

Book review: Parenting in the margins: reimagining workplace equity through dystopian fictocriticism in parents at work

Title of the book: *Parents at Work: A Dystopian 'Fictocriticism' to Subvert Patriarchal Organisations* Social Sciences Social Sciences (R0)

Author: *Mark Gatto*

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In *Parents at Work*, Mark Gatto presents an audacious and boundary-pushing critique of contemporary workplace structures, offering a fresh perspective on the struggles faced by working parents. Drawing from an innovative methodological approach he terms “dystopian fictocriticism,” Gatto blends personal narrative, qualitative research, and speculative fiction to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms that disproportionately impact parents, particularly those trying to balance professional and caregiving roles. Through a mix of evocative storytelling and rigorous analysis, Gatto not only unearths the hidden costs of navigating dual identities in masculinised organisational cultures but also envisions alternative futures where caregiving is valued as much as productivity. In this context, Gatto explores the concept of dual identities, particularly in relation to the tension between the “Ideal Worker” and the “Caring Parent.” He argues that working parents are often expected to align with the ideal of an ever-available, fully committed employee, frequently at the expense of their caregiving responsibilities. This dynamic leads to the “nihilation” of the caring self in favour of workplace productivity. Gatto critiques how patriarchal organisational structures reinforce these dichotomies, compelling parents to conform to rigid frameworks that marginalise and devalue caregiving. However, he also envisions a future in which caregiving and professional work are equally valued, challenging the entrenched dominance of masculinised productivity norms. In this book review, I will explore Gatto’s groundbreaking methodology, key themes, and the profound contributions of *Parents at Work* to critical management studies, while considering its strengths and limitations.

Mark Gatto’s *Parents at Work* offers an innovative and thought-provoking contribution to critical management and organisational studies through its unique methodological approach: “dystopian fictocriticism.” By interweaving personal narrative, qualitative research, and speculative fiction, Gatto critiques patriarchal workplace structures and their profound impact on working parents. The book’s engaging narrative style and rigorous analysis result in a text that is both emotive and intellectually stimulating.

At the heart of Gatto’s analysis is the embodied struggle of parents navigating the “in-between” spaces of caregiving and professional labour. Drawing on 19 participant interviews and his own lived experiences, Gatto uncovers the often-invisible costs borne by parents as they juggle dual roles within organisations dominated by masculinised norms. Central to his critique is the “ideal worker” archetype – a construct prioritising relentless productivity over caregiving responsibilities. This archetype perpetuates systemic inequities, leaving parents overstretched and undervalued. Gatto challenges these entrenched norms, advocating for a reimagining of workplace structures to accommodate and value caregiving roles.



The methodology employed by Gatto – a fusion of Sartrean existentialism, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and dystopian fiction – offers a unique interdisciplinary approach to examining gender inequity in the workplace. Sartre’s existentialist framework provides a philosophical foundation for understanding the tension between self-identity and imposed social roles, particularly for working parents navigating professional and caregiving responsibilities. This existential struggle is deeply embedded within patriarchal organisational structures that demand unwavering commitment to productivity, often leading to the suppression of the “caring self.” By applying existentialist thought, Gatto critiques the rigid nature of workplace ideologies and highlights the ways in which individuals resist and negotiate their dual identities.

CDA, particularly drawing on Fairclough’s framework, enhances this critique by systematically examining how language constructs and reinforces power relations in the workplace. Gatto embeds CDA within the fictional narrative to reveal how discourse interpolates parents into patriarchal structures, shaping their identities and sustaining gendered inequalities. This methodological choice enables a meta-analytical reflection, where both the researcher and the reader critically engage with dominant ideologies that sustain workplace inequities. Through the lens of CDA, Gatto exposes the performative expectations placed on working parents, illustrating how professional legitimacy is often measured by the ability to suppress caregiving responsibilities in favour of unencumbered workplace participation. By weaving discourse analysis into a creative narrative, the methodology effectively demonstrates how language both sustains and challenges systems of power.

The incorporation of dystopian fiction as a research method further strengthens this critical engagement by providing a speculative yet deeply relevant commentary on contemporary workplace structures. This creative approach disrupts traditional academic discourse by making structural injustices more tangible, allowing for a more visceral engagement with issues of power and inequality.

Gatto’s innovative methodology is exemplified in Chapter 4, *The Parental Club: 2029*, which offers a speculative glimpse into a future where parents confront the challenges of navigating a new pandemic. Grounded in the author’s experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the chapter employs a fictocritical lens (a postmodern style of writing that blends fact, fiction, theory and critique’) to explore themes of parental inequity, organisational policy, and cultural transformation. By employing fictocriticism as a speculative and critical genre, Gatto critiques historical and contemporary organisational structures while cautioning against potential future injustices. This methodology disrupts linear academic argumentation, using imagined futures to reflect present societal anxieties and challenge dominant ideological frameworks. It underscores enduring workplace inequities magnified by the pandemic, highlighting solidarity networks as vital resources for fostering community and support among isolated parents. Through dystopian narrative techniques, Gatto critiques patriarchal organisational systems and establishes a dynamic framework for examining systemic challenges and potential reforms.

The narrative critiques the inadequate “good enough” rhetoric of organisational responses to parental needs, calling for meaningful policy reforms to address systemic inequities and better support working parents. Addressing the multifaceted nature of caregiving, the chapter explores themes of self-care, relational care, and ambivalence, capturing the emotional and physical toll of balancing professional and parental responsibilities. It also examines the evolving dynamics of online communities among parents in a world dominated by virtual meetings, reflecting on technology’s dual-edged impact on fostering connection and disseminating information during crises.

Gatto’s evocative prose and immersive narrative style bring the chapter to life. Using a virtual meeting as the central setting, the story vividly conveys the emotional landscapes of its characters. Dialogue-driven exchanges capture the tensions, camaraderie, and resilience of the parents.

The key contributions of *Parents at Work* include Gatto’s adoption of “writing differently,” which aligns with feminist and anti-elitist academic traditions, disrupting rigid norms and

amplifying marginalised voices. Similarly, feminist movements have utilised alternative forms of engagement to broaden their impact and involve a wider audience in their advocacy. Notable examples include the #MeToo movement and the #HowIWillChange campaign, both of which aimed to actively engage men and boys in the ongoing dialogue about sexual violence. These movements called on individuals to assess their roles in perpetuating rape culture, thus fostering greater accountability and encouraging social change (PettyJohn *et al.*, 2019). The concept of “in-betweenness” highlights the competing demands of past reflections, present responsibilities, and future anxieties. Gatto’s analysis of the “motherhood penalty” and “fatherhood forfeit” critiques entrenched gendered inequities, calling for structural reforms. Furthermore, his advocacy for collective resistance to patriarchal norms fosters community among parents and allies.

The reflective and personal writing style fosters empathy, making abstract concepts relatable. Gatto’s interdisciplinary blending of management studies, feminist theory, and speculative fiction enhances its broad academic appeal. However, the speculative elements, while imaginative, occasionally overshadow empirical findings, complicating generalisation. The speculative nature of the work, particularly in its projection of potential futures, may lead to a tendency to prioritise visionary ideas over data-driven analysis. This can complicate the generalisation of Gatto’s arguments, as the imaginative scenarios, though thought-provoking, may not always align with or be supported by empirical evidence. As a result, while the work offers valuable insights into the potential of alternate realities, readers may find it challenging to draw concrete, actionable conclusions or apply Gatto’s ideas universally across various contexts. Additionally, Gatto’s positionality as a privileged white male, though acknowledged, raises questions about the inclusivity of the perspectives presented.

In conclusion, Mark Gatto’s *Parents at Work* and its chapter *The Parental Club: 2029* exemplify the transformative potential of dystopian fictocriticism. Through creative and critical engagement, Gatto critiques patriarchal workplace norms, advocates for systemic change, and reimagines inclusive futures for working parents. Despite the challenges posed by its unconventional format, the text’s intellectual rigour, emotional resonance, and interdisciplinary approach make it essential reading for scholars across management, gender studies, and the intersection of work and family life.

Amir Keshtiban

York St John University, York, UK

References

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