

When freedom and control walk hand in hand: friendship in the workplace

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Abstract

Purpose – While workplace friendship is often idealized in the literature as well as in practice, this paper problematizes the uncritical endorsement of the phenomenon by drawing attention to its inherent power implications.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirically, the paper is based on a three-month ethnography in an organization which encourages workplace friendship at work by deliberately blurring boundaries between work and non-work.

Findings – While being friends with colleagues at work is framed as a free choice among organizational members, who supposedly form these friendship bonds autonomously and organize fun activities in a self-directed manner, our study also shows that forming workplace friendship and engaging in fun activities can be a social expectation rather than purely an individual choice.

Research limitations/implications – We explore this seemingly paradoxical tension between freedom and control through Foucault's notion of biopower, which works through the mobilization rather than restriction of people's autonomy and targets the behaviour of entire populations by shaping their environment. By applying this lens, we contribute to the theorizing of workplace friendship by framing it as a "technology of control" that works through mechanisms of "biocracy" (Fleming, 2012, 2014).

Practical implications – Our analysis suggests that, when instrumentalized, workplace friendship may become "performative" and lose its supposedly spontaneous, beneficial and innocent character. Friendship is then a "performance" in which people can succeed or fail, thus potentially harming rather than promoting their wellbeing at work.

Originality/value – Locating our analysis within the literature on workplace friendship and organizational control, the paper contributes an understanding of workplace friendship as "performative." It moreover provides clarity and conceptual precision on how "biocracy" as a form of biopower compares to and expands our understanding of normative and neo-normative control.

Keywords Workplace friendship, Biopower, Biocracy, Neo-normative control, Performative friendship

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The notion of friendship is rarely contested, neither in the literature nor as a "folk concept" (Costas, 2012; Grey and Sturdy, 2007). As several scholars note, in societies that are increasingly marked by uncertainty, individualism and competitive self-interest (Bauman, 2000), friendship can provide a sense of security and self-esteem (Pahl, 2000). In the context of work, friendship – the informal and voluntary relationship between coworkers – is also most often positively endorsed (Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018). The perceived benefits of workplace friendship are greater amounts of support and resources available to employees (Berman *et al.*,



2002), higher work quality, employee retention and overall greater wellbeing at work (Rath and Harter, 2010). Workplace friendship has therefore been romanticized as a phenomenon (Costas, 2012) which is mutually beneficial for employees and their employing organization. Instead of subscribing to this idealization, we adopt a more critical understanding by zooming in on an organizational setting where friendship among colleagues is strongly promoted by management, while at the same time upholding the image that these are autonomous, self-directed and genuinely (per)formed phenomena.

While such an organizational setup may be well-intentioned, inspired by a belief, and the aim that all its members benefit (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009), in this paper, we challenge the depiction of workplace friendship as exclusively benign, voluntary and beneficial. Especially in a context where friendship becomes a normative expectation and organizational members are asked to invest much of their private selves, we consider it crucial to also explore the power implications at play, especially when members' lived experiences of workplace friendship diverge from dominant organizational discourses around the "freedom" to display friendship at work. We therefore address the following research question: *When being friends with co-workers is part of the dominant organizational culture and discourse, how do its members experience and enact workplace friendship in their everyday lives and with what potential power implications?*

Empirically, we investigate this research question through a three-month ethnography of a fast-growing Dutch organization that strongly promotes and facilitates workplace friendship, while priding itself on letting employees freely choose and self-organize their friendship activities. In addition to observations of the everyday enactments of workplace friendship, 12 in-depth interviews and 2 group interviews (with 4 employees each) give insights into a multiplicity of different, often ambiguous interpretations of workplace friendship; a multiplicity that contrasts with the unison celebration of workplace friendship in the organization's official communications (e.g. job postings, websites and social media channels).

Theoretically, the paper contributes to the literatures on workplace friendship and organizational control by exploring how biopower operates in a context where friendships are expected in the organization, while at the same time, the image of spontaneous friendship and self-chosen fun is carefully preserved. Biopower – as conceptualized by Foucault (2008) and inextricably linked to the principles of neoliberal society – aims to optimize individuals and the whole population from afar, namely by shaping the environment in which people make choices. This is not framed as a measure of limiting individual's autonomy, but rather as a way of "mobilizing" it. In fact, it has been argued that biopower works "through" the idea of freedom, which makes it difficult to oppose or resist it (Fleming, 2022).

While the application of biopower is gradually being picked up by organizational scholars (e.g. Elraz and McCabe, 2023; McCabe, 2025), Fleming (2012, 2014) argues that the concept can be specifically useful for analysing workplace transformations in recent decades, namely through the concept of "biocracy". By coining the term "biocracy", Fleming (2012, 2014) provided a framework for translating the notion of biopower into the organizational work context, also delineating the mechanisms through which biopower operates in the interest of organizations and their management. As the descriptions of biocracy and its underlying mechanisms overlap with existing concepts of normative and neo-normative control, which are well established in the field of organization studies, we first outline similarities and differences between these different concepts. Positioning biocracy within the literature on organizational control and highlighting the nuances which it adds, marks one of the theoretical contributions of our study. It may also serve to explain the added value of the concept, which has not yet been followed up by empirical studies on the dynamics of biopower in the workplace. By showing empirically how people's working lives become entangled with "life itself" and vice versa, we demonstrate the nuance which biocracy brings to an empirical investigation.

More specifically, in this paper, we carefully attend to, and theoretically develop, four mechanisms of biocracy which extend existing frameworks and lend themselves for empirical analysis: (1) the entering of non-work elements into the workplace; (2) the reaping of people's ability and desire to self-organize; (3) the horizontalization of power; and (4) the extension of work into the private sphere of life. Along with those four mechanisms, we analyse how workplace friendship can function as a technology of control. Taking the lens of biopower, we propose and conceptually develop the notion of "performative friendship", arguing that workplace friendship, which is exclusively framed as benign in the literature, can also pose a challenge for organizational members and their wellbeing, especially if they "fail" to develop these supposedly voluntary relationships at work and thus experience social exclusion. By doing so, we raise critical questions about the implications of prescribed workplace friendship for individuals as well as for biocratic organizations and their management. In the following, we will first delineate the literatures on workplace friendship, biopower and the mechanisms of biocracy, before we describe our empirical study and discuss the implications of performative workplace friendship as a technology of control.

Workplace friendship and its appraisal in the literature

Most studies on friendship have explored the notion in non-work contexts. Some have also investigated it specifically in the work setting, namely as enacted voluntary bonds that exceed the formal work relationship (e.g. [Rumens, 2016](#); [Sias and Gallagher, 2009](#)). In line with the overall positive framing of friendship outside of work, most scholars have focused on the benefits of workplace friendship (e.g. [Berman et al., 2002](#); [Pettinger, 2005](#); [Rath, 2006](#); [Rath and Harter, 2010](#); [Tews et al., 2014](#)). They suggest that close workplace friendship increases members' job satisfaction, makes their work life easier, provides a source of support, allows employees to do their tasks more efficiently and thus affects their retention positively. Given these positive connotations, it is no surprise that organizations try to capitalize on workplace friendship, assuming that it will contribute to better organizational outcomes. The attempt to foster friendship at work goes hand in hand with managerial practices that try to make organizations a more pleasant and "fun" place ([Bolton and Houlihan, 2009](#); [Fleming, 2005](#); [Fleming and Sturdy, 2011](#)). As with workplace friendship, it has been argued that fun improves members' physical and emotional health by enhancing their mood and reducing stress ([Ford et al., 2004](#); [Karl and Peluchette, 2006](#)).

Critical management scholars, however, contend that while friendship and fun seem to serve everyone, its underlying power implications may not serve everyone's best interest (e.g. [Bolton and Houlihan, 2009](#); [Fleming, 2005](#); [Warren and Fineman, 2006](#); [Kunda, 2003/1992](#)). Since notions of friendship and fun invite organizational members to fully commit themselves to an organization, they have argued that these notions are instrumentalized in the interest of the organization and its goals ([Costas, 2012](#); [Fleming, 2005](#); [Kunda, 2003/1992](#)). The emphasis on friendship and fun, for instance, can distract organizational members from the fact that they are still required to work hard and make long hours ([Costas, 2012](#)), while at the same time being expected to have fun and be social when doing so ([Bolton and Houlihan, 2009](#)). In this paper, we will scrutinize workplace friendship from a power perspective, namely by applying the lens of biopower.

Biopower and its operation through freedom

Intuitively, workplace friendship seems to reside in unmanaged spaces, escaping or evading power processes in the workplace. [Sias and Gallagher \(2009\)](#), for example, argue that workplace "friendships" are distinct from work "relations" in that they are voluntary (not imposed) and involve the whole person (not only the occupant of a job). This is where Michel Foucault's work on "biopower" makes a contribution. Towards the end of his career, Foucault, whose work on "disciplinary power" through normalization, self-surveillance and

subjectification (Foucault, 1977) has been highly influential in organization and management studies, started to address such apparently power-free phenomena by theorizing them as a qualitatively different kind of power, which he labelled “biopower”: a form of power that targets “life itself” (or *bios*).

Different from disciplinary power, which confines individuals through strict training, timetables and internalization of the regulative gaze, biopower emphasizes how – particularly under neoliberalism – our broader life capabilities, extra-work qualities and social activities have become objects of exploitation (Fleming, 2014). The distinction between disciplinary power and biopower can primarily be seen as an analytical distinction, as biopower does not do away with the disciplinary technique. Instead, it marks an intensification that infiltrates other modalities of power, even if it operates at a different level, on a different scale, using different instruments (Foucault, 2003; Moisander *et al.*, 2018; Nealon, 2008).

Before we attend to these aspects, we will first contextualize the rise of biopower through related notions of “biopolitics”, “governmentality” and “neoliberalism”. While the term “biopower” initially appeared in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978), it was only with the English publication of his lectures on “neoliberalism”, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault, 2008), that Foucault’s shift in thought towards a post-disciplinary agenda became apparent. Here, Foucault examines “biopolitics” as a new form of “governmentality” (Fleming, 2022), which describes how power operates in 21st-century neoliberal capitalism, namely through the proliferation and promotion of individual difference (read *expression of freedom*) rather than sameness and conformity (read *an effect of control*) (Mumby and Plotnikof, 2019). Individuals are encouraged to view themselves as “human capital” and to constantly increase their own value in an enterprising spirit. Hence, the logic of the market permeates the entire social system, with the ultimate goal of not only optimizing individuals, but the whole population in terms of health, wealth, happiness and efficiency (Reed and Thomas, 2021).

The entire population is encouraged to seek entrepreneurial freedom and to actualize themselves in all spheres of life, including family, relationships and education. Even though biopower appears to be liberating, and neoliberalism does indeed need freedom to operate and be effective, those who live in neoliberal societies are not free. Because of its subtle and pervasive effects, Foucault even argued that there is more control in neoliberal societies than in conventional top-down hierarchies. Biopower targets the lives of “free individuals” (Foucault, 1984/1997) and exploits human will to get things done by directing and channelling processes that unleash people’s enterprising capacities (Moisander *et al.*, 2018). This leads to interesting questions around the biopolitical paradox linking freedom and control. How can power enhance freedom, and at the same time regulate it without constraining it (Foucault, 2003; Fleming, 2022)?

Biopower transcends the apparent dualism of freedom and control not by introducing an illusory notion of freedom, but rather by operationalizing individual choice, autonomy and agency in such a way that it enhances control. This can be explained through the metaphor of “framework” (Foucault, 2008) or “frame” (Weiskopf and Munro, 2011), representing dominant discourses and identities within which choices can and should be made (Mooresirust and Brown, 2021). This framework operates at the population level, for instance, by setting and measuring trends within the population and by defining the “rules of the game”. Since the moulding and preconditioning of individual’s agency is laborious and time-consuming, it is easier and more efficient to target and shape the immediate milieu (environment) in which the individual operates (Moisander *et al.*, 2018). Several scholars have explored how biopower operates in everyday workplace situations. Elraz and McCabe (2023), for example, show how a wellbeing discourse was mobilized across organizational contexts, prompting people with a mental health condition to not deviate from the rules of the game, but to act normally. McCabe’s (2025) study shows how biopower became entangled with discursive and disciplinary modes of power within a local UK government authority (McCabe, 2025). Fleming (2012, 2014, 2022) examined biopower – the mobilization of freedom – across different organizational work contexts, which he named “biocracy”. Before we draw on this

Biocracy and (neo-)normative control

For the sake of clarity and to avoid conceptual conflation, we build on conceptualizations commonly used in organization studies by exploring biocracy in relation to the notion of (neo-)normative control. While Fleming is careful to point out that his conceptualization of biocracy is not a critique of existing perspectives, as it does not replace but coexists with conventional forms of managerialism, he does not situate the concept within the existing literature on organizational control or in relation to his own work on neo-normative control (e.g. [Fleming and Sturdy, 2009](#)). To address this omission, we will describe how biocracy might be distinguished (or not) from neo-normative control, a form of control where we see most overlap in theorizing.

There are three different areas where we see both overlap and difference. Biocracy highlights how various elements of people's private lives infiltrate the workplace and, as a result, begin to control workers through appeals of self-optimization. Similarly, the concept of "normative control" ([Etzioni, 1961](#)) – also referred to as "control through organizational culture", describes a type of management control that aims to align employee motivation and commitment with organizational objectives by instilling certain norms and values ([Mielly et al., 2023](#)). More recently, dysfunctions of normative control such as stifling conformity, groupthink and distrust, have led to a "new spirit" of neo-normative control that creates space for individuals to be "unique" and "authentic" and to live "flexible, autonomous work lives" ([Husted, 2021](#)). Along those lines, neo-normative control shares characteristics with the concept of biocracy. Different from normative control, both concepts – neo-normative control and biocracy – are not based on conformity and unitary values, but on notions of freedom, difference and self-reliance deriving from market logics. While Foucault linked biopower to "neoliberal societies" ([Mumby and Plotnikof, 2019](#)), neo-normative control is associated with "market rationality" ([Fleming and Sturdy, 2011](#)), both emphasizing entrepreneurialism and individual risk-taking.

Where the two concepts diverge is, first, in drawing attention to either the subtle presence (neo-normative control) or the apparent absence (biocracy) of managerial control. Growing out of a critical interest in managerial attempts to control a workforce, the notion of neo-normative control highlights a subtle, elusive form of managerial command or coercion that invites workers to commit to corporate norms of authenticity. Building on a Foucauldian school of thought, biocracy has a different starting point. It may involve managerial control, but insofar as it does, it typically goes unnoticed. As an unobtrusive form of control, it targets all spheres of life and "pivots" employees' agency ([Fleming, 2022](#)) by tapping into, harnessing or optimizing such spheres in order to instrumentalize employees' expertise, discretion, initiative, autonomy and friendships. In other words, biopower is not about policing who people are ([Foucault, 2003](#)), but about directing them to be "the best version of themselves", thereby optimizing their lives inside as well as outside of an organization.

Second, we see further overlap and difference in how the two concepts theorize the paradoxical relationship between freedom and control, and what it defines as the primary target of control. At the heart of both biocracy and neo-normative control lies a shared ideology that employees are free agents, which, paradoxically, leads to an intensification rather than relaxation of organizational control. Metaphorically speaking, biocracy aims to achieve this by targeting the collective rules of the game, while neo-normative control tends to target the sense of self of the individual "players" in the "game". In the neo-normative project, neoliberal individualism is strongly emphasized, calling for "mavericks", "nutters" and "zanies" to actively liberate themselves from the controlling effects of organizational cultures ([Peters, 1994](#)). Neo-normative control invites people to "just be yourself!" at work ([Fleming and](#)

Sturdy, 2011; Mielly *et al.*, 2023), playing with notions of freedom and autonomy to encourage individuals to express diverse, idiosyncratic identities (Colling and Ceulemans, 2023). Through the expression of authentic identity and individuality as a form of “existential empowerment” (Colling and Ceulemans, 2023), technologies of neo-normative control make “unique” individual identities more visible and accountable, thereby allowing organizations to harness all qualities of a person for superior performance (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011).

Under the same guise of free choice, biocracy also makes room for difference as an expression of individual choice and directs that individual freedom towards productive ends. However, it makes less of an appeal to individuals to express and manifest themselves and more shapes the organizational environment of an entire population (in this case, the workforce) to invite and entice its members to work. Biocracy thus tends to emphasize the collective rules of the game, which channel people’s supposed freedom in a particular direction, suggesting, for example, that within a particular workplace people are keen to – voluntarily – form friendships and engage in fun activities. Other “frameworks” within which people are supposedly free to express themselves at work and beyond could be self-optimization attempts related to health and body ideals, the pursuit of personal and professional growth, the expression of political ideologies such as cosmopolitanism where “diversity is good” (Hoyer and Ybema, 2025) or the display of environmental conscientiousness, for example, through one’s chosen means of transportation. Because these rules or frameworks are collectively determined, biocratic workplaces leave little room for individual idiosyncrasies.

A third aspect of overlap and difference is the idea of blurring the boundaries between work and non-work. Biocracy builds on the understanding that biopower works at the level of “life itself”, hence drawing on people’s social and personal life engagements inside and outside of work. Likewise, studies of normative and neo-normative control have, from their very outset, discussed the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work, managers and friends, work and play (Fleming, 2005; Kunda, 2003/1992; Mielly *et al.*, 2023). Moving away from bottom-line mentality and blind commitment, (neo-)normative management techniques envisioned a fun, happy and inclusive workplace. “Individuality” and “authenticity” were associated with expressing one’s playful side through humour, happiness and a strong sense of community. Biocracy takes this “blurring of boundaries” a step further by suggesting that work and non-work are inextricably linked, as “life itself” happens across all spheres of lives. Hence, there is no limitation to aspects of fun, friendship, parties and happiness – the focus of neo-normative control – when it comes to the blurring of work and private life. In the biocratic logic, all personal characteristics, such as skills, talents, personal preferences, but also weaknesses, vulnerabilities and even disabilities are mobilized across all spheres of life. Likewise, social relationships with family, friends, colleagues and a broader community play a role inside and outside of work, making the experience of boundarilessness potentially more extreme.

The focus of this paper is on a workplace design that introduces a central quality of “life itself” into the workplace by strongly supporting the formation of workplace friendships. It is designed in such a way that the experience of friendship does not necessarily revolve solely around some superficial fun but also involves opening up to colleagues about personal situations, spending quality time outside of office hours, and becoming life companions over time. While the boundaries between work and non-work were fundamentally blurred, friendship was never imposed on employees. Management and staff took pride in the company’s culture of friendship, but made it an open invitation and implicit expectation for newcomers to develop genuine friendships with colleagues. It was up to staff members themselves whom to befriend and how to have fun together. In this paper, we will explore this phenomenon as a technology of power in the workplace that taps into “life itself”. In the following section, we will explore in more detail the mechanisms through which biocracy operates, potentially turning friendship into a technology of control.

Biocracy's mechanisms in workplace friendship

To explain how organizations have started to instrumentalize social and non-work-related qualities in the workplace, the concept of biocracy emphasizes how personal attributes, social intelligence and informal subcultures are being put to work (Fleming, 2012, 2014). Informed by the concept of biopower, Fleming mentions various mechanisms through which biocracy operates: "social subjectivity put to work", "non-work put to work", "private time put to work" and "unpaid labor put to work". In this paper, we will draw on some aspects from these mechanisms as delineated by Fleming, which we have further developed and slightly relabelled in order to better operationalize these mechanisms for empirical analysis, such as the analysis of workplace friendship. We have named these mechanisms (1) the entering of non-work elements into the work space; (2) the reaping of people's ability and desire to self-organize; (3) the horizontalization of power; and (4) the extension of work into the non-work sphere. In the following, we will elaborate on these mechanisms and suggest how workplace friendship can further ignite them.

- (1) *Non-work elements entering the workspace.* One feature of biocracy is to actively invite informal employee attributes as value-adding resources. While there was a strict separation in the past between what is considered "work" and "non-work", these formal boundaries have weakened over the years. What was traditionally considered an interference to the atmosphere of productive rationality is now considered a well for innovative energy, enthusiasm and social finesse: "humour", "games" and "fooling about". Additionally, since biopower also targets social relations, we contend that workplace friendship can be instrumentalized in the service of organizational goals as well. Rather than engineering certain behaviour in the workplace or trying to order it in a top-down fashion, however, biocracy enacts the biopower principles of "freedom" and "shaping the environment". It suggests that employees can "freely choose" how to experience friendship at work. Instead of (obviously) "ordering" friendship, the strategy would rather be to create a work environment where friendship can flourish in a seemingly spontaneous manner, emphasizing autonomy and possibilities rather than rules or restrictions.
- (2) *Reaping people's ability to self-organize.* While employees have always found ways to unofficially self-organize and relieve boredom at work (Roy, 1959), biocracy tries to encourage and activate this informality as part of a "holistic" management approach. Since it is difficult to openly command workers to take initiative or to activate their broader life skills within the workplace, biocratic organizing is based on the principle of letting employees flourish seemingly on their own accord, without visibly intervening in how these energies are then re-directed into the productive aims of the organization. When employees are willing to self-organize friendship activities inside and outside of the workplace, the best thing from a biocratic logic would be to generally encourage such behaviour, while "staying out of people's way" and letting them do whatever they were up to, assuming that this will eventually benefit the organization more than any attempts of directing their self-chosen activities in more obvious and thus objectionable ways (see also Fleming, 2014; McDermott and Archibald, 2010).
- (3) *Horizontalization of power.* Another mechanism of biocracy is the horizontalization of power, where control is not only exercised from "above" but also from the immediate environment of co-workers. While the imagined "gaze" of peers can lead to an internalization of power, to a certain extent, this form of power remains external as well, as expectations are "real" and not only imagined. Hence, control can take the hegemonic form of teamwork (Barker, 1999). As loyalty towards the team stands for collegiality and a good atmosphere at work, it becomes a desirable virtue to display. Another effect of this horizontalization is that it cuts across employer versus employee

dynamics, in this way not only affecting people at the lower level of the organization, but potentially from all levels (Fleming, 2012). While hierarchies might not disappear, the distinction between manager and employee fades into the background when employees are not directly being told what to do, while the managerially designed environment can still shape employee behaviour. This also makes it more difficult to distinguish between exploiters and the exploited, as everyone seems equally autonomous and at the same time subjected to the market forces that dictate organizational life (Fleming, 2012).

- (4) *The extension of work into the non-work sphere.* In the work context, biopower's principle of targeting "life itself" implies that biocracy infiltrates life beyond the formal workday. When workers under Fordism left the factory, they were free from the control and supervision of their boss. Now, just as we see non-work signifiers entering the workplace, we also see spillover effects in the other direction, where the logic of work flows into the private arena (Fleming, 2012). When friendship relations are actively formed and nurtured in the workplace, it can be expected that these relations will not be confined to the office space and working hours. Instead, interactions with befriended colleagues will stretch into the private sphere of life, making it more difficult to draw the boundaries between work-related and private conversations. In this way, workplace friendship can become a technology of control that operates in the social arena inside and outside of work.

Interestingly, while management enthusiasts and workers themselves might (mis-)take the encouragement of autonomy and self-organization around friendship and fun for a relaxation of workplace control, in this paper, we see biocracy as an intensification of power that is neither a gentler nor a freer form of regulation. Even though elements of employee sovereignty can be genuine (and genuinely appreciated as well), control does not disappear.

Methodology

In this study, we set out to better understand people's lived experiences and possible power implications of workplace friendship. In the following, we will describe the research setting, our data collection and analytic process.

The empirical site

We draw on a single case study of a fast-growing Dutch consultancy firm. The medium-sized organization refers to itself as a "work hard, play hard" type of organization and proudly states that success is achieved through and rewarded with having fun, while workplace friendship is core to the organizational culture. This illustrative site, which we refer to as "Atmosphere" (pseudonym), is an organization that provides private and business clients with advice on how they can optimize their operations. Within the organization there are different departments with different fields of expertise (e.g. back-office, sales). Within these teams, all part-time positions are occupied by students, which represents more than half of Atmosphere's members. Full-time positions are, except for a few senior roles, mostly occupied by young professionals embarking on their career. Their age ranges from 18 to 35 years, thus, Atmosphere is a rather youthful company. Whether this is a purely strategic "choice" or mostly based on the nature of some of the jobs (which partly do not require much experience), is hard to say. It is, however, interesting to notice how this is in line with other case studies on fun companies (e.g. Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Sturdy *et al.*, 2010) which typically employ members under 35 years, as they are most likely to be perceived as "fun" and "expressive".

The focus on fun and friendship is also reflected in the office design, including a ping-pong table and fridges stocked with alcohol, as well as numerous office parties and after-work

drinks. Atmosphere was selected as a research site because of its reputation for strongly promoting workplace friendship, exemplified through their “bring a friend” hiring strategy, which is rewarded with a generous referral bonus. This is also how we learned about this organization – through a friend.

Participant observation

Over a period of three months in 2022, one of the authors, Tessa Leegwater, became a member of Atmosphere, both as an intern as well as an ethnographic researcher. This double role was communicated to the organization’s management from the very beginning, and colleagues were also informed about the researcher’s scholarly interest in workplace friendship. In accordance with [Bryman’s \(2016\)](#) understanding of participant observation, she immersed herself in the social context, observed the behaviour of organizational members in her overt role as researcher, while also participating in the observed activities as an intern and team member. During her time in the field, she collected 45 pages of fieldnotes, documented personal experiences and takeaways from interactions, described events and reflected on her own emotions across various situations. Since the researcher was seen as a colleague rather than an external party, she was easily able to “blend in”, which in this organizational context entailed joining non-work activities outside of regular office hours. We are aware that by becoming “part” of the organization, the researcher entered into a liminal space of sometimes immersing herself into this context, while at other times distancing herself again from the organization’s taken-for-granted ideals. Discussing the empirical findings within the team of co-authors, while two had not been involved in the data collection process themselves, helped to create this distance from the experience. The other authors who were not in the field thus served as a kind of “sounding board”, more critically distanced from the experience of organizational members, and thus bringing in a good balance between being immersed in the field and taking a step back again for collective interpretation. We also want to emphasize that the story about the organization told in this paper neither presents the “full story” nor the representation of an “objective reality”. Instead, it presents our own meaning-making attempt on the basis of observations, interactions, interviews and document analysis.

Interviews

Next to observations, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted, 2 with members of the management team and 10 with employees. Additionally, 2 group interviews were conducted with 4 employees per group interview. The goal was to include a heterogeneous group of interviewees coming from different teams, with different levels of expressiveness in their display of social behaviour (e.g. some being more talkative, loud and outgoing, while others appeared more quiet, shy or reserved at work), but also different durations and forms of employment. In this way, we could include a variety of stories and perspectives on the topic. The initial sample was introduced to the researcher as potential research participants. Later, as she became more familiar with people in the organization through her field observations and her role as an intern, she gradually added other interviewees to the list.

All interviews (in-depth and group interviews) lasted 1 hour on average, were audio-recorded and later on transcribed with the informed consent of research participants. The in-depth interviews were open-ended, conversation-like ([Hermanowicz, 2002](#)) and loosely structured around the themes of organizational culture, workplace friendship and fun. The focus group interviews zoomed in on building and sharing meanings in a group dynamic. Among other things, members of the group interviews were asked to individually write down 2 statements on what they liked about a working environment in which workplace friendship is celebrated, and 2 statements on what they disliked about such an environment. These statements were then discussed in the group setting (for a more detailed explanation of the methodological approach, see [Leegwater \(2022\)](#)). Based on these prompts, participants of the

group interviews reflected more explicitly on the implications of workplace friendship than people did during the individual interviews.

Documents

In addition to the observations and interviews, we noticed that written communication played an important role in terms of expressing and circulating the organization's perspective on friendship. We therefore collected the following documents for analysis: the organization's vacancies, employee newsletters, websites, social media channels, booklets from training sessions and handbooks. These documents helped contextualize the research by providing important background information. The weekly employee newsletter, in particular, served as an important source for understanding the dominant discourses around friendship in the organization.

Data analysis

The collected data were relatively unstructured. Therefore, post-coding was used to structure, categorize and analyse data (Bryman, 2016). This process was assisted by using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. To embark on the analysis, all interviews were first transcribed, while written fieldnotes, and relevant documents were brought together in documents. For the coding process, we followed Strauss and Corbin's three distinct levels of open, axial and selective coding (Bryman, 2016). This allowed us to identify emerging themes from the various data that we analysed and to organize these themes in a way to better understand, for example, how workplace friendship emerged in the organization, how this process was perceived by employees and what role management played (or supposedly did not play) to facilitate and promote certain activities in the workplace. The first step of the analysis allowed us to capture how time and space were used by the organization to "make room" for friendship and fun, and what benefits but also potential downsides, people described in relation to workplace friendship and fun.

In the next iteration of the analysis, and with our specific interest in the power implications of workplace friendship, we took Fleming's (2012, 2014) mechanisms of biocracy as an ordering scheme for our critical analysis of discourses and enactments around workplace friendship and fun. Following this scheme, and scrutinizing some of its implications, we investigated (1) *how friendship enters into the workplace*, thereby bringing non-work elements into the workspace; (2) the emphasis on *freedom and self-direction in the enactment of workplace friendship*, which builds on the idea that biopower works through mobilizing autonomy; (3) the *(bio-)power implications of workplace friendship*, which mark an intensification rather than relaxation of control; and (4) the *experience of workplace friendship as "performative"*, something that people have to succeed in despite its supposedly voluntary nature. Lastly, and more as a reaction to the mechanisms of biocracy, we also noted (5) *the negative perceptions of workplace friendship* by organizational members and their *attempts of micro-resistance*. In the following, we will present our findings along these mechanisms and their implications, which indicate the potential role of workplace friendship as a technology of organizational control.

Results

How friendship enters into the workplace

Friendships between colleagues are increasingly common in many modern workplaces. Atmosphere (a pseudonym) reflects this trend, making it a valuable illustrative case study for understanding how workplace friendships are experienced. This was made immediately clear to the author in the field on day one of her fieldwork, when she met Patrick. "You've definitely come to the right place!" he assured her with a big smile on his face when she told him that she was studying the role of friendship at work. Many of his colleagues at Atmosphere also

claimed that, in their eyes, “this was *the* place to study friendship at work”. The culture of friendship was embraced internally, as well as celebrated in external communications as the organization’s unique selling point. Job advertisements stated that at Atmosphere, “friendship naturally arises in the workplace”, and posts on social media platforms included images of people laughing and fooling around with the accompanying text: “Friendship can be found here!” And when newcomers made friends at work, they were celebrated publicly, for example in newsletter entries:

In February, Matthew and Kenneth joined our team as enthusiastic interns. We often see them playing ping-pong and sitting next to each other at lunch. The duo is clearly as thick as thieves. Both Matthew and Kenneth study [...] and they are even in the same study year. But it was during their internship at Atmosphere that they became close friends. Now they are inseparable and friends for life! (Newsletter #19)

Instead of professionalism or any other businesslike quality, the organization’s staff claimed that friendship in the workplace was the defining feature of the company’s culture. This also translated into the company’s physical design, which alluded to friendship and fun. In the absence of a reception desk, visitors walked straight into a distinctly non-work-like space. Many participants were taken by surprise when they first entered it:

The first thing I noticed was how open it was. I liked the fact that I saw many young people. I also noticed a dog walking around. Not that I am a big fan of dogs [...] [laughs] But I did find it telling. (Michael, team consultancy)

Informality seemed to rule the workplace at Atmosphere. In contrast to the businesslike nature of the immediate surroundings – an industrial business park with standard office buildings – the interior office layout was surprisingly homely. With lots of pictures on the walls, a ping-pong table and an office bar stocked with alcohol, the space did not resemble the typical, sterile business environment. The greasy dishes piled up in various corners of the office gave the impression of being in a student dormitory. The relaxed dress code and staff’s playful interactions – casual chatter and loud laughter – added to a student-like informality. Sharon, a recent recruit, shared her first impressions:

A very large group [of staff] are still students, so they automatically bring a ‘student vibe’ with them. Also, the drinking, the parties [...] Yes, we are a student association [laughs]. (Sharon, team office)

The organization’s external and internal communication, its office space and social practices all emphasized that this was a place to make and be friends. In line with the notion that biopower works both at the level of the individual and an entire (workplace) population (Reed and Thomas, 2021), namely by shaping people’s (physical) environment (Foucault, 2008; Moisander *et al.*, 2018) – we clearly saw how Atmosphere’s management had created such an environment in which friendship could flourish. At the same time, organizational members experienced friendship in this environment as a free choice, which we will elaborate upon in the following.

The emphasis on freedom and self-direction in the enactment of workplace friendship

One of the key mechanisms of biocracy is its seemingly paradoxical operation through “freedom”. Only when organizational members autonomously choose to submit to the “rules of the game” (Moisander *et al.*, 2018; Fleming, 2022), biopower can unfold its full bloom. At Atmosphere, we observed that even though workplace friendship was strongly encouraged and facilitated by the organization’s management, the notions of “freedom” and “autonomy” still featured strongly in the experiences of organizational members. They perceived friendship as a voluntary bond that evolves spontaneously and cannot be dictated by an employer. Friendship was something they could not have with “just anyone”, implying choice and a selection process that one would also expect when making friends outside of work. Lisa,

for example, explained that she needed to feel “at ease” and match personality-wise with another person, while others mentioned the need for mutual interests, trust, respect, appreciation or the idea of sharing norms and values. When reflecting upon the process of how workplace friendship developed in the first place, Christian pointed to a change in relational dynamics:

You notice it a little bit already when you’ve had, say, an evening together and you say goodbye and you give each other a hand or a hug, or whatever. With some people that’s kind of more ‘intimate’ than with others. Intimate as in, you just feel a good vibe or connection with someone. (Christian, team consultancy)

Many members of the organization mentioned a “natural process” of developing closer connections with some colleagues over others, which seemingly prevented the association of workplace friendship with organizational control. Interviewees reported a transition at some point from a professional to a more personal relationship, thus framing friendship as a non-work element entering into the workplace.

I really think the moment you let go of those work conversations and really get a little more . . . a little more in depth in terms of conversation . . . (Sharon, team office)

Carol additionally noted that she generally shared a lot of personal information with her colleagues already, but that it was only the people whom she considered “friends” at work who “really” knew about her specific personal situation – which again underlines the importance of freedom and choice in the experience of (forming) workplace friendship.

After the formation stage, freedom remained an important driver for workplace friendship. Turning to the practices that (re)produce the experience of friendship (Bell and Coleman, 1999; Rumens, 2016), the researcher in the field frequently overheard colleagues at Atmosphere talking about meeting up for dinner, making plans for the weekend or travel plans for the next vacation, while two co-workers even shared an apartment. These markers of friendship outside of office hours arguably reach beyond the control of the organization. But even within organizational boundaries, management portrayed an image of encouraging workplace friendship and fun, without determining its direction. This can be exemplified along Atmosphere’s most prominent social activity, which took place several times a year – the so-called Office Meeting (pseudonym). Although the title of the event sounded rather formal to newcomers, it turned out to be anything but formal. Apart from a short presentation by the management team reviewing the past few months, it was one big party. The theme and the content of the Office Meeting changed each time and remained a surprise down to the last moment. The only information given to the staff in advance was in the weekly newsletter:

Office Meeting: be there or be square!

On [date] the second Office Meeting of the year will take place!!! And trust us, you really don’t want to miss it! Accept the Outlook invitation! (Newsletter #7)

The Office Meeting was presented as an event that employees should not miss. In fact, during an informal conversation, one employee explained that they even planned their vacations in such a way as to avoid missing these “important meetings.” This shared expectation was taken seriously - not necessarily out of a sense of duty to the organization, but rather from a desire not to miss out. The events were tailored to be highly enjoyable and were perceived as being primarily for the benefit of the employees, rather than for the organization or its management. Some members reported how they did not know what to expect from these meetings when starting on their job, and that they were also taken by surprise:

The first time I was actually a bit shocked. We had a masked ball in a country house on an estate somewhere . . . not something I expected from an ‘Office Meeting’. But very fun!! (Donald, team sales)

Other Office Meetings included a flower power themed expedition to the beach, an outside music festival or an old-fashioned casino for which the entire office was completely redecorated. Interestingly, although management paid for these extracurricular activities, promoted them enthusiastically and encouraged everyone to have fun, the Office Meetings were not organized by HR or the management team; they were organized by employees themselves, thus preserving an image of freedom and non-dictated fun. Here we can see another characteristic of biocracy enacted, namely the notion of “self-direction” among organizational members who are seemingly in charge of shaping their own environment.

As Ruth explained in an interview, management did not play an active role in the organization of fun activities, but most often just allowed it to happen. Likewise, Carol confirmed during our interview:

They [management] do not impose anything. They more often ask an open question: ‘what can we do for you?’ (Carol, team sales)

This “laissez-faire approach” is perceived as an invitation to do whatever you enjoy and what you need to be happy and productive. Arguably, this perception of workplace friendship as “free choice” makes them ideal candidates for the working of biopower. According to [Foucault \(1984/1997\)](#), people can best be nudged into a certain direction without eliciting resistance when they feel truly autonomous in their decisions. [Fleming \(2012, 2014\)](#) contends that this makes biopower so effective in the workplace. Rather than a relaxation of managerial control, however, he considers it an intensification through mechanisms of biocracy. It is important to note that, rather than being passive recipients of this control, members at all levels of the organization contribute to, and shape, the reproduction of this biocratic control through their everyday interactions, decisions and displays of friendship.

The (bio-)power implications of workplace friendship

Despite the emphasis on free choice, we also observed how workplace friendship was consciously maintained. Richard, one of the managers, admitted that blurring the boundaries between work and non-work experiences through after-work drinks and office parties was a conscious choice by the management team. It saw fun as a reward for hard work, as well as a source of innovative ideas and a solution to professional conflicts. Popping bottles of champagne on Friday afternoons and drinking together, he explained, invited people to “loosen up and to show more of the person behind the professional role”. And it seemed to work. Albert, who had only been with Atmosphere for a few months, said that he had “not shown much of himself yet, except when he was at the Friday drinks, where his true nature kicked in”.

The HR team also made a sustained effort to create conditions for friendship to develop in the workplace, for example, by asking new hires to play “crazy bingo” and handing out “bingo cards” with tasks such as “bring your colleague a beer” or “share an embarrassing story”. Even before new members started to work at Atmosphere, they received a welcome package with company merchandise and an outline of all the weekly non-work activities, such as working out with a personal trainer any day of the week, playing football or tennis together on Mondays and Wednesdays and sliding into the weekend with drinks on Fridays. In addition, staff members organized all sorts of other activities, such as clothes swap markets, farewell parties and pop-up cocktail bars, where participation was not mandatory, and yet expected from the other members of the organization. This shows that members are not merely subjected to biocratic dynamics; they actively participate in reproducing and shaping the very environment that governs them.

From a biopower perspective, these activities – though some were organized by management, most were initiated by members themselves - helped establish the “framework” or “rules of the game” that shaped an organizational milieu in which members were expected to operate, often through mutual expectations ([Foucault, 2008](#); [Weiskopf and Munro, 2011](#)).

This framework translated into expectations – mostly from colleagues – of how organizational members should be(have). Here, we recognize biocracy's claim that the horizontalization of power can become a powerful mechanism of "real" rather than just "imagined" peer control. While expectations from the boss or a superior can arguably be resisted more easily, it is more difficult to resist expectations from peers about how to be(have) in the workplace. As an expression of these expectations, research participants made reference to an "ideal type of employee", which someone described as follows:

A strong character, big mouth, a bit crazy, loves to drink and party, and can take a joke. (Ruth, team Office)

This observation, that an "ideal Atmosphere type" employee existed in the organization (being "sportive" was another main characteristic), stood in contrast to Atmosphere's narrative of embracing authenticity. Some research participants did recognize this as a paradox between freedom and control, stating that Atmosphere was inclusive, but only under the condition that people "fit in" and match the "ideal Atmosphere type". This can be considered an intensification of organizational control, as the focus on people's work performance and productivity is now extended to the personal characteristics which they display and whether these characteristics are perceived as "likeable" by superiors and peers. In our observation of newcomers, some struggled with this:

While Charles, an outgoing and confident character, easily connects with others and has quickly started to play a prominent role at the lunch table, Christopher, a rather shy and reserved person, is alone more often and seems to have more difficulties in accommodating to this new 'world'. He appears to feel more awkward and 'out of place'. (Based on fieldnotes, March 2022)

When entering a new organizational context and its culture, organizational members usually have to undergo a certain adaptation, known as socialization process, in which they learn about the customs and expectations of the workplace (e.g. [Poulter and Land, 2008](#)). This socialization period is not unusual across all kinds of organizations and industries. What stands out at Atmosphere, however, is that not only work-related aspects have to be learned, such as professional jargon, mastering the administrative processes or obtaining high satisfaction scores in client ratings. At Atmosphere, we observed how personal qualities and social abilities also had to be "learned", as people were not only judged on the basis of their professional output, but for their social skills and popularity inside and outside the workplace, which makes it much more difficult to escape this form of control. Not surprisingly, then, some research participants experienced friendship at Atmosphere as a social expectation which they had to "deliver on". In this case, what appears as individual autonomy is a form of mutual control, where employees themselves reproduce and subtly reinforce biocratic norms and expectations, thereby sustaining the very system that governs them.

Workplace friendship experienced as "performative"

We observed that workplace friendship, just like other job requirements, was an expected "performance" at work. Despite its supposedly spontaneous character, the choice to decide whom to be friends with and the freedom to "live" this friendship in various ways inside and outside of the organization, organizational members at Atmosphere were not yet free to choose "against" friendship without having to fear indirect consequences of social exclusion. This in turn induced feelings of heightened insecurity among some of the Atmosphere members: Were they performing well enough on the dimensions of being "social", "likable" and a "fun person" to be around? Some research participants admitted that the image of the "fun person" was something they constantly had to invest in:

The emphasis is on having a good time. And some days you just think 'I do not want to' . . . But then there is a certain pressure: I have to be 'on'. (Cynthia, team sales)

Through a biopower lens, we can see how the environment shapes the behaviour and feelings of employees. Rather than referring to colleagues or superiors who make explicit demands around workplace friendship or being a fun person, organizational members expressed a sentiment that in this “work environment”, you have to display a certain mood all the time. Ashley, moreover, acknowledged that in this particular work setting, people might not dare to turn down an invitation for a social event or fun activity, as this would show a lack of commitment to one of Atmosphere’s crucial performance criteria – the voluntary engagement in friendship and fun.

Despite a strong emphasis on the “natural process” through which workplace friendship was formed, members also reported that to nurture and maintain this friendship, they had to put in some “extra work”. This diverges both from management discourse and academic literature (e.g. Carrier, 1999), which defines friendship as a spontaneous sentiment free from any demands. In contrast to this experienced “extra effort”, there was a discourse in the organization around the “ease of making friends”. Peter stated: “It is very difficult not to have friends at Atmosphere”. Ironically, while this statement suggests that making friends at Atmosphere does not require any special “performance”, it also suggests that if people fail to make friends, something must be wrong with them as a person. In the interviews, we noticed that especially for some newcomers, the “pressure” to make friends among colleagues was experienced as a burden:

I was very nervous in the beginning at Atmosphere . . . People already know each other so well, and have such a good time together, and then I come in as an outsider . . . maybe you feel even more distanced at the beginning. (Lisa, team office)

The presence of one of the authors in the field contributed to a deeper understanding of these dynamics. When people heard other colleagues making plans for the weekend together, while not being invited, feelings of social exclusion and self-doubt could easily arise. And indeed, the expectation was clearly for people to be either popular and thus invited to join, or if not, to be proactive about their inclusion:

You do have to be asked [to come along], yes that is right. But honestly, if you are super keen, and you say to me “hey I heard that there is something planned for the weekend, can you tell me more about that . . .”, then you may also tag along. But if you do not take initiative, and you are not asked, then yes, you could potentially miss out (Patrick, team sales)

In the same interview, Patrick explained that it is “up to the person” as everybody is allowed to join, but the person needs to show some keenness to participate, all under the premise that they are interested in the kind of “fun” that is on offer, often involving partying, alcohol and/or sports.

Not surprisingly, then, organizational members who deviated from these interests also felt socially excluded. As Anthony noted, people could “fail” at developing workplace friendship. And indeed, Christian and Sharon, who both did not “succeed” in developing (many) workplace friendships, critically reflected on themselves during the interviews. For Christian, it was a matter of not making (enough) time for non-work activities, as he was already quite occupied outside office hours with his own activities. Sharon, in turn, explained that since she was not in the office on Fridays, she often missed the after-work drinks. She laughingly joked: “. . . or maybe I am just a horrible person”.

If people, after several months of employment, did not manage to fit in at Atmosphere, the price was high. Ruth, who identified as an “ideal” type worker at Atmosphere, bluntly acknowledged that:

We act like there’s a lot of freedom, we act like there’s a lot of space, but you actually have to be: so, so, so, so, and so. (Ruth, team office)

This statement captures a key paradox: a culture that celebrates difference can still produce sameness, as everyone ends up following the same rules of the game. At Atmosphere, the need

to conform to organizational and collegial expectations pertained not only to professional standards, but also to social expectations around being a fun and likeable person. The constant repetition and re-enactment of “voluntary” fun and “natural” friendship as the company’s prime principles also set them as the unquestioned norm for staff members.

Negative perceptions of workplace friendship and the attempts of micro-resistance

Besides the entrance of non-work elements into the workplace, another characteristic of biocracy is the extension of work into the private sphere of life (Fleming, 2012, 2014). Workplace friendship facilitated this extension, namely by blurring the boundaries between what was considered professional work or an act of friendship. While many reported enthusiastically about their friendship activities outside of work, this transgression also elicited negative sentiments. Patrick, for instance, who is a strong promoter of “going the extra mile” for a friend and “helping each other out”, also recognized the pitfalls of this:

... sometimes it’s hard to say no. I can do it business-wise, I say no to everyone externally, but I do find it difficult to say no to people who I also see as friends (Patrick, team sales)

Likewise, Sara explained during the group interview that she is often conflicted when a friend asks her to perform a task outside of working hours. Although she is willing to “do that for a friend,” it conflicts with her principle of maintaining clear boundaries outside office hours. Patrick and Sara explain that they find it hard to say “no” because they are unsure from which role they are saying no. Even though people may normally be able to draw boundaries and protect themselves from an overdemanding boss or employer, thereby displaying agency and resistance, these boundaries are now sacrificed in the name of friendship, which comes with moral obligations.

As several members of the organization reported, whenever there was a conflict between work and friendship roles, the latter would usually trump the former. People tried to avoid difficult conversations in order not to harm their personal relationships:

She is also a friend of mine, and then we kind of had a fight about something work related ... and she was just really blunt, and I was blunt too ... but I could not see that as: this is work and we are still friends, you know. I was like: are we still friends, is she angry, can I still come to her birthday? ... Was I twelve years old? No, I was an adult ... but that is what I find hard. That it is then ... work and private ... that I cannot really keep it separated when I work with my friends. (Sara, team sales)

Conflicts between friends can also arise outside of work, and they do. What is different in a setup where friends are also colleagues at work is that professional matters can now come between them. Who is getting more interesting tasks, more recognition from the boss, more opportunities for career advancement? While these questions might also not be unusual among colleagues, they do become more intricate when friendship is a differentiating factor. And indeed, the blurring of professional and private roles resulted in the experience of nepotism within Atmosphere, which became a point of critique. Peter proposed in a group interview that some co-workers got more opportunities because they happened to be friends with the “right people”.

While Richard, a member of the management team did not believe that there was a form of nepotism in the organization, he did recognize the struggle with being objective, as one “cannot see past the informal relationship”, plus the difficulty of critiquing friends. So, the transgression of work and private matters worked in two directions. While friendship affected professional decisions, professional decisions now also affected private relationships, and sometimes not for the better. Not surprisingly, then, some people expressed how they tried to protect their private self from an over-demanding organizational culture. Lisa, for example, notices how she is a bit more careful with work friends as to what it is she shares. While she is “watching her words” with most of her workplace friends, she “throws everything in” when it concerns her “normal” friends (what other interviewees also referred to as “real” friends). By

distinguishing different categories of friends, Lisa consciously placed friendship back into the private arena. Another way of how people tried to protect their private self was by not engaging in social activities outside of office hours. In these accounts of how people distanced themselves from the demand to go “all in” on workplace friendship, we noticed openings for the resistance to biopower, which we will further discuss in the following section.

Discussion

While biopower has been recognized as a powerful and effective mode for controlling the behaviour of entire populations, [Sinnerbrink \(2006\)](#) critiqued Foucault’s work on biopower for not providing a real account of its implications. The author argued that without such an account, we are left with an under-theorized sense of why biopower might be something to question, criticize or reject. He proposed that we should ask ourselves “what is the specific injury, harm, or injustice suffered by subjects subjected to regulatory biopower?” (p. 250). In the following, we will address Sinnerbrink’s provocative question by discussing our empirical findings around workplace friendship as a possible technology of biopower. We will particularly elaborate on what we consider the “performative” aspect of workplace friendship and discuss its implications for individuals and an entire workforce (population), as well as for organizations that apply biocratic management practices.

When trying to theorize workplace friendship through a biopower lens, it is worth noting that Foucault himself did not explicitly discuss how biopower acts on emotions, feelings, moods or affect. At the same time, the concept of biopower indirectly touches on how affective capacities of populations are shaped when “life itself” is the target of power. Hence, affective relations – including workplace friendship – can be considered object-targets for biopolitics, which form part of the conditions for biopower ([Anderson, 2012](#)). And Foucault did after all speak about amorous power relations – e.g. between husband and wife, children and parents, teacher and student, employer and worker – as the new modality of controlling the conduct of others, namely by intervening in the domain of the other’s possible actions ([Lazzarato, 2002](#)).

This brings us to our theoretical proposition that workplace friendship can be considered a technology of control that is “performative” in everyday (work) life. Even though the notion of friendship might appear less power-laden than some of the above-mentioned, asymmetrical relationships, we contend that friendship – especially because of its connotation with being non-hierarchical, voluntary and spontaneous – can become a modality of control that potentially shapes the behaviour of an entire workforce. While biopower operates exactly through the mobilization of autonomy, our study also revealed the limitations or the pre-defined framework within which friendship were to be displayed in the context of the case organization. In the following, we will elaborate on our conceptualization of workplace friendship as “performative” and then delineate the potential implications of this.

Workplace friendship as performative

As [Gond et al. \(2016\)](#) rightly suggest, when drawing on the notion of “performativity”, organizational scholars should firstly acknowledge its foundational conceptualizations, and secondly, clearly define their own use of the term. In 1962, John Austin introduced the formulation “performative utterance”, which was subsequently interpreted by social scientists and philosophers in numerous ways. A critical historical review of the concept shows that it featured in several social science movements, including the “linguistic”, “practice”, “process” and “materiality” turn, partly with overlapping assumptions ([Gond et al., 2016](#)). We situate our theorization of “performative friendship” mostly within a process understanding of ontological “becoming”, which was most prominently developed by [Butler \(1990\)](#). In her seminal work on gender, she explains that rather than being born or socialized into it, we “become” female or male by performatively constituting these identities. Butler contends that the construction of the self is inscribed by “societal norms”, which she also labels as “a wider

sociality” or people’s “outside”: “the ways in which we are from the start. . . already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (Butler, 2004: p. 22). To attain the position of recognized subject is thus to be “cast, always, outside oneself, Other to oneself” (Butler, 2004, p. 148, Foucault, 1984/1997; Kenny, 2010).

In other words, since the subject desires recognition and legitimation from others, it will adhere to existing normative frameworks. In this way, life areas that would generally be associated with a social or political “outside” come to operate in a space that is usually thought of as “internal”. This understanding of performativity – as a matter of being cast into this “outside” that is pre-defined, problematizes reductionist theories, namely by emphasizing that identities can simultaneously be attractive and repellent, sought-after and resisted, passionately attached and vehemently rejected (Gond *et al.*, 2016; Hodgson, 2005). Drawing on this Butlerian understanding of performativity, Kenny (2010) explored processes of workplace identification via the enactment of a dominant organizational discourse on “ethical living” – comparable to the enactment of a dominant friendship discourse in our own study. Kenny found this enactment to be passionate and ambivalent at the same time, and she explains this along the Hegelian intersubjective understanding – which was further developed by Butler – that self and other are always inescapably intertwined, which makes room for similarity and difference.

From this perspective, we are not the sole authors of our own identifications, as the self is always (also) located outside of itself. The ethical implication of this is that the subject depends on the validation of the outside, the “other”, an organization or society more broadly, for their own positive self-image.

Thus, by conceptualizing workplace friendship as “performative”, we argue that this is not a relationship we can naively idealize. The idea that practices or workplace friendship can be salient to the constitution of people’s professional as well as private identities distorts the supposedly innocent, spontaneous and non-demanding character of friendship as we imagine it. The performative aspect of friendship is further fuelled by its connotation with freedom and autonomy, suggesting that friendship at work is something universally desirable that everyone would naturally opt for. At Atmosphere, forming and sustaining friendship bonds with colleagues was indeed framed as a voluntary, self-directed endeavour. We argue that this portrayal of free choice lies at the heart of its performative nature.

According to Foucault (2003), biopower is not a matter of predefining who people are or policing their decisions; it is rather the attempt to optimize their decisions and hence their state of life, which makes this form of power rather insidious. Instead of suggesting that people are always trapped, Foucault emphasized that they are always free to make choices (see also Lazzarato, 2002). In fact, members are not merely subjected to biopower dynamics; they actively participate in reproducing and shaping their environment, which leads them. However, the notion of “performative friendship” highlights that even though these choices are “real”, the choices of whether to make friends at work or not are not equally attractive as they can have profound consequences for those making these choices. Hence, people have to “perform” the right choices that lead to social inclusion when engaging in the “right” kind of activities.

This alludes once again to the paradoxical relationship between freedom and control in a biocratic setting. At Atmosphere, the freedom to choose your own friends and to design fun activities in a self-directed way only marked a form of freedom in so far that people could choose “whom” to be friends with and “what kind of” fun activities to engage in, but they could not opt against workplace friendship *per se* or engage in a kind of fun outside the repertoire of partying, drinking or engaging in sports (without having to fear exclusion). In other words, if organizational members wanted to succeed both at a professional and personal level, they had to perform well on several different dimensions, always within the boundaries of the environment’s script (see also Picard and Islam, 2019). If a person was sporty, for example, and engaged in sports activities outside of work – which generally falls within the “ideal type” of Atmosphere – this was only considered a “good performance” if it was exercised interactively

with other workplace colleagues. Otherwise, it was considered unsocial behaviour. In the following, we will zoom in on the potential implications of performative friendship for individuals, for a workforce and for biocratic organizations.

Implications for individuals and a workforce: performative friendship as a source of insecurity

Looking at workplace friendship through the lens of biopower sheds light on what is at stake. This is no longer just a person's professional self, but the "whole" self with no clear demarcation between the professional and the private realm. We observed how – in the name of workplace friendship – showing more of the self in the work context was not without consequences. Atmosphere members often experienced conflict between their professional and private role of being friends with co-workers, which led them to "sacrifice" healthy work-life boundaries. Other consequences were the experiences of nepotism – friends of senior colleagues being favoured – and social exclusion. When organizational members did not "succeed" in developing friendships at the workplace, they often interpreted it as a failure on their side, especially since it was supposedly "easy" to make friends at Atmosphere. This led to the experience of performance pressure, heightened self-consciousness and insecurities.

As [Collinson \(2003\)](#) explains, with a heightened sense of freedom, we also see the rise of uncertain and insecure subjectivities. This derives from the individualization of risk in neoliberal societies more generally, where all responsibility for human flourishing rests on the shoulders of individuals. In such an environment, people collectively search for orientation on how to be(have) in the "right way". Despite the freedom and autonomy which they are given – or maybe just because of that – people willingly subscribe to the rules of the game within a given environment and seek comfort in the perceived "shelter" of being informed through social norms on what to think and do.

While workplace friendship – as a prescribed framework – can provide a sense of comfort and social support, in this paper, we suggest that it can also serve as an additional source of uncertainty. At first sight, friendship seems to break away from individuality and competitiveness, as it provides an opportunity for solidarity against intrusions of neoliberalism. The concept of performative friendship suggests however that the relationship may also have unintended consequences. According to [de Botton \(2004\)](#), as human beings, we need the "protection" of appreciation or love from the world. Only with this love we feel that "our presence is noted, our name is registered, our views are listened to, our failings are treated with indulgence and our needs are ministered to. And under such care, we flourish" ([De Botton, 2004](#), p. 6). Thus, securing signs of affection from the outside world becomes an important basis for our sense of identity and perceived (self-)worth. In the past, it was enough to seek love and affection in the private sphere and to deliver good work outcomes in the professional realm. In a work context that celebrates friendship and fun, this distinction is no longer meaningful.

How we "perform" in the area of workplace friendship can become an indicator of our own worth. Especially in biocratic environments, everything that we are is now on display, to be seen and, eventually, to be judged ([Cederström and Fleming, 2012](#)). And the responsibility for success rests on the shoulders of individuals alone. Like with all performance indicators in neoliberal societies, if we fail on the friendship dimension, we cannot blame anyone or anything else but ourselves ([Sturdy et al., 2010](#)). The entire workforce is now at risk of being (socially) evaluated and, in the worst case, rejected. This evaluation is not limited to the qualities and characteristics of individuals, but becomes entangled with their ability to form, nurture and maintain relationships with others. In this way, workplace friendship becomes a form of social validation, a way to convince others of your own worth. In an environment where work and friendship have become one, people are at a continuous risk of losing their "value" and thus "failing" in life. While people previously had their private lives and friends to fall back on when things were not going well at work (which can already be detrimental to

one's feeling of self-worth), this private life is now entangled with work. As a result, people can never escape the environment in which they need to prove their own "worth".

*Implications for organizations: performative friendship as a source of unwellness/
resistance*

If we consider the introduction of workplace friendship as a benevolent attempt to increase the overall wellbeing of employees, it is worth noting the underlying assumption that a humane workplace will be a more attractive, productive and profitable one. This again is grounded in the assumption that physically and emotionally "healthy" employees who are friends with their colleagues and engage in fun activities show increased output levels and positively reinforce each other in the workplace. Not surprisingly then, the happy-productive worker has been considered the "holy grail of management" (Watson *et al.*, 2023), where both the employee and the employer benefit from the setup. Critical scholars, however, contend that wellbeing in the workplace has only become so important due to the forms of ill-being produced by unhealthy work demands in the endless push towards economic productivity. And the celebration of workplace friendship can be considered yet another attempt to further increase this productivity.

Haunschild (2003) noted that efforts to increase workplace wellbeing, as we can observe in biocratic organizations, are a response to problems that individuals would not have if it were not for their stressful or mind-numbing jobs in the first place. The irony of measures for increasing workplace wellbeing is that – despite good intentions – they do little to actually make us well. Especially when employees are held responsible for their own wellbeing, including their ability to make friends and be a fun person at work, they feel stigmatized if they do not live up to the image of a happy, healthy and socially integrated employee. In that sense, wellbeing – just like workplace friendship – can become a performative goal in itself, subordinated to an instrumental logic of striving for a good life that is pre-defined for the entire work population by the management of an organization and broader societal discourses.

At Atmosphere, for example, we observed that while the organization claimed to invite "spontaneous friendship" it still imposed a narrow framework and organizational fit, thereby predefining what friendship – which is not the same for everyone (see also, e.g. Plester *et al.*, 2015) – should look like, in terms of partying, consuming alcohol and being a sporty person. Some employees experienced this as (self-)alienating and started to reappraise boundaries around their work and career ambitions, thereby detaching them from their private sphere of life. As an implication for biocratic organizations, employees might start to shift their focus from searching and finding wellbeing at work or through work, towards consciously seeking wellbeing outside of the work context and managerial discourses (Watson *et al.*, 2023).

This brings us to the broader question of how biocracy – grounded in biopower – can be resisted. Since the central idiom of biopower is "freedom", and its target is "life itself" or "us", the outlook could be pessimistic on how to resist that. And indeed, some existing studies that looked into the possibilities of resistance to biopower (e.g. Norbäck, 2021; Raaper, 2016) concluded that it can be practiced at a personal cost. Raaper (2016), for example, noted that it is difficult to resist biopower if it is not entirely clear who and what to resist. In the end, employees might have to resist their own internalized self-understanding and actions in relation to their work. And yet, as Fleming (2022) argues, it would be too easy to conclude that this form of power has finally won the day. A potential critique of the biopower concept more generally could be that it is too "productive" and totalizing in the sense of literally seeing work "everywhere", even where it might not be present. It is important to acknowledge that employees do actually have free time and time away from work. After all, the disdain for exploitation remains among working subjects and no form of power in the workplace is infallible. Like other forms of control, it can be opposed and contested (Fleming, 2012, 2014). Resistance then becomes a matter of repossessing social life in the form that existed prior to

economic rationality, where life was not yet colonized by the ideology of work, the body was more than a human resource, and self-direction was not instrumentalized in the service of a firm. In other words, several detachments can mark moments of separation and withdrawal, back into a sphere of life that remains unexploited.

In the past, we have seen trends of “downshifting”, where people departed from high-paying jobs in order to lead less exploited lives. More recently, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have also witnessed a trend of refusing to work while staying on the payroll, also labelled as “Quiet Quitting” or the “Great Resignation”. [Lazzarato \(2002\)](#), moreover, focused on resistance as something productive and creative, not only a matter of negation. While it can start with a firm “no” as a necessary and minimum form of resistance, in its creative quality, it can transform a situation. The idea behind this is not to withdraw into solitude or individual isolation, but to reclaim social life beyond work, where self-valorization is detached from productivity. People can withhold their social qualities that are expected in schemes of workplace friendship and protect them from being exploited ([Fleming, 2014](#)). In this way, friendship can collectively be repossessed and enjoyed for its own sake.

Conclusion

It has been argued that, especially in individualistic and competitive environments ([Bauman, 2000](#)), friendship has become an important social glue that holds society together. In this paper, we have suggested, however, that if friendship starts to lose its innocent character, namely by becoming a technology of control in biocratic workplace settings, this may have negative implications for individuals, organizations and their workforce more broadly. While biopower, in line with the principles of governmentality, underlines individualism, difference and egalitarianism, what we observed in this study was yet the adherence to organizational norms around workplace friendship and fun and the attempt not to deviate from social expectations (see also [Costas, 2012](#); [Leighton, 2020](#)). Even though autonomy and self-direction around friendship and fun were strongly emphasized in the case organization, people were not free from power dynamics, as their self-regulating abilities were still being managed ([Mumby and Plotnikof, 2019](#)) through mechanisms of biocracy.

When looking at how organizational members experienced workplace friendship, they described it as a matter of “fitting in” and a question of “making an effort”. These processes describe how friendship is commonly perceived in the private sphere as well, as something involving a matchmaking between people of similar interests and characteristics, along with a sense of this being a voluntary choice. We have argued, however, that in the context of biocratic organizations, this choice locks people into a performative logic, where they try to “score well” on the friendship scale with the idea to do so deliberately and on their own terms.

Hence, one should be careful not to idealize workplace friendship. Looking at workplace friendship through the lens of biopower, we have argued that we should be more aware that also friendship – a supposedly intimate and supporting relationship – might come with power implications when instrumentalized in the work context. Looking at our own selves, such understanding helps to comprehend how, in a workplace environment that celebrates fun, friendship and togetherness, we could still experience something “unexpected”, namely: social exclusion, performance pressure and the desire to resist these seemingly pleasant workplace benefits.

As a potential limitation to our study, we have to acknowledge that not all jobs in the 21st century are regulated by biocratic forms of management. In fact, the majority of jobs is still controlled by Taylorism, bureaucracy and technocracy, even in knowledge-based, postmodern organizations ([Fleming, 2014](#)). In other words, most organizations do not enroll occupational freedoms around friendship to regulate the productive capacities of its workforce ([Fleming, 2022](#)). Nonetheless, we do see an increasing trend towards blurring work and private life matters, with new forms of revolt against such intrusion in the workplace. Our discussion of

workplace friendship through the lens of biopower and along the mechanisms of biocracy can inform other empirical studies on the working of biopower in the 21st-century work organization.

To conclude, in this paper, we have tried to problematize the uncritical celebration of workplace friendship by pointing out the mechanisms that turn friendship and fun into technologies of biocratic control. We hope that this paper, and the introduction of the concept *performative friendship*, leads to more stories from the field. And in telling these stories, we suggest we take nothing for granted, even if it seems so much fun.

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