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ORIGINAL PAPER

Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity in Critical Work and Organizational Psychology: From 'Blank' to 'Troubled' Subjectivity

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Abstract
In recent years, a scholarly movement has taken hold that is critical of work and organizational psychology (WOP). Referred to as critical work and organizational psychology (CWOP), this movement problematizes some of the foundational premises of WOP, including its lack of reflexivity on its own values and ethics. While bringing increased attention to reflexivity and ethics as vital to critical theorizing and praxis, CWOP has yet to concertedly engage with ethics. This conceptual paper has two aims. The first is to outline existing ethical approaches in CWOP. Reviewing the literature, we suggest there are currently three tentative critical–ethical positions: (1) a critique of mainstream WOP for its ethical failures, (2) espousal of a radical humanist ethics, and (3) an ethics of ambiguity. The latter is embedded in CWOP literature, but not yet articulated as such. Our second aim is therefore to make an ethics of ambiguity a recognized and explicitly embraced form of ethics that is rooted in a sustained engagement with the conceptualization of subjectivity as such. To clarify the risks inherent to theorizing ethics without a sufficiently robust understanding of subjectivity, we juxtapose 'blank subjectivity' with 'troubled subjectivity,' two notions informed by psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. We argue that a theory of subjectivity as troubled is at the heart of an ethics of ambiguity. The paper concludes by discussing the contribution of an ethics of ambiguity to CWOP, while also pointing to some convergences between the different critical–ethical positions.

Keywords Critical work and organizational psychology · Subjectivity · The ethics of ambiguity

Introduction

Critics outside of work and organizational psychology (WOP) have long lambasted the field's agenda of assimilating workers to a pre-given social order and for ignoring issues of power (Baritz, 1960; Blackler & Brown, 1978). Over the past decade, a surge of scholarship within WOP has furthered this critique (Abrams et al., 2023; Bal & Dóci, 2018; Bal et al., 2019; Gerard, 2016; Islam & Sanderson, 2022; Islam & Zyphur, 2009; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2017), raising the profile of once-marginal critical perspectives (Hollway, 1991; Kornhauser, 1947; Prilleltensky, 1994; Steffy & Grimes, 1992). While the territorial boundaries of this emerging sub-field known as "critical work and organizational psychology" (CWOP) are fuzzy and still evolving, indications of a distinguishable scholarly movement can be gleaned from the presence of CWOP workgroups and conference panels, a recent special issue in a mainstream psychology journal (Abrams et al., 2023), and a forthcoming CWOP Handbook (Edward Elgar Press), among other initiatives. While this movement is hardly homogeneous, some widely shared objectives include problematizing WOP for reducing complex workplace phenomena into discrete intrapsychic variables, treating sociocultural factors as independent variables, relying too heavily on self-report questionnaires, laboratory or experimental research designs and statistical analysis, and ignoring the field's own ideologies and political investments (Islam & Sanderson, 2022). CWOP scholars therefore seek to take a more reflexive stance on their research and practice relative to WOP (Seubert et al., 2023), using this both to expose the latter's blind spots and

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to model a different way of 'doing' work and organizational psychology. Despite this increased attention to reflexivity, however, a concerted engagement with ethics has yet to manifest in CWOP.

This conceptual paper has two aims. Our first aim is to outline existing ethical approaches in CWOP. Reviewing the current literature, we suggest that there are three tentative critical–ethical positions. The first and most dominant one is founded on a critique of mainstream WOP literature for its managerialism, utilitarianism, overemphasis on performance, and other ethical failures (Bal, 2020; Gerard, 2017; Seubert et al., 2023). This position is arguably engaged in "radical and categorical resistance" (Röllman et al., 2023, p. 66) of the status quo without necessarily espousing an alternative ethics. A second position seeks to provide answers to the question: "to what ethical foundations do (or can) representatives of critical work and organizational psychology refer to when they intend to criticise theory and practice?" (Weber, 2023, p. 21). This position explicitly articulates radical humanistic ethical values and foundations, such as meaningfulness, justice, equality, democracy, tolerance, and freedom (Bal, 2017; Hornung et al., 2023; Weber, 2023; Weber et al., 2020b; Yeoman, 2023). To date, Lefkowitz (2008, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2023) has been one of the most vocal representatives of this position through his insistence on humanistic values and norms in grounding the WOP profession. A third critical–ethical position, which has yet to be elaborated, is one that "want[s] to embrace ambiguity, instead of resisting it and trying to eliminate it" (Röllman et al., 2023, p. 63). Drawing on Beauvoir's (1994) *The ethics of ambiguity*, this position is suspicious of "directive didactics," warning against "spreading a moral stance, an ideology" (Röllman et al., 2023, p. 62).

The second aim of this paper is to make this third position, which we call an ethics of ambiguity, a recognized and explicitly embraced form of ethics in CWOP. We also argue that at the heart of this position is a serious consideration of subjectivity as such. This linking of ambiguity with the theorizing of subjectivity aligns with calls to incorporate psychology into the study of ethics (Neill, 2016; Islam 2020). Ethical deliberations need to consider, for example, questions about the extent to which people *can* be ethical, and thus require psychological insights about people's desires and interests (Freud, 1930; Wallwork, 1991). In other words, considerations about subjectivity are central to ethical thinking. While subjectivity is taken seriously in CWOP (e.g., Islam & Zyphur, 2009), existing conceptualizations of subjectivity pose challenges to theorizing ethics in this sub-field. Aligned with traditions in critical psychology that problematize the ahistorical, decontextualized, and apolitical view of human behavior upheld by the bulk of mainstream psychology (e.g., Parker, 2015), CWOP scholars position subjectivity as sociohistorically, discursively, and politically constituted (Bal & Dóci, 2018; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2019; Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Newton et al. 2022; Seubert et al., 2023; Symon & Cassell, 2006; Weber et al., 2020a). However, this very positioning, while essential to counteract psychologization and individualism in mainstream WOP (Godard, 2014), largely relies on social constructivist and discursive psychology, which have been problematized for producing "a quasi-behaviourist notion of blank subjectivity" (Parker, 1997, p. 497). Blank subjectivity is understood as "a merger of the subject with a general ontology of discourse, power and historical events such that there is no longer anything self-defining or distinctive about the subject *itself*" (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 8, emphasis in original). Indeed, by absorbing the individual within discourse or historical and political power structures, blank subjectivity describes "a form of deadness" (Lear, 1998, p. 4) that precludes an account of ethical responsibility and accountability (Neill, 2016). In this paper, we suggest that both the position of critiquing mainstream WOP for its ethical failures and the position of espousing radical humanistic ethics may fall victim in various ways to unwittingly reinforcing blank subjectivity, and thereby limit a more robust, if also more subtle and nuanced, stance on ethics.

To mitigate this problem of blank subjectivity, we suggest embracing an ethics of ambiguity in CWOP which is founded on 'troubled subjectivity'. The latter can be defined "as a psychosocial site of conflict where a variety of forces, both sociocultural and intrapsychic, interact dynamically with each other" (Seu, 2015, p. 7). Troubled subjectivity is largely informed by psychoanalytic theory, which offers a view of the human being centered on the prevalence of the unconscious: that which lies outside of conscious awareness and rational thought but nevertheless shapes thinking and action (Freud, 2003; Wallwork, 1991). The unconscious points to the disruptive aspects of our being, and to what is mysterious, unknown, and ambiguous in human life (Bollas, 1999). Ambiguity in this psychoanalytic sense therefore refers to openness to difference, or otherness, and on that basis, challenges the certainty of normative discursive positions and principles.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing the current CWOP literature to unearth three critical–ethical positions: (1) critique of mainstream WOP for its ethical failures, (2) espousal of a radical humanist ethics, and (3) an ethics of ambiguity. We then begin to elaborate the ethical position of ambiguity by rooting it in a sustained engagement with subjectivity. Subsequently, we delineate current conceptualizations of subjectivity in CWOP, and then differentiate these with a theory of troubled subjectivity, which we suggest is at the heart of an ethics of ambiguity. We conclude by discussing some convergences between the different critical–ethical positions and outline the contribution of an ethics of ambiguity to CWOP.

Critical–Ethical Positions in CWOP

Critiquing WOP for its Ethical Failures

One strand of the CWOP literature focuses on the examination and critique of the political, philosophical, and ethical assumptions and failings of WOP research and practice (Weber, 2023). This includes problematizing WOP for maintaining a narrow focus on certain populations, topics, methods, and approaches, while omitting others. For example, Symon and Cassell (2006) claim that the dominance of positivism and natural science perspectives in WOP implies a neglect of alternative understandings of the nature of the world and knowledge. Similarly, some argue that WOP's adherence to a positivist epistemology resembles dogma (Zyphur & Pierides, 2020), as it presupposes an inherent ethical stance rooted in the pursuit of 'objectivity' and 'value neutrality'. Therefore, CWOP scholars call for epistemological and methodological pluralism, and a commitment to reflexivity, highlighting how researcher's personal values influence the research process (Islam & Sanderson, 2022). Beyond methodological critiques, CWOP scholarship also chastises WOP for not serving "the precarious and the oppressed" (Röllman et al., 2023, p. 61) because of its longstanding focus on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts and professionals in formal employment at the expense of other groups and locations, such as people in poverty (Gloss et al., 2017), workers in the informal sector (Bergman & Jean, 2016), those in unstable or vulnerable employment situations (Reichman, 2014; Seubert et al., 2023), and female leaders outside of WEIRD geographies (Nguyen et al., 2022).

A further theme of this important branch of CWOP literature includes shedding light on the unarticulated beliefs and ideologies in WOP, such as that of "testing and ranking people hierarchically [as] an unproblematic and purely technical necessity" (Islam & Zyphur, 2006, p. 25), as well as problematizing WOP for obscuring processes of power and control (Hornung & Höge, 2021). For instance, in a highly cited publication, Bal and Dóci (2018) emphasize how the neoliberal ideals of instrumentality, individuality and competition shape the subjectivity of workers, making them believe they are individuals in competition with others rather than part of a collective. According to Bal and Dóci (2018), WOP has largely overlooked the ethical ramifications of neoliberalism, which fosters a competitive environment among employees marked by individualism and insecurity. Neoliberalism also encourages the commodification of employees, who are compelled to market their personalities in the labor market and within organizations, often pitting them against each other in a race for success (McDonald et al., 2017). More recently, Bal (2020, p. 197) has extended this line of critique by linking neoliberal ideology to the injunction of performance enhancement whereby even ostensibly non-objectionable priorities of improving employee health and well-being (e.g., wellness initiatives) are subsumed within the aim of "performance as the ultimate outcome." WOP, Bal (2020) claims, is central in perpetuating the neoliberal capitalist socioeconomic agenda of instrumentalizing any aspect of human thinking, feeling, and behavior in the pursuit of performance. Furthermore, the normative conception of performance as something objectively or inherently good excludes other considerations such as economic equality or human, animal, and planetary health (Bal, 2020).

Taken as a whole, what is left out of debates in WOP and much of psychology generally, according to this branch of CWOP scholarship, is the moral and ethical repercussions of the economic system in which individuals and their organizations act (Richardson et al., 2018). WOPs lack of reflexivity in this respect has led to its complicity with neoliberalism out of a misguided assumption that to comment on political and economic issues would undermine its objectivity and value neutrality (Islam & Sanderson, 2022). It follows from this that a comprehensive examination of ethics in psychology necessitates an acknowledgment of how psychology as a discipline, particularly WOP, is intertwined with and perpetuates neoliberal ideology, and this is especially crucial given the significant impact neoliberalism exerts on employee well-being (Sugarman, 2015).

A distinct critical–ethical position can therefore be said to emerge from this scholarship that focuses on challenging existing WOP theory, research, and practice for its ethical failing to disclose its own ideologies and values. While this position is founded upon a critique of mainstream WOP for reasons outlined above, there is no espoused ethics for CWOP other than calling for a "radical and categorical resistance" (Röllman et al., 2023, p. 66) that manifests in a repeated calling out of mainstream WOP for its ethical failures.

Espousing Radical Humanist Ethics

Against WOP's pretence of value-free research (Islam & Sanderson, 2022), a related, but somewhat different, strand of CWOP scholarship advocates for an active reflection on the values and visions that inform critical research and scholarship (Röllman et al., 2023, p. 68). Weber (2023), for example, suggests that CWOP's problematization of, for example, managerialism and its concomitant domination, instrumental reason, alienation, and commodification in WOP are not only based on 'negative' critique of capitalist forms of organizing, but also guided by 'positive' Kantian and Marxist values of humanism, justice, equality,

democracy, tolerance and freedom. Weber (2023, p. 23) therefore proposes that CWOP should explicitly espouse an "ethical foundation in humanism." For CWOP scholars, this means avowing a radical humanist ethics that includes "ideals of equality, community, and solidarity" (Hornung et al., 2023, p. 5), as well as democracy (Weber et al., 2020b) and dignity at work (Bal, 2017). Similarly, research and practice should be conducted in the service of the "common good, instead of narrow self-interest and accumulation of material wealth" (Hornung & Höge, 2021, p. 367). Moreover, the investigation of work tasks and conditions—a central remit of work and organizational psychology—should be underpinned by the aim of exposing alienation and practices that hinder the development of humane work (Yeoman, 2023). Yeoman (2023, p, 48), for example, suggests that prioritizing meaningfulness as part of a radical humanistic ethics and guiding principle implies that work tasks be engaging to the subject, aimed at caring for other beings, and underpinned by the values of autonomy, freedom and dignity. CWOP research and scholarship from this perspective, therefore, explicitly articulates ethical adherence to "the realization of human potentials […] comprehensive well-being and health, higher levels of consciousness, self-actualization, personality development, authentic personal relationships, and psychologically, moral and spiritual growth" (Hornung & Höge, 2021, p. 366).

Lefkowitz's work has served as a vital precursor to this branch of CWOP. Spanning now three decades, Lefkowitz continues to draw attention to the consequences of WOP's actions, which, far from neutral, carry profound ethical implications and therefore must be considered when theorizing and acting as work and organizational psychologists. Specifically, Lefkowitz (2017) criticizes the field's "disavowal of humanistic concerns and moral values because of a mistaken belief that normative judgements are incompatible with the appropriate conduct of both research and professional practice" (p. 386), with "appropriate" here meaning purportedly objective and value-free. Lefkowitz highlights how the fact-value dichotomy undergirding this disavowal is itself (not only) highly contestable in any applied social science, but also serves to unwittingly perpetuate an "economic corporatist value system" in WOP, with overwhelming priority placed on organizational over individual and societal concerns. To mitigate these consequences, Lefkowitz (2008, 2011, 2013) has sought to achieve a morally grounded WOP rooted in explicit humanistic values. As Lefkowitz (2008) reveals, these values have an established history in humanistic philosophy and in considerations of what it means to be a caring or helping professional, yet they remain (at best) talking points in WOP. If, however, WOP professionals were to take such values seriously, they would deploy them to ask important questions, such as: is it the right thing to do?; should WOP professionals "help…organizations who do not deserve it?" (Lefkowitz, 2019, p. 476); and what should organizations be doing to help their employees and broader society? (see Lefkowitz, 2013). For Lefkowitz (2008), "the choices made by [WOP professionals] concerning where they work, what they study, and the criteria by which they evaluate that work," is already influenced by values (p. 440). WOP's task is therefore to articulate explicitly what these values are, and for Lefkowitz, they should reflect humanistic commitments. Recently, Lefkowitz (2023) has offered a values statement that attempts to outline just what he means by a commitment to humanism in WOP that, at the same time, acknowledges the challenges:

> a fundamental objective of research and practice in industrial–organizational psychology should be to assure that organizations are safe, just, healthy, challenging, and fulfilling places in which to work. There is no inherent conflict between those objectives and improving organizational effectiveness. In fact, the two are often related and interdependent. However, when it is anticipated that actions undertaken to improve organizational effectiveness will adversely impact the well-being of employees or other organizational stakeholders, the appropriate role of the I–O psychologist is to challenge the morality, wisdom, and necessity of those actions and, if necessary, to attenuate their adverse consequences to the extent feasible (p. 418).

CWOP's own attempt to construct an ethical vision of WOP grounded in humanistic values extends Lefkowitz's work into more radical humanist norms. For example, the idea that "there is no inherent conflict" between pursuing organizational effectiveness and pursuing humanistic values would likely be called into question by virtue of the larger tensions at play between neoliberal capitalism and human flourishing (Bal, 2020; Bal & Dóci, 2018). The radical humanist stance would prioritize humanistic values and principles, such as "ideals of equality, community, and solidarity" (Hornung et al., 2023, p. 5) above and beyond norms of efficiency or performance. Therefore, this ethical–critical position in CWOP does not only resist WOP for its ethical failings and insidious ideologies and values, but also proposes alternative visions and values in the interest of actualizing human potentials (Hornung & Höge, 2021).

Ethics of Ambiguity

Some evidence of a tentative third critical–ethical position can be found in the existing CWOP literature. This position is still cursory and shares some similarities with the above perspectives. For instance, both the radical humanist view and this third position adopt explicit values. However, the latter distinguishes itself by emphasizing ambiguity over any other value or principle. Röllmann et al. (2023) propose this

position by citing Simone Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1994). They imply that when adopting a worldview and choosing sides, such as postmodernism versus enlightenment thinking, or collectivism versus individualism, we risk "walk[ing] into dogma[…]because no singular perspective can reveal the complexity of the human experience" (Röllmann et al., 2023, p. 63). Taking a position temporarily and strategically is at times necessary, but it may be done with an awareness of our own limitations and "that our final vocabulary is no closer to the truth than others final vocabulary" (Röllmann et al., 2023, p. 63). In contrast to "directive didactics" that espouse an unambiguous moral stance (Röllmann et al., 2023, p. 62), this approach involves "embrac[ing] ambiguity instead of resisting it and trying to eliminate it" (Röllmann et al., 2023, p. 63). Adopting a Beauvoirian ethics of ambiguity, this position incorporates rather than denies contradiction and emphasises "situativity" instead of "generalizable universality" (Röllmann et al., 2023, p. 62).

While this position is embedded in the CWOP literature, it is not yet fully developed. If we were to base this approach on Beauvoirian philosophy, it becomes necessary to recognize that subjectivity forms the essence of Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity. As Beauvoir states, "it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself" (Beauvoir, 1994, p. 17). Against universalist approaches, Beauvoir's perspective on ethics considers the particularity of each subject. Ethics that are prescribed from without—externally derived ethics of, for example, right or wrong—involves the elimination of subjectivity. Adhering to externally prescribed ethics implies an end to ethical subjectivity insofar as it forecloses upon the very subjects necessary to freely create ethics (Beauvoir, 1994).

Furthermore, Beauvoir (1994) highlights that subjectivity is ontologically ambiguous. She emphasizes the complexity and 'irreducibility' of subjectivity. While ambiguity has several meanings in Beauvoir's work, one essential connotation is that we are both products of situated social–historical forces and yet free; both objects for other human beings, and subjects for ourselves and capable of choice. Another sense of ambiguity for Beauvoir is that "the embodied subject is finite, limited and sexed" (Zakin, 2000, p. 113). As Beauvoir states "[…] the original scheme of man [sic] is ambiguous: he wants to be, and to the extent that he coincides with this wish, he fails" (Beauvoir, 1994, p. 23). This implies that the subject is not identical to the values or identities that he or she explicitly adopts. Therefore, as opposed to many other ethical deliberations, she does not ground ethics on any universal foundations apart from the ontological ambiguity of subjectivity. While Beauvoir does acknowledge that particular, separate individuals can forge connections with each other to engender universal values or ethics that apply to all (Beauvoir, 1994, p. 18), such connections and universality require the recognition, rather than denial, of the ambiguity of existence shared by all. As an existentialist, Beauvoir asserts the importance of freedom and self-actualization, but she implies that the ontological ambiguity of subjectivity at the same time constrains this. In this sense, and in contrast to some other philosophies on freedom such as that of Marquis de Sade, Beauvoir did not "absolutize freedom" (Zakin, 2000, p. 112). In other words, freedom is not an abstract, extrinsic value that should be pursued at the cost of other humans as free beings. Rather, for Beauvoir (1994), freedom entails adopting a responsible and active orientation toward the world and recognizing our finitude.

Insofar as Beauvoir (1994, p. 6) concedes that we are simultaneously separate individuals and products of society, her understanding of ambiguous subjectivity has parallels with existing psychosocial and psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity as "a psychosocial site of conflict where a variety of forces, both sociocultural and intrapsychic, interact dynamically with each other" (Seu, 2015, p. 7). However, while Beauvoir highlights subjectivity as inhabiting tensions and conflict, her perspective is not explicitly psychosocial or psychoanalytic. Indeed, Beauvoir is usually considered, like Sartre, to have rejected psychoanalysis. She does nevertheless praise psychoanalysis for its presentation of embodied subjectivity (Beauvoir, 1989), and her writing is permeated by psychoanalytic vocabulary such as narcissism, ego, and masochism (Zakin, 2000). Even though she does not openly engage with the notion of the unconscious, her conceptualization of ambiguous subjectivity has strong affinities with a psychosocial or psychoanalytic view of 'troubled subjectivity' in that it is against 'blank' understandings of subjectivity. As such, troubled subjectivity could be viewed as integral to Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity. Before expanding on troubled subjectivity, we first explain what we mean by blank subjectivity in more depth and the difficulties it poses in theorizing ethics.

Current Conceptualizations of Subjectivity In CWOP: Cautioning Against Blank Subjectivity

One of the central aims of CWOP is to bring to the fore how core aspects of human psychology are formed within historical, cultural, ideological, and societal contexts (Newton et al., 2022). CWOP scholars unravel how a positivist and 'scientific' basis of WOP results in a neglect of subjectivity and, specifically, the role of context, culture, history, and politics in the formation of the human subject at work. One prominent example is Islam and Zyphurs' (2009) critique of motivation, a construct at the core of work and organizational psychology that is largely devoid of acknowledging, let alone questioning, the socializing processes of consumer

capitalism (for example, the urge to commodify oneself and others) that in turn perpetuate rather naive theorizing of the so-called 'motivated employee'. More generally, while mainstream WOP may frequently concern itself with the ways in which groups and teams influence identity and behavior (Haslam, 2004), CWOP scholarship emphasizes how this often coincides with a bracketing out of broader contextual influences on the psyche (whether sociopolitical, discursive, or ideological) that invariably shape behavior at work (Dashtipour, 2015). Indeed, a prominent aim in the CWOP literature is to exhibit how concepts which characterize subjectivity, such as motivation or emotion, are not universal, natural, or neutral, but emerge within certain historical conditions (Newton et al., 2022).

In contemporary CWOP literature, the acknowledgment of subjective ambiguity extends to the understanding that subjectivity emerges from the interplay between social dynamics and individual agency. For instance, Nguyen et al. (2022) show how women Vietnamese leaders negotiate social expectations in the construction of their leadership identities. However, while subjectivity is considered in terms of the tension between sociocultural forces and agency, the intrapsychic dimension is viewed in terms of social cognition. Another example is provided by Newton et al. (2022), who draw from Nobert Elias' cultural–historical and actor network approach to consider agency as the complex entanglement of different actions and intentions within interdependent networks that create uncertain outcomes and new practices. This perspective is significant because it avoids assuming that agency involves an independent autonomous individual acting with self-determination. Yet, because of the desire to theorize agency as embedded within sociocultural and historical contexts, this viewpoint intentionally avoids conceptualizing the psychological facets of subjectivity.

While acknowledging agency and the complexity of subjectivity, these approaches to subjectivity involve very little psychology. Although this is understandable considering the desire to steer clear of perpetuating the ingrained issue of psychologization in much of WOP, it can lead to a diminished understanding of subjectivity. In psychosocial studies, conceptualizations of the subject that "equate subjectivity with mere positions in discourse" (Henriques et al., 1998, p. ix–x) have long been problematized for upholding 'blank subjectivity' (Parker, 1997). For instance, discursive psychology, which is otherwise critical of positivist and empiricist approaches in mainstream psychology, has been contested for its "dismissal of individual experience as if it were only an effect of language or a work of fiction," and thus intentionally "ignor [ing] what is going on inside the person" (Parker, 1997, p. 480), leading some psychologists to call for a renewed ontology of the subject (Blackman et al., 2008; Gough, 2004).

From the vantage point of CWOP, a related yet almost inverse form of blank subjectivity can be seen to permeate mainstream WOP insofar as it reifies subjectivity, reducing it to cognitive-behavioral machine-like processes that undermine its historical contingency as well as its social–political dimensions. Moreover, as myriad CWOP scholars point out, such bracketing out of the broader, often contestable qualities of work (e.g., its domination, manipulation and oppression) systematically occludes any interrogation of the (neoliberal) capitalist logics of competition, individualism, instrumentalism, and productivism that invariably infect mainstream theorizing (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Islam & Zyphur, 2009; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2017; Weber et al., 2020a). However, as critics of discursive psychology note above, theorizations of subjectivity that do not include questions about the psychological risk reproducing 'blank subjectivity,' which in turn leads to difficulties in theorizing ethics. Returning to the perspective of Beauvoir, 'blank subjectivity' regards human beings merely as objects, shaped solely by the will of others. However, Beauvoir contends that we are also subjects endowed with the capacity for choice. Therefore, existence is inherently ambiguous. For Beauvoir (1994), while the subject does not coincide with his or her wishes and values, ethics nevertheless involves subjective choice and, therefore, responsibility. A psychosocial view contributes to this perspective by emphasizing that ethics entails owning up to one's psychic life, which includes assuming responsibility for one's motivations and desires, some of which may be unconscious (Wallwork, 1991; Neill, 2016). Put differently, ethics fundamentally involves recognizing the presence of a peculiar 'other' within ourselves, as articulated by Kristeva (1991), which renders us opaque, at times contradictory, and thus tentative in our ethical deliberations. If blank subjectivity risks foreclosing on this understanding of ethics, a more nuanced conception of subjectivity is necessary when theorizing the ethics of CWOP.

To be sure, extant CWOP scholarship has attempted to account for the unconscious. For instance, Hornung and Höge (2021, p. 367) discuss how technologies of power are internalized without conscious awareness. Furthermore, scholars aligned with the radical humanist position in CWOP, drawing from the insights of psychoanalyst and social theorist Erich Fromm, substantively incorporate the unconscious (Funk, 1998). Taking inspiration from Freud's own thinking on character formation, Fromm (1947) developed the notion of social character to explain the irrationality of social behavior and particularly conformism. According to Fromm, specific social formations repress certain human tendencies, making them unconscious, while promoting the expression of character traits in line with the objectives defined by the social order in place. When emotions (like aggression), or ideas (like grandiosity), and desires (like erotic longings) become forbidden due to personal or

societal reasons, individuals may repress them, rendering them unconscious, but these repressed elements still influence thoughts, emotions, and actions covertly, and results in irrational behaviour (Funk, 2023, p. 32). The need to adapt and the internalization of social constraints are thus at the root of social character. While this body of CWOP scholarship drawing upon psychoanalysis tends to concentrate on how work and organizational structures shape certain social characters, it does occasionally reference the ambiguity or troubled aspects of subjectivity, even if implicitly. For example, the society of mass production and consumption, the commodification of relationships, and economic competition lead to the formation of a marketing social character. This type of personality "*acquires* 'marketable' personality attributes, competencies, forms of communication—independently of his [sic] actual being—and, if possible, *represses* those cognitive, emotional and imaginative powers, which do not promise success, because they are critical, difficult or negative" (Funk, 2023, p.36). This suggests that subjects are more than the products of sociohistorical forces and constituted by repressed emotions and thoughts. Subject formations that are merely comprised of marketable personality attributes or competencies would imply 'blank' subjectivity. However, Funk indicates that incorporation of normative traits involves the repression of feelings and thoughts that contradict such traits, hinting that even when subjects conform to elements of social character, they remain troubled.

For Beauvoir, blank subjectivity would be viewed as the 'thing-like' aspects of subjectivity, or the part of subjectivity constituted by sociopolitical structures. However, for Beauvoir, we are also free subjects. Hence, while Beauvoir does not use the term blank subjectivity, from a Beauvoirian perspective, blank subjectivity disavows the ambiguity of existence. These themes in Beauvoir put her conception of both subjectivity and ethics in line with many psychoanalytic approaches. The subject is for Beauvoir predominantly affective and embodied and not always able to master the situations in which it finds itself (Zakin, 2000). Ethics therefore involves a confrontation with the failure of subjectivity. As Beauvoir states "[…]without failure, no ethics; for a being who, from the very start, would be an exact co-incidence with himself [sic], in a perfect plenitude, the notion of having-to-be would have no meaning. One does not offer an ethics to a God" (Beauvoir, 1994, p. 9). In other words, an ethics requires an acceptance that subjectivity is not given, uniform, or complete. Furthermore, like many schools of psychoanalysis, Beauvoir offers an ethics that is open to the other, and to alterity (Bergoffen, 1997). Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity is thus underpinned by a notion of troubled subjectivity—even though she does not herself use this concept. In what follows we provide a fuller explanation of what we mean by these points, and by troubled subjectivity, drawing more expansively on psychoanalytic theory.

Troubled Subjectivity

In critical and theoretical psychology and psychosocial studies, psychoanalysis is often central in conceptualizations of subjectivity. This is because psychoanalytic theory mitigates against the "danger of sociological reductionism," and especially "leaving the space of the subject empty in a way that neglects agency and reduces subjectivity to an effect of the social, creating 'social dupes,' rather than subjects" (Frosh, 2019, p. 109). Of course, psychoanalysis risks reducing everything to intrapsychic processes, and many, including critical psychologists otherwise sympathetic to psychoanalysis, problematize some of its uses precisely for this reason (e.g., Parker, 2005). Yet, psychoanalytic notions have long been deployed by various critical scholarly and clinical movements to account for the psyche while still holding strongly onto the position that subjectivity is immersed within sociohistorical and political contexts (Danto, 2005; Zaretsky, 2015). Examples include, most notably, the first-generation Frankfurt School (Marcuse, 1955; Adorno, 1967; Fromm, 1962), and the vast feminist and humanities literatures for which psychoanalysis plays a central part in conceptualizing subjectivity within capitalist, racial, and patriarchal structures (Khanna, 2003; McGowan, 2015; Mitchell, 1974). Furthermore, the early Tavistock researchers' consideration of the psyche as intertwined with social organizational systems (Menzies, 1960) carries forward into the now relatively established (but still marginal) field of psychoanalytic organization studies (Fotaki et al., 2012; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020).

Though not uniformly applied, psychoanalytic theory has proven valuable in these domains, primarily because it facilitates the theorization of subjectivity that addresses psychological aspects without reproducing issues associated with psychologization, and thus, without perpetuating the view of a consistent, unitary, and mechanistic subject that still undergirds much of mainstream WOP. Although psychoanalytic theory comprises diverse and multifaceted perspectives, encompassing various psychoanalytic schools, each with its unique interpretation of subjectivity, they all converge on the concept of the unconscious. And insofar as the unconscious consists not only of internalized social norms, discourses, and prescriptions, but also harbors desires, impulses, or anxieties that may not easily align with societal expectations or the conscious self, it makes subjectivity itself troubled. Indeed, this is why Freud is often perceived (albeit not entirely accurately) as being opposed to conventional ethics, as he believed that rigidly controlling desires, libidinal impulses, and sexualities could lead to physical and mental illness (Freud, 1930). In other words, while psychoanalysis may be interested in normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2014), including how we may 'enjoy' subjecting ourselves to dominant discourses (Bloom & Cederström,

2009; Stavrakakis, 2008), a central concern is the dimension of the unconscious that never perfectly conforms to social expectations. It is also this dimension that leads each individual to conform (or not) in singular ways to societal prescriptions and discourses (Ruti, 2012). Indeed, in much of psychoanalytic and psychosocial theory, subjectivity is not really considered as the psychic internalization of norms, but as the space in which norms are either unsettled or imperfectly conformed to (Frosh et al., 2003). In this sense, psychic life is dialectical—we may consciously conform to certain norms, but unconsciously subvert these very norms. This is another instance in which the subject is 'troubled': something escapes the complete incorporation of hegemonic social forces, and thus, a simple static view of subjectivity is insufficient. To borrow from Bollas (1999), there is something of the "mysterious" in subjectivity that cannot be finally known, predicted, or fixed.

In summary, the unconscious represents a multifaceted dimension of human subjectivity. It can be seen as the realm where social norms and values are rigidly upheld, yet also the source from which social conventions are disrupted. Consequently, the unconscious is an inherently ambiguous sphere, giving rise to troubled and ambiguous subjects. In the following sections, we elucidate how troubled subjectivity lies at the heart of the ethics of ambiguity and explore the implications for CWOP.

Troubled Subjectivity at the Heart of the Ethics of Ambiguity

Psychoanalysis, akin to Beauvoir's perspective, places ambiguity at the core of both psychic and social existence by conceptualizing subjectivity as inherently 'troubled'. As such, like the ethics of ambiguity, the ethics of psychoanalysis implies enhancing our "capacity for ambiguity" (Trotter, 2022, p. 55). Recognizing troubled subjectivity fosters an openness to the unconscious: to other perspectives, ways of being, and "otherness" as such—all of which may exist within ourselves. Ethically, this implies taking responsibility for aspects of ourselves that are denied, disavowed and repudiated (Freud, 1923) while practicing a radical honesty (Thompson, 1994) involving an incessant attempt to 'own' and take responsibility for unconscious desires, even those that may be considered personally or socially abhorrent (Wallwork, 1991, p. 243).

This view of troubled subjectivity aligns with scholarship advocating for critical reflexivity in both research and practice (Suebert et al., 2023), but it is also an ethical reflexive position that involves a more thoroughgoing toleration of contradiction and difference, and encourages questioning of the finality of knowledge by accepting that "nothing is ever merely one thing" (Trotter, 2022, p. 93). In other words, the ethics of ambiguity founded on troubled subjectivity, like the ethics of psychoanalysis, implies that any position of absolute certainty is suspicious, and that the desire for "moral purity" may itself be driven by less than noble motives (Wallwork, 1991, p. 234). As Wallwork (1991) observes:

> Absolutist moral principles are often not particularly trustworthy guides in complex moral situations because, too often, they lead their duty-bound devotees to sacrifice people to principles; their rigidity leads to the neglect of important subtleties; and the unacknowledged unconscious motives they repudiate tend to erupt without warning to cancel the alleged superiority of the stability of principles over sentiments in the moral life (p. 239).[1]

Similarly, while freedom is at the heart of both Beauvoir's (1994) ethics of ambiguity and psychoanalytic ethics, they both caution against fervent adoption of absolutist ideals of freedom, advocating instead for the acceptance of limits that requires us to problematize freedom motivated by omnipotent delusions or defensive reactions to dependence (Trotter, 2022, p. 84). Indeed, central to the ethics of ambiguity is the rejection of solipsistic or isolated understandings of freedom (Beauvoir, 1994), emphasizing that individuals are shaped in and through their relationship with others and the world around them. For Beauvoir (1994), this underscores the importance of actively advocating for the freedom of others that significantly informs feminist ethics (Hancock and Taylor, 2020), including scholarship that emphasizes morality rooted in caring for others within the specific, everyday situations of life (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993). The ethics of ambiguity founded on troubled subjectivity problematizes absolute ethical positions which impose certain values on all (Noddings, 1984), but it also challenges what it means to take up an ethical position as such, advocating for a sustained embrace of contradiction without collapsing into certainty that too often leads to dogma. In sum, the notion of troubled subjectivity provides reasons for embracing the ethics of ambiguity in CWOP. We now conclude by emphasizing that this position avoids dogmatic thinking in critical scholarship and ethical thinking.

[1] While such 'moralistic idealism' (Allen, 2020, p. 540) may be driven by an attachment to a superior notion of self (Wallwork, 1991), it just as often may be rooted in a desire to aggressively dominate others (Allen, 2020), while at the same time repudiating one's own ambiguity of existence, or the contradiction or otherness that exists within oneself (Kristeva, 1991).

Conclusion

This paper has pursued two aims. The first was to outline the existing landscape of ethics in CWOP by documenting the presence of three critical–ethical positions: (1) critique of mainstream WOP for its ethical failures, (2) espousal of a radical humanist ethics, and (3) an ethics of ambiguity. In demarcating these positions, our intention was not to suggest that they are entirely distinct or at odds with each other. Instead, we contend that the literature reveals various stances that, until now, have not been synthesized in this manner. The second aim was to make an ethics of ambiguity a recognized and embraced school of ethics in CWOP. This perspective is already embedded in CWOP scholarship, but not articulated as such. In this conclusion, we examine certain parallels between an ethics of ambiguity, rooted in troubled subjectivity, and the other critical–ethical positions, elucidating the contributions of the former to the broader CWOP literature.

The first critical–ethical position explored in this paper scrutinizes the ethical shortcomings of WOP. These shortcomings encompass a reluctance to embrace methodological diversity and a disregard for marginalized communities and geographic regions (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Islam & Sanderson, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; Reichman, 2014; Röllman et al., 2023; Seubert et al., 2023); a neglect of ideologies that permeate WOP (Hornung & Höge, 2021; Islam & Zyphur, 2006), such as neoliberalism (Bal & Dóci, 2018); and an uncontested valorization of performance (Bal, 2020). In calling for a "radical and categorical resistance" (Röllman et al., 2023, p. 66) to these shortcomings of WOP, this branch of CWOP scholarship could be said to adopt an ethics rooted in a capacity to doubt rather than assert moral certainty (Ricoeur, 1995). By disrupting the conventional norms, prescriptions, and values of WOP scholarship and practice, and by unveiling those dimensions of work and organizational life which are repressed, trivialized, ignored, and rendered invisible by WOP research, this branch of CWOP could itself be seen as embodying troubled subjectivity. As a comparative analogy, social movements such as anti-racism, feminism, and queer advocacy exemplify the importance of remaining faithful to repressed domains of subjectivity by asserting resistance to domination and articulating experiences and modes of being that are repressed by hegemonic culture (Ruti, 2017). For example, the feminist and queer theorist Sara Ahmed argues that "the history of feminism is […] a history of making trouble" (Ahmed, 2010, quoted in Ruti, 2015, p. 143), and that acts of defiance involve "a kernel of […] anti-hegemonic negativity" (Ruti, 2015, p. 141). Similarly, problematizing WOP for its ethical failures expresses the subjectivity of CWOP scholars who are troubled by and trouble conventional WOP research and practice. Consequently, CWOP is frequently perceived as unsettling by WOP scholars (see for example, Anseel et al., 2018; Guest & Grote, 2018). This branch of CWOP therefore aligns with the ethics of ambiguity proposed in this paper insofar as it represents the "free engagement of thought" (Beauvoir, 1994, p. 85) when it troubles rigidity and inflexibility in the dominant paradigms of WOP.

The ethics of ambiguity also resonates with the second critical–ethical position: the radical humanist viewpoint that espouses values of justice, equality, democracy, freedom (Weber et al., 2020b), community, and solidarity (Hornung et al., 2023), and that prioritizes the safety, health, and well-being of employees (Lefkowitz, 2023) as well as the pursuit of the common good and the advancement of human potential (Hornung & Höge, 2021). The ethics of ambiguity proposed in this paper agrees with these values, including those that emphasize that every facet of subjectivity and experience—even the facets deemed socially or personally abhorrent—ought to be regarded as possessing intrinsic worth, meaning, and dignity (Bal, 2017). Moreover, the radical humanist position has particularly strong affinities with an ethics of ambiguity in espousing certain humanistic values, while stopping short of dictating them. For example, rather than a prescriptive approach, Lefkowitz (2003) advocates for self-reflection and the articulation of positioning. He considers factors a psychologist might consider in making moral decisions writing: "complex social situations with moral aspects often involve a bewildering mix of antecedent conditions, contrasting interpretations and personal beliefs, competing values and motives, divided loyalties, and contradictory principles and institutional demands" (Lefkowitz, 2017, p. 504). While Lefkowitz (2023) develops a clear pathway for ethical decisions, he refrains from prescribing standards as the basis for ethics, pointing instead to the importance of reflexive and reflective processes for navigating complex and contradictory beliefs, values, priorities, and contexts. This strongly correlates with the ethics of ambiguity, which as we have argued in this paper, emphasizes reflection on troubled aspects of subjectivity: on contradiction, paradox, and tension (Bollas, 1999; Trotter, 2022).

This leads us to the contribution of this paper. While aligning with existing critical–ethical positions, the ethics of ambiguity proposed here advances current scholarship in CWOP by offering a deeper consideration of subjectivity as such, an aspect that is largely absent in the other two ethical positions. In particular, the ethics of ambiguity illustrates that ethical thinking requires a theory that recognizes the troubled and multifaceted nature of subjectivity. Moreover, it necessitates a concept of the subject that is not uniform, but potentially contradictory. Indeed, without an incorporation of this conception of subjectivity, ethical thinking risks being simplifying and prescriptive

(Beauvoir, 1994). A theory of troubled subjectivity that explicitly acknowledges the unconscious lies at the heart of an ethics of ambiguity and justifies its embrace by CWOP.

Troubled subjectivity supports and undergirds an ethics of ambiguity by highlighting that any subjective position is limited. For example, it cautions that when we take "categorical positions at opposite ends and make truth claims" (Röllmann et al., 2023, p. 63), we may be driven by illusions of purity or "perfectionist strivings," which may be common in ethical reasoning (Wallwork, 1991, p. 290). In other words, an ethics of ambiguity implies adopting a reflective orientation that is always aware of the risk of "walk[ing] into dogma" (Röllmann et al., 2023, p. 63), and entails open thinking and dialogue, even with perspectives we may disagree with (Trotter, 2022, p. 28), while fostering tolerance for diverse perspectives, contradiction, and ambiguity in our field. It thus avoids "stereotypical thinking" and "deterministic rigidity" (Hornung & Höge, 2021, p. 367) that can pervade both mainstream and critical perspectives alike. The problem with dogmatism from the perspective of Beauvoir (1994) is that it denies the ambiguity of existence and instrumentalizes the self and others as objects—or, we could say, as blank. In this sense, the ethics of ambiguity founded on troubled subjectivity allows for a deepening of the conversation around ethics in WOP. While recognizing the importance of a reflexive concern with values, an ethics of ambiguity which has troubled subjectivity at its heart emphases that values are not 'things,' and that "the subjective movement" is the driving force of all values (Beauvoir, 1994, p. 18). Crucially, it also accepts "the element of failure involved in the condition of man [sic]" (Beauvoir, 1994, p. 9), and thus cautions against the illusion of mastery—over ourselves, other humans, organizations, and the planet—that has inflicted mainstream WOP since its beginnings (Bramel & Friend, 1981). Accordingly, this ethics starkly differentiates CWOP from WOP because it relinquishes a desire for mastery and control, and recognizes that even the most progressive cultural views are susceptible to blank subjectivity and dogmatism when they deny 'subjective movement,' and the ambiguity of existence. The ethics of ambiguity is premised on an epistemic openness that is at once also a stance against blank subjectivity, and the reification and treatment of the human being in essentialist and utilitarian terms (Kristeva, 1991). While the ethics of critical scholarly movements such as CWOP continues to evolve, troubled subjectivity and the embrace of ambiguity encourage more thoroughgoing reflection on the ways in which we render subjectivity blank, furthering the important work of modeling a different way of 'doing' work and organizational psychology.

Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no conflict of interest to report.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals (If applicable) There is no research involving Human participants or Animals.

Informed Consent (If applicable) This is a theoretical paper so it includes no data.

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