a doer mentality, etc., at work. That is, while the executives' sporty and competitive lifestyle is very

much real to them, it is not supposed to be more than a symbol to the employees; a symbol that should motivate them to be healthy as in active, self-controlling and fit for work.

One reason for this seemed to be practical. As said by one of the executives: “most of the employees do not have the abilities I have of setting my own schedule, it would not be realistic for them to live and work the way I do.” That is, it is neither possible nor desirable that the employees are more than moderately interested in the executives’ sporty lifestyle, because this would risk taking too much time and interest from their work. Another reason, however, concerns the differences the executives see between themselves and their subordinates. In slightly different ways the executives emphasize that “people that reach top management positions tend to have a very competitive orientation to life in general; they love to compete.” Competing is seen by the executives to be part of their nature, a nature that defines them and separates them from the rest. Their love for and skills when it comes to competing seemed to form an answer to the question: why have I reached this far? to what extent am I right for, entitled and likely to hold on to a position as top executive?

Taking part in competitive sports is in this respect not merely seen by the executives as a playful expression of their competitive nature, it is also seen as a way of proving to themselves and others whether or not they truly are of this nature. Several of the executives pointed out that in competitive sports “you show what you are made of, whether or not you can keep it together when it really counts.” Competitive sports, one executive said, “is as frightening as it is fascinating because there is no place to hide, you show both yourself and others who you are; whether you are able to win or, you know, are one of those guys that that always lose.”

However, why do the executives need competitive sports to prove their competitive nature and skills? Are their professional achievements not proof enough? Somewhat paradoxically several of the executives pointed out that corporate life is highly competitive. Yet, “when you have reached above a certain level in the organizational hierarchy, corporate life becomes less and less a competitive game and more and more a political game”, one of the executives told us. Corporate life is described by the executives as a competitive game, which, if it is played

well, leads not only to significant financial rewards, but also and more fundamentally, to significant amounts of power. Yet, once executive power has been won, the game is no longer a competition between equals, but a power game between unequal. Hence, when the executives that take part in this game are still young and on their way up, corporate life is driven by competition, but this competitive game ultimately kills competition and transforms the game itself. Competitive sports seemed in part to be a solution to this paradox. While not threatening - other than in symbolic terms - the executives’ formal power, it reinserted them into a competi-

tive game between equals where they had the chance to prove that they “were built from the right stuff”.

Discussion and Conclusions

With the account for WHP and corporate executives’ health initiatives I hope to have pointed towards the different ways in which health has become a central marker of employability on contemporary labor markets. At one side, studies of WHP show that health seems so closely associated with employability that the two concepts emerge as two sides of the same coin. For just like the employable individual is defined by his active, social, improvement oriented and above all self-controlling character, so is the healthy individual. When we move upwards in organizational hierarchies we find executive elites that also adopt an active and improvement oriented lifestyle, but that distinguish themselves from their subordinates by superseding or replacing the subordinates’ emphasis of health with competitiveness and adventurousness.

Keeping these observations in mind I think it is interesting to recall William Whyte’s [9] “Organization man”, which was celebrated for having captured the essence both of the man idealized as employable in the 1950s and of the systems that socialized and regulated this man. It is striking how different the “organization man” is from the man that emerges as employable in our studies. The “organization man” is employable not because he is active, improvement oriented and self-controlled, but because he is loyal to his employer and to his community, submissive to authority and willing and able to fit in to the huge and profoundly regulated hierarchies that dominated the public and private sector up until the 1970s. In short, the “organization man” was employable because he was always willing and able to obey.

It is also striking how different the systems that socializes and regulates “organization men” are from the employability and health programs accounted for above. Whyte describes a patriarchal system that keeps a constant watching eye on the individual, defines, compares and ranks him in relation to his colleagues, makes sure that he

does not go astray from the path - the career - laid out for him, and if he nevertheless does so, carefully and authoritatively correct him and puts him back on the right track. What Whyte [9] describes is in other words a good example of what Foucault [2] and many of his followers within organization studies [3,4,10] refer to as a system of discipline. Discipline, says Foucault [5] “analyzes and breaks down [individuals] into components such that they can be seen, on the one hand, and modified on the other.” Basic in this disciplinary ambition of observing, objectifying and modifying is to circumscribe and isolate a space. Discipline is hereby “essentially centripetal ... [it] concentrates, focuses, and encloses.” [5]. It places the individual in a circumscribed space where he knows that he is always potentially seen, always potentially caught misbehav-

ing, and where he thus gradually comes to understand that it is best to internalize the discipline and ‘freely make the correct choices’. It is in this way that disciplinary regulation keeps the individual in place and within normative limits; rather than sketching principles of conduct within an open field of potential activities and initiatives, it regulates conduct exhaustively “according to a code of the permitted and the forbidden” [5]. In short: discipline produces the loyal and submissive individuals that Whyte [9] describes by figuratively slapping the individual on the fingers that takes a hold on fleeting opportunities, that takes risks without first considering the consequences in relation to prescribed codes of conduct.

The health and employability programs we have studied depart from this disciplinary schema in several important respects. First of all, while they are based on observations of individuals’ conduct and faculties, they do not try to alter or correct the individual in accordance with precise norms of conduct. Instead they seek to allow individuals to run their course, targeting those already existing faculties and behaviors that can be qualified at once as ‘good’ and as spontaneously motivating for them. Hence, as opposed to disciplinary regulation they do not try to prevent what is bad, dangerous, inappropriate or forbidden, but seek instead to promote what is considered to be ‘naturally’ good in individuals’ lifestyles, careers, personalities, competencies, etc. They take a step back, as it were, and observe the individual from a slight distance, trying to determine the existing identity of the individual; how he sees himself, what he likes to do and can do particularly well, etc. for the sake first of committing the individual to this identity and then of making the small changes to the individuals’ attitudes and behaviors that might render the individual functional in a particular working environment. For example, the WHP programs at Scania and Volvo do not seek to transform the employees in relation to set norms defining a healthy and employable employee. In this respect, the type of services these firms and their experts provide have less to do with disciplinary care than with commodifying and brokering human capital [8].

All of the above, finally, point towards how both disciplinary regulation and the post-disciplinary regulation that underlie the health and employability programs we study are paradoxical, but in fundamentally different ways. The paradox of disciplinary regulation is that it tries to profoundly change individuals so that they fit precise, restricted and unchanging norms of appropriate and good conduct [11]. The paradox of post-disciplinary regulation is that it tries to promote a stable existing core of individuals for the sake of rendering them useful in milieus dominated by ideals of constant expansion, change and better performance. Hence, the one seeks to change individuals for the sake of maintaining social and professional stability whereas the other seeks to maintain individuals in their existing reality for the sake of social and professional change, flexibility, and expanding performance. To the extent “discipline is centripetal”, post-disciplinary regulation, as Munro has suggested

[8], is “centrifugal”: On the one hand, in the ways it seeks to make individuals increase their performance and transgress themselves. Rather than preventing individuals from acting in ways which are considered incorrect, thus keeping individuals within the limits of normatively restricted identities, post-disciplinary forms of regulation operates as “technologies of performance” [8], promoting individuals to develop expansive identities that seek potential returns, e.g. in the form of increased health and performance, by taking calculated initiatives. On the other hand, it is centrifugal in the sense that it seeks to integrate and combine new elements and areas of expertise. The WHP programs illustrate this by bringing together and making use of expertise in organizational development and recruitment consultancy with medical doctors, therapists, diet specialists and experts in neuro-psychiatric testing, all for the sake of what is in the best interest of the employee and the employer - and where interests are then defined in utilitarian terms of costs and benefits.

The athletic activities undertaken by the corporate executives are illustrative of an additional aspect of these post-disciplinary procedures: they have a tendency to discriminate different ‘classes’ of employees. By ‘classes’ of employees I then intend the Weberian sense of class as individual attributes and living conditions, which give access to specific economic and social opportunities [12]. We have seen how the corporate executives explicitly strive to define themselves in terms, which establish exclusive boundaries towards other employees. Hence, WHP programs dedicated to employees and the athletic activities undertaken by corporate executives separates individuals in bio-political classes while joining them in an ambition to compete, to improve and thereby, possibly, to become best in their own class.

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