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# Work-Related Diseases as a Challenge for Institutionalized Prevention in a Changing World of Work

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contradictions between traditional ways of thinking about workplace disease prevention on the one hand, and workplace realities and psychosocial stresses associated with the subjectification of work on the other. In doing so, the questions are examined as to which psychosocial risks for employees have to be associated with the current changes in the world of work, how these changes are perceived in the field of workplace prevention, and what policy needs can be derived from this. With a focus on the Labor Inspectorate and the Workers' Compensation Board, current prevention discourses are empirically examined within the methodological framework of Grounded Theory. Interpretative-reconstructive analyses of expert interviews and relevant documents serve to develop a theory of occupational disease prevention as a sociopolitical field. The focus is on the mediation process between legal regulations and operational implementation. Based on the empirical results, starting points for a better integration of psychosocial risks into occupational prevention are identified.

**Keywords:** Individualization, Subjectification of work, Workplace prevention, Psychosocial risks, Social policy

## INTRODUCTION

The working world is changing. This change becomes obvious by various developments, such as individualization, flexibilization or the dissolution of boundaries, which also shape the discourse about subjectification of work. Changing work requirements and demands made by employees are closely entwined with changes in health burdens of working people. While the numbers of workplace accidents are constantly declining, an increasing augmentation of work-related diseases can be noticed. At the same time, long-term health maintenance and employability is gaining importance in Europe, as access conditions to welfare state benefits are increasingly restricted. The prevention of accidents and diseases at workplace is historically rooted in the welfare state and associated with certain traditions of thought. In Austria, workplace disease prevention is based on regulations of occupational health and safety (OHS) as well as statutory accident insurance. Interpretation and communication of these regulations through legally mandated institutions strongly influence companies' OHS prevention measures. However, in the face of tertiarization processes and the subjectification of work and in view

of the “4 Fs” of change at work – feminization, flexibilization, fragmentation and financialization – traditional prevention discourses and practices run the risk of excluding growing parts of the working population. This raises the central question of how institutions of prevention can meet the conditions of today’s working world and effectively integrate fields of work not within their traditional focus.

This paper takes up the developments described above and carries them forward using the results of Marie Jelenko’s dissertation (2021) on current prevention discourses. The focus is on Austria’s central state mediating bodies, the Labor Inspectorate and the Workers’ Compensation Board. Within the methodological framework of Grounded Theory, Jelenko conducted qualitative interviews, additionally including a large number of relevant documents in her analysis. The findings reveal conservative as well as dynamic approaches to work-related disease prevention at the level of intermediary social policy agencies.

## PREVENTION IN A CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

The theoretical approach on which the analysis is based includes four inter-related perspectives on the prevention of work-related diseases, both in terms of changes in the world of work and traditions of workplace prevention. The *first* is the individualization thesis developed by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1986, 1995) at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It reflects social change as an ambivalent process from the first classical modernity to the second reflexive modernity, which opens up opportunities for more self-determination. However, it also entails the risk of social destabilization and leads to new forms of reintegration into society especially through standardization induced by the media. Moreover, the individual in the sense of a progressive self-centeredness is becoming increasingly important. In the context of his individualization thesis, Beck also criticizes the contradictions between welfare state institutions operating in traditions of the first classical modernity and the realities of individuals’ lives increasingly situated in the second reflexive modernity.

From the *second* perspective, we look at the way in which individualization tendencies have entered the world of work from the point of view of subjectification. Employees are increasingly expected to contribute to the work process as an entire person with his or her individual and subjective abilities (Kleemann et al., 2019). In this context, the subjectification of work includes both the increased expectations of employees themselves with regard to the content and meaning of work and the increased work demands of employers on their employees, which are particularly visible in the form of increasing work compression, time pressure, flexibility and personal responsibility (Ahlers, 2020, Sennett, 2008). Working conditions combining freedom of action with competitive and market pressures are designed to activate the entrepreneurial potential of workers. Voß and Pongratz (1998) have vividly illustrated in their type of “Arbeitskraftunternehmer” (workforce entrepreneur) the tendency toward greater indirect control of workers and access to their subjectivity through increased demands on their abilities to self-direct, self-rationalize, and self-economize. In an ever-accelerating world of work,

it is not enough to remain at the same level of work ability; in our days workers must constantly dilate and optimize themselves, according to the prevalent social convictions (Bröckling, 2019, Rosa, 2005, Mauno et al., 2019). These convictions have even found their way into the conservative European welfare states by means of activating labor market policies, therefore not only affecting the highly qualified with correspondingly broad scope for action, but also the segments of low-skilled and precarious employees (Esping-Andersen, 1990). To put it briefly, the process of subjectivization not only creates degrees of freedom in work design with simultaneously higher work demands, but also makes it increasingly difficult for employees to distinguish between work and private life. Consequently, this can lead to higher stress levels and a reduction in regeneration time with negative effects on health (Rau, 2017).

The historical development and institutionalization of workplace prevention is the *third* perspective of analysis, which ties in with Berger and Luckmann's (2009) approach to the social construction of reality. It sheds light on the question of whether the institutionalized practices of workplace prevention meet the realities and challenges of today's working people. Because the history of institutionalization of workplace prevention is strongly linked to engineering approaches of accident prevention, they strongly influence workplace prevention (Kangas, 2010, Moses, 2019, Müller, 1983, Püringer, 2014). Therefore, even today, physical and psychosocial prevention strategies must be reconciled with technical approaches to gain sufficient legitimacy. This complicates the preventive handling in the case of higher individual work contexts, since complex interdependencies make almost impossible the conventional technical distinction between external conditions and internal processing.

In addition, in the *fourth* perspective of analysis, we consider how work-related disease prevention is embedded in general disease prevention, ranging from structural disease control to individual behavioral approaches. The latter increasingly prevails in the medical context and, on the contrary to the theoretical focus on working conditions, gained influence in occupational medicine practice (Lengwiler and Madarász, 2010). In occupational medicine, the contradictions between contextual and subject-oriented prevention strategies are clearly visible and confront professionals of prevention with the difficulty of demanding healthy working conditions oriented to the "standard person", while at the same time individual preconditions and needs have to be taken into account. A strong focus on health behaviors at the workplace runs the risk of shifting responsibility for health entirely onto the worker himself, while structural approaches not only tend to leave the individual out but also exclude the workforce as a whole, acting in a hierarchical and patronizing manner. Even workplace health promotion, which is more focused on the individual, cannot solve this fundamental problem. Although it strives to strengthen the individual, it is linked to the idea of self-optimization and can become part of the problem by causing self exploitation of the worker (Bröckling, 2019, Kratzer et al., 2011).

In all these perspectives of analysis, the integration of workplace prevention in government social policy plays an important role. In order to combat

the negative effects of work on the health and physical integrity of workers, the prevention of occupational accidents and diseases was integrated into European social security systems in the course of industrialization (Esping-Andersen, 1990, Moses, 2019). In his comparative historical analysis of social security in a global perspective, Dixon (1999) examines the traditions of the welfare state as ideas that emerged in the 19th century and persist today. The master-servant tradition, the idea of insurance, welfare state paternalism, and the tradition of marketization are four of those approaches that fundamentally shaped the inclusion of workplace prevention in social policy. In recent decades, the intensity and relationship between these traditions have changed, and market orientation combined with competitive orientation, personal responsibility, as well as fear of social exclusion have gained ground (Böhle and Lessenich, 2018, Vogel, 2018).

According to Jill Rubery (2015), central trends in the changing world of work are the feminization of the labor force, the flexibilization of working conditions and employment relationships, the fragmentation of employer organizations, and the financialization of value creation apart from the production of goods and services. Global developments in terms of tertiarization, transnationalization and technology transformation as well as political tendencies to deregulate, de-collectivize and depoliticize labor relations had a decisive influence on these trends. Regarding the impact on psychosocial risks, the following aspects are particularly relevant (Ahlers, 2015, 2020, Palm, 2020, Voß and Weiß, 2014):

- In the course of *tertiarization*, two contradictory developments are emerging, difficult to reconcile: greater standardization of the work process on the one hand, and an increase in intellectually demanding, complex work on the other hand. With the increase in *women's employment*, the multiple burdens of care responsibilities and gainful employment are becoming increasingly apparent.
- Increasingly *atypical employment* has led to more biographical uncertainties and anxieties among workers.
- The soaring development of *information and communication technologies* and the acceleration of society are accompanied by shorter deadlines, a greater amount of information and greater complexity of work.
- Greater spatial and temporal *flexibility* blurs the boundaries between working time and leisure time. As a result, the demands on self-organization, time and performance pressure, self-exploitation and the perception of stress increase.
- Increased *global competition* has raised the demands on the quality of work and tightened the cost and personnel corset.
- High work demands and competitive pressures, more unstable employment biographies, the organizational split between core and peripheral workforces, and an increasing share of dislocated work go hand in hand with a decline in *social support* at work.
- Workers themselves, especially if they are among the well-educated, have higher *expectations* of gainful employment in terms of self-fulfillment and

social recognition, which is associated with a high willingness to utilize, even to the point of exploiting, their own resources.

- In the course of decreasing collective protection and increasing individualization, structurally induced failure is increasingly understood as personal failure. This intensifies the internal pressure and fear of failure.

Data on morbidity in Austria and Europe show that stress, depression and anxiety disorders - after musculoskeletal disorders - are among the most frequently cited work-related health problems in Europe (Eurofound and EU-OSHA, 2014, Eurofound and ILO, 2017, Leka and Jain, 2017, Leonie, 2019). Epidemiologically well-studied work stress models establish a link between certain work design characteristics (high work demand, low range of decision, little gratification) and an increased risk of developing depression (Siegrist, 2019). However, the problem of constant and almost limitless self-optimization demands on the subject, including the problem of self-exploitation and the destructive depletion of the own health, are not included in these models.

## **PREVENTION PRACTICES OF INTERMEDIARIES**

### **Methodology**

The inclusion of psychosocial risks in employee protection has been clearly anchored in Austrian law more than ten years ago. For the implementation and effectiveness of such regulations in the world of work, public bodies that mediate between the legal framework and practical implementation play a central role (Püringer, 2014). The empirical study therefore focuses on the two central Austrian intermediaries, the Labor Inspectorate as an authority endowed with control and sanctioning rights, and the Statutory Accident Insurance as the central advisory and information body for the prevention of occupational accidents and diseases. Their strategies and practices were analyzed by means of guided qualitative expert interviews and selected documents (especially laws and standards, information and support services for companies) (Wolff, 2010, Bogner et al., 2014). The selection of a total of ten experts and around fifty relevant documents, as well as the evaluation and interpretation of the written empirical material, was based on the methodological foundation of Grounded Theory (Strauss, 1994). The focus of the evaluation was based on the rules of perception, observation and action of public intermediary bodies in the prevention of work-related illnesses in companies, with the emphasis on psychosocial risks.

## **RESULTS**

In the course of the interview and document analyses, four areas emerged as particularly relevant for the integration of new developments into the operational prevention practice of public intermediaries. The four areas are: An institutional embedding in the social security system, values and traditions in the intermediary bodies, the changing of social values and institutionally shaped windows of perception on changes in the world of work.

The technical-disciplinary character and the orientation towards binding national legal materials (above all the Austrian Employee Protection Act and the General Social Insurance Act) are essential for the interpretation and communication of the prevention contents to the company actors. In addition, orientation to standardization and statistical averages are of great importance. Thus, the existence of binding standards facilitate the interpretation of laws. The legal orientation towards the collective is implemented through statistical average data. In the engineering professions, prevention problems are usually addressed by removing easily manipulated units from the work process and by calculating and developing engineering solutions that take into account general human factors (e.g., height, weight, resistance of body parts, reaction time), assuming normal distribution. Moreover, rooted in the engineering tradition and its close relationship to law are notions of superiority through expertise, male dominance, orientation toward large-scale production and male industrial work, as well as a self-image as a technical advisor or controller. In addition, the clarity, decomposability and assignability of prevention topics is important: The employees of the intermediary bodies see it as their task to clarify legal requirements for companies within the scope of their competence and to make them, step by step, feasible and controllable. Legal requirements that appear unclear or “spongy” from a technical-instrumental perspective tend to be excluded. Although legal requirements shape the practice of intermediary bodies, these entities also influence legal developments in the area of worker protection through various mechanisms. In this context, the fields of social policy, social security and public administration form the organizational framework for the activities of the statutory intermediary bodies, which are interlinked among each other as well as with the social partners and their interest groups. From the point of view of preserving the opportunities of largely undisturbed, factually and professionally oriented work, the employees of the intermediary bodies tend to hold back on clear positions that could be interpreted as politically motivated by public actors. However, this attitude can make it more difficult to integrate new or controversial topics into workplace prevention.

The window of perception through which the Austrian actors in workplace prevention record psychosocial changes in gainful employment is the legally prescribed workplace assessment in terms of safety and health, in the context of which work-related mental stress must be comprehensively taken into account since 2013. The approaches chosen for this purpose are closely linked to the legally and professionally shaped conceptual world of workplace prevention. In addition, they tie in with guiding principles of industrial and organizational psychology, which is reflected in the intense discussion about comprehensible and controllable procedures, particularly with regard to the standardized measurement of mental stress and the development of easily manageable procedures for companies. The claim is that these should fit in well with the established practice of workplace prevention and at the same time satisfy the fundamental quality requirements of quantitative social research and psychological diagnostics. This leads to tensions that sometimes cause to conflicts between the different actors, leading to a loss of perspective for the higher-level prevention goals such as the reduction of health

risks and the development of protective factors in the work context. Another shortcoming which came up in the interviews concerns the timeliness of the quantitative methods used, which were often developed against the backdrop of discussions about the humanization of the world of work but do not take into account more recent developments such as self-optimization and dissolution of the boundaries of work.

However, there can be found also aspects of workplace prevention that can serve as door openers for new developments: For example, impetus for change came from “outsiders” to workplace prevention, such as non-technical occupations or traditional women’s fields of workplace prevention (e.g. maternity protection). Important impetus also comes from supranational and European exchanges, especially the European Healthy Workplaces Campaigns, which address emerging risks in the world of work that are increasingly being incorporated into national prevention work. However, the new and non-technical matters can also lead to irritation, overload and rejection in workplace prevention, not only when the usual self-evident facts such as superior expertise or clear solutions to clearly definable problems are put into question, but also because existing problems still have to be dealt with limited resources. In addition, the responsibility of the intermediary bodies, especially the statutory accident insurance, is perceived as limited due to legal requirements. Legal adjustments are most effective when they combine the old and the new (e.g. informal preparatory work, fitting into previous practices), and if the established players in workplace prevention can work on a topic in a coordinated manner and from different viewpoints. Social individualization tendencies and the subjectivization of work receive little attention in workplace prevention. Against the backdrop of defined legal responsibilities, scarce resources and traditional prevention practices, and due to the focus on collective working conditions and circumstance-oriented measures in the workplace context, there are neither ambitions to become active in this area nor ideas of what such activities might look like in practice. The most likely fields of action are currently secondary and tertiary prevention as well as digital forms of work such as remote and virtual work.

In recent years, there has been a change in values in the intermediary bodies with regard to workplace prevention. Both employee representatives and members of the intermediary bodies point to the increasing importance of the employer perspective and corporate interests in employee protection. This tends to slow down the further development of the legal basis and favors a divergence between work realities such as platform work or home office and their legal regulation. At the same time, other prevention actors assess the importance of employee protection topics in employer interest groups as low in terms of available resources and diversity of content. Against this background, prevention players are increasingly relying on economic arguments of cost-benefit optimization and increased productivity through healthy, motivated employees under the catchphrase “win-win situation”. However, the increased focus on voluntarism, which is at the heart of workplace health promotion, has to be considered critically, as a large number of companies currently cannot be reached by it. Overall, however, in addition to the technical-disciplinary approach described above and the orientation towards

binding legal bases, a third position in the thinking of workplace prevention has gained considerable importance, which can be described as market orientation. According to this, workplace prevention practice is increasingly taking into account the interests of employers and companies and integrating new public management strategies. Increasingly, this also involves the self-motivated design of good working conditions to improve the competitiveness of companies.

## CONCLUSION

The qualitative study has shown that technical-disciplinary approaches and an orientation toward existing legal bases continue to dominate in workplace prevention. However, the influence of market-based thinking is increasing and the engineering fiction of clear solutions for uncomplicated problems is becoming fragile. Against the backdrop of an increased proportion of women and increasingly multidisciplinary training backgrounds of prevention professionals, as well as European influences, new perspectives may find their way into workplace prevention. However, health risks related to the subjectification of work are hardly addressed despite the established assessment of mental stress. This is mainly because the relationship between the collective and the individual in the interest structure of workplace prevention is a difficult one. However, the following conditions can support a broader and effective inclusion of work-related illnesses in prevention efforts, regardless whether the risks are emerging or well known:

- A well-developed statistical database on work-related risks for diseases
- A clear integration into employee protection legislation and the system of occupational diseases
- Inclusion of these diseases in accident insurance
- Clear criteria for the examination of working conditions as possible causes of illness in the company
- These criteria should ideally be directly observable and easily measurable
- The proximity to technical-scientific findings, which enables prevention staff, usually technically trained, to act competent and as professionals
- The thematical embedding of prevention work in a broader and coordinated cooperation of national and supranational actors (e.g. national OHS strategies, social partner engagement, European campaigns)

A completely different practical example in Austria, namely the prevention of occupational cancer risks, has impressively shown how an improvement in the prevention of work-related diseases can succeed if these aspects are taken into account.

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