Workplace Wellness: The New Domain of Neoliberal Human Capital Management

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Abstract
Workplace Wellness is a concept that emerges in the enterprise management models of developed industrial societies as an administrative intervention to address the productivity issues that arise out of an aging and unhealthy working population. Wellness programmes instituted by corporate planners rely on activity tracking devices and associated data processing software to monitor the physical activity, nutrition and sleep quality in employees and incentivize healthy behaviors. The bodily data collected longitudinally (over weeks and months) from the employees with the aid of wearable technology are used to make a variety of granular and abstract conclusions about their health and well-being and test interventions that improve employee productivity. All these techniques of management mask operations of power that closely scrutinize the body— both at the level of the individual and at the level of population— to facilitate the integration of human bodies into circuits of economic production. This paper attempts to situate these workplace surveillance practices broadly within the history of neoliberal governmentality and specifically within the exercises of power that Michel Foucault calls anatomopolitics and biopolitics. Instead of merely mapping physiolytics onto the Foucauldian account of governmentality, this paper seeks to complicate the traditional distinction between anatomopolitics and biopolitics by demonstrating how the same exercise of power disciplines the individual body (for instance, by creating highly accurate profiles of individual employees and systematically stipulating their bodily behaviors) and regulates the species body (for instance, by monitoring and attempting to adjust larger demographic trends pertaining to health and productivity). This paper also seeks to understand how employee participation in corporate wellness goals and competitions outside the workplace complicates the traditional distinction between leisure and work and reimagines the worker’s body as a form of capital that can be absorbed into the domain of economic analysis. Finally, the paper will examine whether the metaphor of the panopticon is adequate to understand the ideological force invested in persuading individuals to voluntarily accept their data being mined for a variety of purposes, and what new theoretical categories can be imagined to accommodate these new technologies of governance.

Neoliberal human capital management in Western industrial societies is at a critical juncture. The working populations in developed, technologically advanced societies, due to population control and its accompanying cultural
transformations, are aging without being replaced by a younger, employable workforce. Despite a perceptible fall in the number of people being removed from the workforce as a result of what were hitherto considered epidemics, the sedentary nature of work and unhealthy lifestyle trends (“lifestyle epidemics”) continue to lead to absenteeism and diminishing productivity among workers (Stepanek et al. 2017). This contraction in the working population, complemented by the barriers in productivity, is expected to induce circumstances that adversely affect the availability of optimal bodies for the creation of an economic surplus. As a growing body of industrial research indicates that the increase in the average human lifespan afforded by the improvements in medicine and technology has not adequately translated into improvements in "healthspan" (Bloom et al. 2011), corporations are investing in new techniques of systemic management founded on persuading workers to become responsible self-investors in their health and wellbeing. The advent of workplace wellness programs, directed at maintaining and optimizing human capital through a close scrutiny of the human body, and culturally enforced forms of “self-responsibilization” (Brown, 2015), is a direct response to a future where corporations cannot maximize profits, and worse, are forced to contribute to welfare measures of populations which are largely outside the circuits of production. As of 2017, Workplace Wellness has grown into a six-billion-dollar industry in the United States with 92% of all organizations that employ more than 200 people offering some or the other form of employee wellness program (Stepanek et al. 2017).

The interest in bodies that constitute the workforce and the preservation of their efficiency is not a recent development. Michel Foucault, in one of his 1979 lectures at College de France, argues: “And as soon as a society poses itself the problem of the improvement of its human capital in general, it is inevitable that the problem of the control, screening, and improvement of the human capital of individuals, as a function of unions and consequent reproduction, will become actual, or at any rate, called for.” (Foucault, 1979)

He also discusses this in his seminal work The History of Sexuality, where he traces the history of the state’s interest in administering the bodies of citizen-subjects in two distinct but complementary exercises of power that develop in European history.

The first form of power, which Foucault calls “anatomo-politics”, pertains to the use of productive (as opposed to deductive) power in the interest of disciplining, optimizing, and increasing the utility of the individual body by studying it systematically and integrating it into
“systems of efficient and economic control” (Foucault, 1976). For instance, in the 18th century, the association between urban living conditions and epidemics were closely studied and public health measures were devised to prevent the large-scale demise of the urban workforce.

The second development, which Foucault calls “biopolitics”, emerges later in the century as the state shifts its focus from the study of the individual body to the study of the “species body”. Foucault associates this development to the emergence of new disciplines such as statistics and biometry which gives the state the capacity to powerfully quantify the general trends in the populations they administer. Biopolitical power, as Foucault conceives it, operates through the study and management of entire populations through demographic aggregates such as infant mortality rate, life expectancy, and other indexes of health and wellbeing. It is exercised as interventions in terms of predicting, improving, and administering the workforce at “the level of the generality of a phenomenon” as opposed to the specificity of each instance (Foucault, 1976). While Foucault theorizes anatomo-politics and biopolitics as distinct exercises of power, he is unambiguous in stating that both these exercises of power are not antithetical, but complement each other in “exerting a positive influence on life and endeavouring to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (Foucault, 1978).

Forty years since Foucault devised the vocabulary to describe a specific and important site of neoliberal governmentality, significant changes have occurred in the technological landscape and the economic arrangements that characterize its domain of operation. This paper seeks to demonstrate the strengths and limitations of Foucault’s vocabulary in understanding the assemblage of practices that constitute human capital management, and more specifically workplace wellness, in a world that is being governed using surveillance technology that was unimaginable four decades ago. While the utility of the Foucauldian framework in understanding the process of life-administration cannot be overstated, this paper seeks to demonstrate that this framework, as it is conceptualized by Foucault, does not fully comprehend the complexities of modern worker-subjectivity and the techniques of life-administration that shape it. Hence, an attempt is made here to complicate the historical distinction Foucault makes between anatomo-politics and biopolitics, and further scaffold it with the means to understand the practice of data-driven human capital management. In order to do this, this paper will examine how workplace wellness programs are implemented.
There are two broad processes in wellness management: tracking and nudging. While tracking is about collecting the bodily information of workers, nudging is about using that information to steer workers in the direction of becoming responsible self-investors in their health and well-being. Tracking, in practice, relies on wearable activity tracking devices to collect rich data on employees’ exercise habits both inside and outside the workplace by monitoring, for instance, the distance and steps covered, calories burned, sleep quality, and daily active time of the employees. These physiological data points are then used to build highly individualized profiles that are enriched with other metrics associated to the employee such as their age, Body Mass Index (BMI), disease history, blood pressure, and drug use. Most activity tracking devices are linked to online bridge services that allow external applications authorized by the employee, such as an employee wellness application administered by the employer, to remotely import and process this data at regular intervals. Employers can also encourage workers to take various health-risk assessments such as self-administered ergonomic and nutritional assessments and periodical check-ups to supplement the data that has been collected using fitness tracking devices. (Raizer et al. 2018)

The privacy concerns tethered to this level of bodily surveillance by employers are self-evident, especially in the absence of consequential privacy laws to protect bodily data collected through wellness programs. With the advent of big data analytics and machine learning, there is limited clarity among workers on how intrusively their bodily data can be used to shape myriad aspects of their lives. For instance, in the United States, where workplace wellness programs are immensely popular, there are no provisions under Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)— the privacy law that governs doctors and hospitals— to protect the bodily data of employees from being sold to third parties such as banks, insurance providers, and advertisers. This effectively means that data can flow freely into other parts of the economy and, in the hands of a data broker, integrated into algorithms that influence lending and credit decisions, mortgages and targeted advertising (Hancock, 2015).

The second process, nudging, is significantly more outcome-driven. It is also the process that is best explained by the framework of anatomopolitics. Nudging is about using various techniques of systemic management to persuade employees to become responsible self-investors in their health and well-being. To nudge employees, corporate wellness administrators create wellness goals and competitions that employees can compete in either individually or as teams. The data that has been
previously processed by the application is then used to score employees on various corporate wellness goals and competitions. Employee engagement in these goals and competitions are incentivized with bonuses or vacation leaves, and in some circumstances, the scores or “wellness points” are used to determine the employer’s contribution to the employees insurance premiums or other benefit plans. (Raiser et al. 2018)

It is imperative to understand how this “gamification” of data collection fundamentally changes how workers engage with intrusive surveillance technologies, transforming data sharing into a site of pleasure. Through incentive based, behavior-oriented activities, wellness administrators transform the register through which employees understand the prospect of improving their physical health under the close supervision of their employer. This form of surveillance is no longer a transaction to be suspicious of, but a source of delight (as it involves participating in fun, socially-engaging activities) and a signifier of virtue (as it demonstrates a sense of responsibility towards one’s own well-being). It is also useful to pay attention to the language in which employees are encouraged to adopt wellness activities into their daily routines and share their private bodily data with their employers. Employers insist that enrollment into wellness programs are entirely voluntary—it is merely an optional reciprocal arrangement in which employees who enroll in these programs become healthier and happier while the employers benefit from lower healthcare costs and increased productivity. However, a closer attention to the mechanics of wellness management reveals that this is a decidedly more coercive exercise of productive power that aligns perfectly with the logic of neoliberal governmentality. While workers are not explicitly coerced into enrolling in these wellness programs, the governing rationality of self-improvement internalized by the workers renders them responsible for taking charge of their health and well-being. This consequently forces them, in some measure, to partake in the culture of wellness and data-sharing.

Wendy Brown, in her book Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution, discusses how neoliberalism transforms individuals and public institutions into projects of management through a process she calls “self-responsibilization”. This process forces citizen-subjects to “engage in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and the health of the economy”. The cultural logic of “investing in oneself” is critical to the phenomenon of human capital management. Brown goes on to argue:

“Both persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways
that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment and/or attracting investors.” (Brown, 2015)

The modes of persuasion that are embedded into this culture of self-responsibilization are further reinforced by the social media integration available in the wellness applications that allows employees to share their scores/ranks with their peers. (Raiser et al. 2018) Within the application interface, each competition and goal features a unique, sharable leaderboard that displays the employees’ exercise statistics and the other performance metrics which consequently encourages/shames them to perform better in the competitive act of taking care of themselves. Comparably, in case of team activities, an employee who is otherwise not inclined to participate in a wellness activity is tacitly coerced/motivated into involvement by fellow team members for the successful completion of a particular goal.

Pramod K Nayar uses the term “diffused multiveillance” to refer to these practices of participatory surveillance where “we willingly subject ourselves to observation but are in turn ourselves observers” (Nayar, 2011). This combination of self-monitoring and willful subjection to surveillance is not a phenomenon that renders itself easily into the traditional account of coercive power. This is, in many senses, what Jason Read refers to as “neoliberalism doing away with the antagonism and social insecurity of capitalism, paradoxically by extending capitalism, at least its symbols, terms, and logic, to all of society.” (Read, 2009) It is important to distinguish this modality of neoliberal power from the traditional forms of power deployed by the sovereign-state. Here, power is productive not merely at the level of its consequence (it creates productive outcomes) but also at the level of its exercise. The ideological instruments deployed here are designed in such a way that the subjects of this modality of power accept its governing rationality and voluntarily adopt intrusive technologies that monitor and ultimately determine their behavior.

Therefore, subjecting oneself to the technological infrastructure of bodily surveillance, while appearing to be voluntary on the surface, is enforced through a carefully engineered culture of health consciousness which renders the need for explicit coercion obsolete. In a manner that is typical of neoliberal societies, the market becomes the template for all social relations between the employees. (Giroux, 2014) The apparent choice that is available to the workers— the language of agency that is built into neoliberal governance— makes it exceptionally difficult for the subjects of this exercise of power to mobilize any meaningful resistance against it. This is also why the model of the panopticon, which was fundamental to
understanding surveillance in the twentieth century, fails to serve as a framework for understanding the unique dynamics of this form of data-surveillance. If the gaze of an external observer disciplined the panoptic subjects who were involuntarily assimilated into its all-pervasive field of vision, the gaze of the observer here is internalized by the neoliberal subjects who voluntarily embed themselves into a culture of reciprocity.

Finally, in addition to the data accumulated from individual employees, composite data-sets collected from multifarious devices allow employers to track general trends in populations, which are then mapped onto myriad indexes of productivity. The bodily data collected longitudinally (over a long period of time) from employees are used to make granular and abstract conclusions on employee productivity and well-being. Sophisticated data analytics then allows wellness administrators to test various interventions and their effectiveness recursively, and over several cycles of data collection and analysis, build predictive models that can be used to manipulate general trends in population behavior. Using the same data-set to understand the individual constituents of the workforce as well as the employee population itself is a development that is facilitated by technological advancements in data processing which enables corporate life-administrators to transcend the real constraints of conventionally collected statistical data. This is where the Foucauldian distinction between anatomo-politics and biopolitics must be problematized in explaining the technological practices associated with this exercise of power. Here, the same exercise of power disciplines the individual body (for instance, by creating highly accurate profiles of individual employees and systematically stipulating their bodily behaviors) and regulates the species body (for instance, by monitoring and attempting to adjust larger demographic trends pertaining to health and productivity).

The new notion of “work” created through neoliberal human capital management is also one that contests many traditional conceptual categories that are firmly anchored in the understanding of labor rights. It must also be noted that these rights, in fact, are a product of a history of collective bargaining. For example, the corporate expectation that an employee is mindful of their health (and the resulting productivity) outside the workplace challenges the conceptual categories of “work” and “leisure”—a distinction that is fundamental to any serviceable definition of what constitutes “working hours”. When an employee transfers their bodily data collected on a fitness tracking device outside their workplace onto the employer’s wellness application, they effectively render meaningless the traditional distinction between the time dedicated to be spent on socially
useful labor and the time dedicated to be spent according to one’s own discretion.

Jason Read, in his work A Genealogy of Homo Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity, theorizes this development by describing how labor in the context of neoliberalism is no longer limited to the specific sites of the factory or the workplace, but is any activity that works towards desired ends of maximizing the productivity of a worker. This extension of labor outside the workplace creates, Read argues, “a new organization of the production and distribution of wealth, but by the mode of subjection, a new production of subjectivity.” (Read, 2009)

This new worker-subject is also one that is devoid of many politically obtained rights which were taken for granted as preconditions of labor in the twenty-first century. What one observes with the advent of employee wellness programs is a re-articulation of these labor rights in an economic register. As wellness applications interact and share information with a constellation of other human capital management applications, what is effectively created is a conception of labor that is deeply entrenched in the reciprocal arrangements that characterize neoliberalism. For instance, if the wellness application is integrated with the benefits or absence management applications that are similarly propelled by employee data, employers can correlate the exercise patterns of an employee with the insurance claims or paid time off availed by them. Consequently, employers can further create arrangements where only a certain percentage of the insurance premium or vacation time is offered to the employee if they fail to meet the minimum physical activity requirements stipulated by the wellness administrators. (Manokha, 2019) In this manner, what were once considered rights of a worker become re-articulated as transactions between the employer and the employee.

The neoliberal society today is characterized by economic arrangements where private stakeholders are increasingly inheriting the roles traditionally performed by the state. Multinational corporations routinely collaborate with the state, in multifarious capacities, in the process of life administration. This, in turn, has complicated the traditional notions of sovereignty, legitimizing the governmental capacity of these stakeholders to use disciplinary and regulatory techniques on populations in new and interesting ways. With exponential improvements in data science and predictive modeling, human capital management is becoming a complex and intrusive domain of biopolitical and anatomopolitical power. The emergence of new informational subjects, who are in many senses reduced
by technology into correlates of information, requires us to imagine novel ways in which we can interact with neoliberal governance in the digital age. For this very reason, it is important to formulate frameworks to theorize these new exercises of power in relation to their social and cultural consequences, and by extension, find a vocabulary to articulate the anxieties of the subjects governed through these exercises. It would be a unimaginative, however, to conclude one’s effort at characterizing technologies of power as conspiratorial without attempting to develop a fine-grained account of neoliberal governmentality and the ideological underbelly of its associated technological practices.

References


