

Venla Okkonen, University of Eastern Finland
venla.okkonen@uef.fi

Care of the working self through self-quantification and the ruptures of neoliberal rationality

Digital technologies have increasingly been integrated into the field of workplace well-being, as taking care of workers' mental well-being and work ability has gained importance as both an organizational and an individual concern. Many workplaces aim to prevent harmful stress and burnout by offering workers wellness tools and services, such as self-tracking technologies and coaching. It has been shown that self-tracking in general and specifically in working life context cultivates neoliberal ways of understanding the self by allocating the responsibility of taking care of oneself to the individual and reducing well-being into a rational project of calculation (see Hull & Pasquale 2017). However, it has been argued that we are currently living in a shift from neoliberalism towards post-neoliberalism (Davies & Gane, 2021) or a crisis-prone era of neoliberalism, sometimes called zombie neoliberalism (Kotsko, 2020; Peck, 2010). In these circumstances, the neoliberal ways of relating to oneself and well-being can be in flux.

This presentation explores the ruptures of neoliberal rationality at work by analyzing interviews of 9 Finnish workplace well-being professionals, such as coaches, who utilize self-tracking tools in their professional practice. Based on the conducted discourse analysis, care of the working self through self-tracking turns out as a conflictual practice. As the professionals talk about their work, the rationalizing logic of self-tracking collides with the everyday realities of working life in ways that both challenge and reinforce the individualizing logic of neoliberalism. In the end, the individual responsibility to take care of one's well-being proves out to be a strong ideal sustained through the rhetorical virtuosity of the well-being professionals. The analysis forms one section of the doctoral research project exploring the construction of the ideal labouring subject in workplace well-being practices, published as a research article in 2023.

References

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