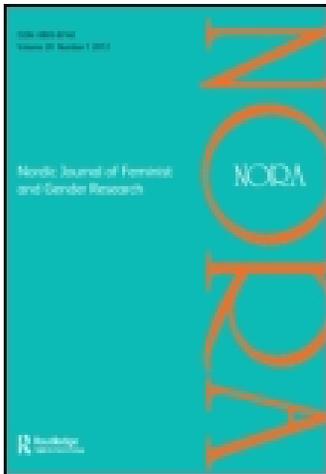


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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Fantasy of the “Ambitious Young Girl” as Flexible Knowledge-worker Subject

ANGELIKA SJÖSTEDT LANDÉN

ABSTRACT *One of the paradoxes of the so-called flexible work environments of late capitalism is that, at the same time as tribute is paid to organizational and work-force flexibility in terms of increased empowerment and freedom for workers to make their own decisions, there is also a strong emphasis on controlling their work. These ways of governing and controlling work have been problematized within critical organizational studies and analysed and conceptualized as audit regimes and audit cultures. Furthermore, feminist research highlights how the hegemonization of flexible work ideologies may result in declining health for employees and increased gender inequalities in the labour market.*

This article contributes to these critical strands of research by examining some of the gendered aspects of the ideological forces that work to install everyday work practices of “flexible subjects”. The analysis is done by studying the means of knowledge-work fantasies, and especially the ideological forces behind the fantasy of the “ambitious young girl”.

I draw on feminist critiques of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal practices and, more specifically, theories of the professional investment that is supposedly common in neo-liberal discourses. The source material that laid the foundations for this article was gathered from within a more extensive ethnographic study where I followed the relocation of a knowledge-intensive civil service agency from the capital of Sweden to a smaller town northwest of the capital.

The analysis shows that, in the process of moving work-place, employees became invested in a fantasy of “ambitious girls”, a fantasy that entailed certain expectations of flexible and mouldable civil service workers in neo-liberal times.

Introduction

The implications of the so-called flexible work environments of late capitalism have resulted in a growing interest in critical studies of work and organization (see Cederström & Hoedemaekers 2010). One of the paradoxes of such flexible work environments is that, at the same time as tribute is paid to organizational and work-force flexibility in terms of increased empowerment and freedom for the workers to make their own decisions, there is also a strong emphasis on controlling their work. Such control includes measuring and auditing the employees’ achievements so that

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their performance becomes quantified and thus comparable, and other practices that are motivated by the argument that they will make work more efficient. What is especially intriguing for the purpose of this study is how these ways of controlling work(ers) hinge upon “shaping how people (have to) think and act accordingly” (Diffenbach 2009: 900) and upon requiring them to imagine themselves as professionals in new ways.

The aim of this paper is to explore some of the gendered implications of these types of work practices that are intertwined with notions of flexibility and efficiency. The study focuses on the installation of “flexible” and “adaptable” practices by professionals among a highly qualified work-force within the Swedish public sector. Work that requires such a highly qualified work-force (henceforth referred to as knowledge work) is usually linked with values of a high degree of individual achievement and commitment, and also with expectations of taking part in the tailoring of the ways in which work tasks can be solved: qualities that are not easily measured by quantitative instruments. Moreover, this can give rise to contradictions that are specific to public sector employees, when the type of knowledge work to be incorporated into public service bureaucracies takes its lead from the multinational, private business sector (see Sennett 2006; Rothstein & Blomqvist 2008).

Where auditing practices such as measuring the performance and achievements of employees have been introduced, they also imply the “re-invention of professionals themselves as units of resource whose performance and productivity must constantly be audited so that it can be enhanced” (Shore & Wright 1999: 559). This also means that people need to adapt to new ways of relating to their work-place, to authority and to each other and themselves and that such relations must be understood as relations of power. This has been analysed in earlier research in terms of audit culture and has been declared symptomatic of neo-liberal managerialism (see, for example, Shore & Wright 1999; Shore 2008). My strategy for exploring how these practices become constructed and sustained is to mobilize the concept of fantasy to scrutinize how work-place practices that install so-called flexible work environments are organized and sustained, and maybe even potentially transformed (see Glynos 2010: 29).

The analysis in this study is undertaken by specifically exploring the forms of knowledge-work fantasies, and especially a fantasy of “ambitious young girls”. Although it has been acknowledged that “audit regimes” build on norms of masculinity and femininity (Archer 2008), this paper contributes with an exploration of how a fantasy about “ambitious young girls” could explicitly become utilized as constitutive of audit cultures in a knowledge-work environment and at the same time produce gendered professional subjectivities. The questions that I specifically address are: what could a fantasy of “ambitious young girls” signify in such a knowledge-work context? What could such a fantasy mean for work practices and the construction of professional subjectivities? How were such practices sustained and/or resisted?

Locations of fantasy

The concept of fantasy has recently been utilized to explore, for example, the legitimization of neo-liberal subjectivities (Dean 2008; Stavrakakis 2008) and the roles of fantasy in working-life contexts (Glynos 2008). Fantasy has also been employed in

(post-structuralist) theoretical developments of how subjects relate to social norms or try to oppose them (Glynos & Howarth 2007) and how fantasy constructs (feminist) history (Wallach Scott 2011). For my exploration of the significance of a fantasy of ambitious young girls, for example, I draw on feminist and post-colonial critiques of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal practices (Hey & Bradford 2004; Massey 2005; Gonick 2006; Archer 2008; Ringrose 2007; Shore 2008) and, more specifically, on theories of the professional investment that is supposedly common to so-called neo-liberal discourses. Here, neo-liberal discourse could be perceived as a fantasmatic narrative that works to implement certain standards of how to live “the good life”, the “prestigious life”, or maybe even “the proper life” and works to install practices of flexibility and adaptability as “natural” or at least well-motivated and thereby difficult to resist.

The concept of fantasy thus becomes useful for investigating the concealment of contingency in professional and organizational life (Stavrakakis 2008; Glynos 2008, 2010). These approaches to fantasy all build on post-structuralist theory inspired by the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as well as Lacan. My way of understanding fantasy in the organizational setting also includes thinking about space (geographical, work, organizational, social, political), at any level of analysis, as always being tangled up in relations of power. I consider Doreen Massey’s argument (see Massey 2005) important in this context as it draws attention to the centrality of exploring the spatial implications of how knowledge-work fantasy is sustained or counteracted.

Girl subjectivity and audit culture

The conceptualizations of girls¹ and the roles that such conceptualizations play in society have mainly been studied in the fields of education (see Ambjörnsson 2004; Davies & Saltmarsh 2007; Ringrose 2007; Baker 2010) and popular and teenage culture (Gonick 2006; Frih & Söderberg 2010). Studies of girls have thus mostly been located in teenagers’ rooms, schools, or—at those times when the pathologization of girls has been the focus—medical institutions (see Johansson 2010). Girl subjectivity, however, has not been thoroughly explored as located in work life (see Katila & Meriläinen 2002). This previous research points to the paradoxical expectations projected on to girl subjectivity as being both a problem and a possibility.

Girls are simultaneously recognized as the potential idealized autonomous neoliberal subject even as they are also always at risk of failing to secure the position. (Gonick 2006: 19)

It is interesting to relate what Ringrose has called the “seductive discourse of successful girls” (2007: 486) to the rather extensive body of critical research about the hegemonic position of flexibility in late capitalist society.

Several scholars have traced how processes of market-driven management have developed within the private corporate sector and have then become the recipes for managing public sector work too in the name of making the public sector more effective and flexible, all under the term of New Public Management (NPM) (see for example Shore & Wright 1999; Sennett 2006; Rothstein & Blomqvist 2008;

Diffenbach 2009). These processes have developed at different rates in different countries and in different parts of the world, but have the common feature of being articulated as a part of neo-liberal ideology. Through these processes, an institutional framework is often promoted that is characterized by the liberty of individuals, unencumbered markets, and free trade (Harvey 2007: 22). However, feminist research highlights how the hegemonization of flexible work as part of neo-liberal ideology may result in declining health for employees and increased gender inequalities in the labour market (Hey & Bradford 2004; Ringrose 2007; Archer 2008; Shore 2008).

Infrastructures set up for governing and controlling work have been analysed and conceptualized as audit regimes and audit cultures (see Archer 2008). These concepts draw attention to—and problematize—the ideological aspects of flexible work environments. Some researchers in this field have scrutinized the effects of New Public Management, for example by exploring how so-called audit cultures develop in current work contexts where audit culture is conceptualized as:

the contexts in which the techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct—and the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices that this is creating. (Shore 2008: 279)

Audit could imply the implementation of new systems of time- and performance-reporting and new computational methods for controlling organizations and measuring individual performance. A central concern of this critically engaged research is that audit acquires great significance for relationships, routines, and other daily business at work (Shore 2008). Since auditing techniques put figures on people's work, they can be used to make the performances of organizations, departments, and individuals comparable (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 172). It then comes down to organizations, departments, and individuals to show that they are “useful”, for if they are sufficiently valuable they will retain their legitimacy and continue to belong. To be positioned as ambitious in such a context could be a way of signalling earnestness and a will to be *adaptable* in accordance with the requirements of the work context.

A case of constant changes: public sector knowledge workers on the move

The source material that laid the foundations for this article was gathered in the last phase of a more extensive ethnographic study where I followed the relocation of a work-place from Stockholm (the capital of Sweden) to Östersund (a town 600 kilometres northwest of the capital).² In this section, I first give the background to the ethnographic field research that led up to this study. Then I describe the interview material used in this study before giving a description of the context of knowledge work specific to the analysis undertaken in this paper.

Interviews with knowledge workers who participated in this study took place during a time that was marked by constant change at the public sector agency where they worked. In the material generated through interviews and observations that I conducted at the agency between 2005 and 2009, I acquired knowledge about employees' professional daily lives in this changing work environment. In the

interviews, their working situation was discussed in concrete terms and from a long-term perspective.

During the process of relocation, it became clear that very few employees in Stockholm chose to remain with the agency when it moved to Östersund, which was why a new work-force was recruited.³ At the height of the hand-over process, I noted that the demand for professionalism was expressed in different ways. Ex-employees in Stockholm were mentioned as experts with long experience in their specialisms who now saw their offices in central Stockholm being packed up and shipped off to the new offices, where others would take over the work that had always been associated with the specific expertise that had been built up in the capital. The Stockholm staff were expected to pass on everything they knew to the new employees in a so-called knowledge transfer. However, the work-force in Stockholm was also described as problematic in the relocation process. For example, it was said to consist of a large number of older women “of a difficult age”, which meant that they were thought slightly too old easily to obtain new jobs, especially when resigning from an organization where so many careers had been built up from the bottom.⁴ This discourse emerged in the process of relocation work and also indicated implications of status in this process of transformation from “old” personnel to “new”.

Interviews

The primary data used in this article consists of 10 interviews with newly recruited staff that I conducted in Östersund in 2009. This was the second time that I interviewed the same individuals. I had also interviewed 16 employees in the autumn of 2006, when the majority of them were recent recruits to the agency. They ranged in age from their early 30s to their 60s; about one-third were identified as men and two-thirds as women. Most of those interviewed at the agency’s offices in the new location had no management responsibilities at that point, although there were a few people from mid-level management amongst the interviewees. The same individuals who were interviewed in the autumn of 2006 were contacted and asked to consider giving a follow-up interview in the spring of 2009; 10 chose to participate in these second interviews. Since this method provided a degree of longitudinal continuity in the source material, I was able to follow the relocation and the subsequent transformations of the organization as a process. The interview material consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in the work-place or in locations elsewhere that were suggested by the interviewees. The interviews were documented by tape recordings that were subsequently transcribed, and/or by interview notes. Given the necessity of informant confidentiality, no names or other information that can be linked to specific individuals are given here, even when quoting directly from interviews. Gender is indicated and age is given in approximate terms.

Public sector knowledge workers

The majority of the staff was made up of analysts; the remainder provided administrative and public relations support. The analysts’ main duties were, and are, to conduct investigations and compile research reviews, to monitor the work of other

government agencies and organizations, and to provide expert advice to ministries and the government to aid in making and implementing policy. Its official website states that, as the national expert agency, it is required to monitor, evaluate, and provide statistics on the political goals defined by the government, all in collaboration with regional and local actors (local authorities and county councils) and international actors (primarily the EU). This work means that the agency's analysts need to be able to network with academics, for example, or with representatives of local government and other government agencies and institutions. When the work-place was based in Stockholm it was described as having a large number of highly qualified employees. The expected level of education was further raised when analysts recruited to the new offices in Östersund were required to have at least a master's degree, while an increasing number of new recruits even had doctorates. The newly recruited personnel, in particular, told me that a position at the agency was much sought after amongst those who wanted to work at the highest level within the agency's policy area (see also Sjöstedt Landén 2011, 2012).

People employed at the agency can therefore be said to fall firmly into the category of "knowledge workers" expected to work with "a great degree of problem-solving and high level of qualification" in "flexible time-cultures" (Kvande 2009: 61). This, as Kvande argues, requires a type of organization that permits its employees a high degree of autonomy, with the attendant increase in post-bureaucratic organizational forms. However, since my study is concerned with public sector knowledge workers, their work is also noticeably bureaucratic. This can give rise to contradictions that are specific to public sector employees, because the type of knowledge work to be incorporated into public service bureaucracies takes its lead from the multinational, private business sector (see Sennett 2006; Rothstein & Blomqvist 2008).

Strategies for analysis

In the following, I address the ways in which the fantasy of ambitious young girls was juxtaposed with the audit culture that was reinforced in the work-place. In the first stage of analysis, I read the material regarding how employees at this government agency became invested in a fantasy of "young ambitious girls" as knowledge-worker subjects. In the second stage, I analyse how the fantasy of "ambitious young girls" could become utilized within neo-liberal practices at work (here conceptualized as audit and audit culture). The notion of ambitious girls was explicitly articulated by informants, but sometimes interviewees only talked about "the new". However, as a group, the new were often referred to as "young", and in addition it was stated in these interviews (as in the larger ethnographical material as a whole) that a majority of the new employees were women. In addition, the new employees were often described as ambitious and enthusiastic. The fantasy of ambitious young girls could therefore be found in the data in explicit ways (when an interviewee used the expression "ambitious young girls" as a description of what characterized the new work-force). In other passages of the material, the fantasy about "ambitious young girls" occurred in more implicit ways, when employees and managers described the characteristics of the work-force as young, enthusiastic, ambitious, and consisting of

a majority of women. Elsewhere, I have discussed how the change of location of the work-place underscored the change from “old” to “new” and made the change in the characteristics of the work-force stand out as particularly distinct (see Sjöstedt Landén 2012).

I have chosen to illustrate the analysis of what a fantasy of ambitious young girls could signify in the process of relocating the work-place with excerpts from interviews as well as descriptions of the content of the interviews. Excerpts from interviews are chosen to exemplify explicit and implicit ways of constructing the fantasy of ambitious young girls. These citations are chosen to illustrate what I will analyse here as a fantasy about how the work-force was described in the data, which means that these excerpts illustrate some of the more widespread notions used for characterizing the work-force. This does not mean, however, that these excerpts claim to speak for the individual employees’ opinions (which would be impossible to capture in a heterogeneous collective). I am merely interested in how they illustrate a fantasmatic narrative that was commonly shared, discussed, and debated in the wake of the relocation of the work-place. In his outline of a discourse analysis informed by a Lacanian conceptualization of fantasy, Glynos argues that fantasy is built up by resources that on the one hand relate to the subjects’ investment in a fantasmatic narrative, and on the other hand to the norms of the practice that this narrative appears to sustain, which can also be contested and possibly counteracted (see Glynos 2010: 33). I draw on these two dimensions as a method for perusing the analysis in this paper.

Becoming invested in a fantasy of ambitious young girls

Several of the interviewees who joined the agency when it relocated said that they had many pleasant colleagues who meant a great deal to them. Many were newcomers to the city, and several socialized after work as well as in the office. They enjoyed themselves at work. There was talk of a pioneering spirit: a special sense of solidarity among the staff, who now had to build up something new in Östersund. The interviewees mentioned this pioneering spirit as an important factor in the working atmosphere of the office. Yet, because these new recruits were often referred to as inexperienced in the agency’s work practices (in comparison to the Stockholm staff), they were particularly keen to show that they could excel at their jobs; in their eagerness to build up something new and exciting, an attitude towards work seems to have taken hold where long hours and late nights were more the rule than the exception. In the interviews, the ambitious atmosphere was related to girl subjectivity. One employee in her 30s stated:

In terms of working atmosphere, it was fun to have such a young [work-force]. It’s nice, but then you also sometimes think, ye-ees, . . . could it be that if you’ve got a bunch of girls, often ambitious . . . well, could you whip up some kind of working atmosphere that isn’t good for individuals? Not competition exactly, but you want to make a decent fist of it. For many of them it’s their first real job and many of them want to go places.

Here much was made of the “good girls” who worked hard and were very ambitious. A female employee in her 40s repeatedly came back to this during the interview:

That’s what I think is actually part of it, that there are an awful lot of good girls who are so loyal, so ambitious, so very, very competent. . . . I think that there’s a very strong sense of duty and loyalty, and that you want to, to do a good job, that’s what I think. . . . in my experience many of them work very, very hard too; very, very hard; up to the point where it’s bad for some of them.

Terms such as “sense of duty” and “loyalty” are thought to be characteristic of “ambitious young girls”. Doing their duty and falling in with both formal and informal hierarchies were seen as a way of doing “a good job”. At the same time, this was noted as something of a problem because such ambitions might back-fire on staff who worked too hard, making some of them ill—in other words, it was expressed as being damaging to work-place health. A work-force supposedly made up of “girls” was thus ascribed a professional identity that in turn could constitute a risk to the working environment.

These two interviews also exemplify how the ambitious young girls were often referred to as “them” or “they”, which made it appear that interviewees were talking about someone else and not themselves. However, in other passages of the interviews, they also used the term “we” in the same context, and in the interview with the woman in her 40s (referred to above) she also reflected upon how she had become part of these orders herself, describing how she had worked long nights and weekends that in turn generated lots of positive feedback about her work.

Notions of age had a particular significance in this context. In the data, the new employees were repeatedly referred to as young in comparison to the Stockholm employees (this was stated by employees and managers alike, irrespective of whether they were seen as part of the “new” or the “old” work-force). However, in its financial assessment of the agency’s relocation, the Swedish National Audit Office writes that the average age of the agency staff had not changed appreciably as a result of the move. This highlights the fact that the fantasy about “new” employees as “young” did not have much to do with actual age. Even a woman in her 60s describes how she adopted the features that were often linked with the fantasy of ambitious young girls, for example, long hours, and at the same time was grateful for being given the opportunity to gain a long-sought-after position at the agency because of the relocation, as well as being part of the settler spirit at the beginning of the agency’s time in Östersund. A conclusion to draw from this could be that the fantasy of ambitious young girls marked out new expectations of how work should be conducted at the new location. What the Audit Office did note, however, was that:

The organization has become more change-oriented. This has meant that the relatively major changes in policy effected shortly before the relocation have been introduced relatively smoothly to the agency. (Riksrevisionen 2009: 82, translated from Swedish)

This citation from the National Audit Office talks about a more “change-oriented” approach as an ideal for conducting work in the organization. It is interesting to link such expectations of adaptability to the feminist literature about working life ideals. It has proved to be such things as adaptability and flexibility that are often thought of as feminine qualities in working life, while self-assurance and efficiency are thought of as masculine (Ringrose 2007: 485). From this perspective, the conception of the new work-force as “ambitious girls” installed a promise of an adaptable and change-oriented work-force. To speak of their abilities in this way generalized about all the employees at the agency, regardless of whether they saw themselves as young, ambitious, or female. It could mean, however, that those identified as “girls” were likely to feel it was their responsibility to live up to the generalized picture.

After all, I’ve had male colleagues as well, and there is an immense difference actually! [Laughter] Younger female staff are simply much more loyal, dedicated, ambitious. The blokes ... they’re more laid back.

While all this talk of ambitious young women became a generalization, about which agency employees would necessarily have had a point of view, this did not mean it was only a way of referring to colleagues. The categorization of colleagues by gender was immensely important for how employees were perceived as *carrying out* their work. Younger women at the agency were said to do their work in a loyal, dedicated, and ambitious manner, while the younger men were said to get through the working day by adopting a more “laid-back” approach, as the interviewee quoted above put it. “Laid-back blokes” were thus identified relative to “ambitious girls”, who in turn were expected to adhere to the normative ideas of the new work-force as generally flexible and change-oriented. By contrasting the manner in which “girls” and “blokes” set about their work, there was also a suggestion that “good girls” could be “too” good, in which case even attributes such as “good”, “dedicated”, and “loyal” could be thought damaging. One of the interviewees quoted above asked whether all these ambitious young women were in fact fostering a working atmosphere “that isn’t good for the individual”. “Ambitious girls” could be interpreted as embodying the ideal, autonomous, and neo-liberal subject, but at the same time they risked positioning themselves as being overly ambitious, perhaps even as causing work environment problems by working “too hard”.

Evidently, the label of young, inexperienced generalist in Östersund was a way of describing a specific group of agency employees: ambitious young women. Yet it was also a way of referring to something very different, namely a generalized picture of the agency staff *as a whole*. To give the entire staff a professional identity as generalists becomes intelligible in terms of the now-lost expertise of the Stockholm staff and also highlights the fact that these processes were intertwined with imaginative geographies of “how the world is made” (Massey 2005: 84). In this case, professional identity became linked with the practices of centralization and decentralization of public sector jobs that rest on a dichotomized relationship between centre and periphery in which centre is granted a privileged position (see also Sjöstedt Landén 2011). This change was intensified during the course of the relocation, and was reinforced by the mass resignation of experienced

employees and the subsequent recruitment of new staff in the wake of the relocation. The newly employed stated that it was because of the decentralization of the workplace that it was possible for them to acquire these jobs. When the agency was located in Stockholm there were very few opportunities to gain a foothold within it.

As indicated in the source material, the relocation period witnessed an intensification and actualization of professional identity issues, for example, in terms of new ways to run the machinery of state. Such formulations are not limited to a narrow concern for this specific work-place, but should also be seen as informing a wider social concern. True, in my qualitative material, specific forms of management, working life, work-load, and organizational change are described and discussed, yet the agency was not the only place in which to see such upheavals. Many of the knowledge-intensive government agencies in Sweden underwent similar processes during the 2000s. This study can therefore be taken to illustrate the way in which organizational changes are juxtaposed with societal and social patterns, which have far-reaching consequences for people's professional lives. This draws attention to the question of how the fantasy of "ambitious young girls" was sustained as well as, potentially, opposed, and this will be addressed in the following section.

Utilizing fantasy: audit culture in public sector knowledge work

There's, kind of, always something new. It's either something political that's going to happen that affects our work: there's going to be a new government, or there's a new organization managing what we do. Just recently it was the new Director General and reorganizing for her, and there's always things like that, one after another. You just have to learn to cope. There's no point in waiting it out, hoping it'll all settle down somehow That's what's normal. It just shifts focus a bit. So it's just something I've realized somehow, which is just as well I reckon. Otherwise you'd end up exhausted. 'Cos there are lots in the group who are exhausted, and it's all down to work-load or leadership or things like that. (Interview with woman in her 30s)

As illustrated in this interview excerpt, there was not only one change during the reorganization. Employees had to deal with several different changes simultaneously—the relocation, a new government, new minister, new Director General, new organization, new case-load, and new demands—all when they had only been with the agency for a couple of years. The interview quoted above reveals the lack of interest in resisting when each restructuring is followed by another, and large numbers of employees "end up exhausted".

Glynos (2010: 33) argues that "the more subjects are invested in fantasies, the more likely they are to read all aspects of their practice in terms of that fantasmatic narrative". However, if the development of new audit systems made out a fantasmatic narrative in this case, the interviews also show that this did not mean that there was no criticism at all of the working environment. The interviewees noted that there had been "rumblings in the organization" and "union discussions". Interviewees were dissatisfied with the

new organizational forms, for example, and with the time- and performance-reporting systems.

We staff have a lot of demands on our time now. We have to report, we have to report our performance, we have to report time worked. We are far more managed, and in quite a different way to what we're used to, and that isn't particularly welcome on the ground ... it's easy to feel that I'm more some kind of function than a person who's a resource. (Interview with woman in her 40s)

New organizational and control systems tend to ruffle feathers, stir up emotions, and provoke employees to react to them (see Hey & Bradford 2004). Nor did they leave people indifferent in this case. It was obvious that the interviewees reacted strongly to the changes. Another employee states:

[We face] different requirements for feedback and key ratios and a bunch of those sorts of boring factors that, ugh! It's enough to make you sick! (Interview with woman in her 40s)

That organizational control systems have "requirements" and can seem "boring" is perhaps not that difficult to imagine, but here the metaphor of feeling physically ill speaks of a system that has a direct effect on the professionals' bodies. In both of the interviews quoted above, there is evident frustration at the agency's new working methods and the increased management of their work. At the same time, there is also quite clearly a realization that this is something that goes with the territory. When such an order stands out as something one cannot choose to opt out of, it becomes a form of governance that is enacted via employees' hearts and minds (Archer 2008: 281). Employees may be angry, upset, or frustrated, but they somehow go along with the new system regardless, for their professional identity is also vested in it because it is thought integral to their work.

It is in this way that so-called neo-liberal technologies screen off alternative attitudes and notions, or make them seem unreasonable. Neo-liberal subjects thus become "exceptionally familiar with, as well as inscribed within" forces that, equally, they might prefer to contest (Hey & Bradford 2004: 692). This does not mean that employees did not react critically to the changes. However, interviewees reported that when they opposed proposed changes, the argument from the leadership was that "we *must* do this now otherwise we won't be able to carry on or they'll shut us down". The "they" in this case was the government, which was painted as a capricious power located somewhere just out of reach of the agency employees. It is clear from the interviews that this type of comment was a source of even greater anxiety for staff. It also underlined the impression that the new ways of controlling work were difficult to contest since responsibility for their implementation could not be pinned on any one person or function. This could also be an element of neo-liberal practices as ideological forces in that they present themselves as, in the end, the only choice because they are seen to lay down the conditions for knowledge work.

Brown (2005: 43 ff.) has described how the depoliticizing of social and economic spheres must be regarded as one of the signature techniques of neo-liberal governance,

and I would argue that working life is one of its most important arenas to control and, consequently, to also control professionals' subjectivity. In accordance with this, the individual professional becomes a marketable commodity and not "a person who's a resource", as one of the interviewees put it. In audit cultures, success is equated with individual responsibility. The significance of the social and organizational aspects of success or failure is generally toned down. Yet, while much of the responsibility falls to individuals (who, moreover, are expected to show initiative), at the same time this type of organization has hierarchical decision paths that give the managers a crucial role (see Glynos & Howarth 2007: 172). The result is a paradoxical office landscape in which the employees of a government agency, imbued with an audit culture, have to work. The contradictions are evident in the fact that, while the analysts were employed as specialists (by virtue of being highly qualified in their fields), it was also suggested that they should move around between different areas of work within the agency. The reason for this was to ensure that agency staff would be as useful as possible, regardless of what, politically speaking, were the hot issues of the moment. A female interviewee in her 40s commented on the difficulties of such organization:

Much was made of the analysts being able to rotate between departments. You can sympathize to a certain extent. But, as a generalist, I really wanted to feel that I knew a bit more about this little bit, and that I knew a bit more about that, and so on. So I can't really see how they're going to get it to work in practice.

This interview offers a good example of how the new control techniques and organizational forms combined with the talk of the work-force, as generalists locked themselves into the generalist role, which was seen as problematic given that a generalist was construed as "less" expert. Another female interviewee in her 30s described how these discussions had proceeded during the relocation process and the following organizational changes.

We were less expert than them, them in Stockholm. We were meant to have, like, a broader range so we could shift focus between issues. That idea lives on, what with the new Director General and all, that we're meant to jump around between fields ... to be useful policy-wise when the focus is on certain questions, that kind of thing.

The interviews show that there were doubts about how the new control models that the agency had implemented would work in practice, which was linked to misgivings about just who would find a generalist's competence useful. For example, this emerged in interviews in which it was clear that the relationship between generalists and experts included relative status. Being pushed to remain generalists left employees torn between doing the job in hand and looking after their own interests in terms of training and career advancement.

When no-one becomes an expert, well, that's just another sort of hidden contrivance to hold people back in some way. It feels like you never get to be really good at anything. It's all well and good being broad, but it'll have

consequences, because then there won't be any real depth to your work. Which makes it hard to be certain on particular issues when you have to speak as a generalist. But thinking of salaries and such, I don't know if it's not rather stupid to think it, but if they're going to say that everyone is a generalist it might have an effect ... Now no-one can be an expert, 'cos after all being an expert means a pay rise and so on. (Interview with woman in her 30s)

The analysts' interest in being recognized as experts stemmed partly from their wish to appear credible in their roles—for example, when offering an expert opinion or developing a network, referring to yourself as a “generalist” does not have quite the same ring to it as “expert”—but also from a sense of careers being blocked, of not being allowed to increase their knowledge, get a better position, or negotiate a pay rise. The professional identity of the generalist was thus seen to be inferior relative to the expertise it was assumed the agency's ex-employees had possessed before the relocation, but it was also described as being strongly dependent on the organizational models and ideals implemented at the agency during and after the relocation.

Concluding discussion

In this paper I have explored what a fantasy of “ambitious young girls” could signify in a knowledge-work context. In conclusion, I argue that the significance of this fantasy was at least twofold: firstly, it was a fantasy that was generalized across the whole body of new staff and held out the promise for knowledge-worker subjects that if they were flexible and mouldable then they would be of maximum possible use to the fluctuating “policy market”. Secondly, however, this fantasy placed a heavy responsibility on the staff to provide proper efficiency for the government institution, particularly on those who identified more closely with the position of ambitious young girls. Consequently, ambitious young girls could also become positioned as responsible when this promise was seen to fail and as systematically disregarding the multiplicity of power structures (including notions of gender, age, and spatiality) in which knowledge workers became enmeshed.

I have also studied what this fantasy meant for the construction of professional subjectivity and the ways in which it was sustained and potentially opposed. This exploration concludes that the gendering of knowledge workers through the fantasy of ambitious young girls could, in Joan Wallach Scott's words, seek to bring subjects' fantasies in line with the “cultural myth and social organization” (2011: 20) of neo-liberal practices. In such a case, the ambitious young girl may work as a normative category for mainstreaming the organization of civil-service work in accordance with neo-liberal agendas regarding flexibility, adaptability, and effectiveness adopted within the Swedish public sector. Although employees were very critical of the developments at their work-place, they were clearly invested in the fantasy of the “ambitious young girl”, regardless of whether or not they themselves sought to identify with such a position. However, even though they were invested in the fantasy, they were also critical of the ideological narratives of audit and other practices of neo-liberalization of their working conditions. They wanted to draw attention to the fact that things could be different from the alternatives posed by the ministry and the management. Nevertheless, these

practices were not disrupted to any large extent, and the employees needed to develop strategies to deal with the uncertainty of their situation.

For audit to become audit culture, more is needed than one specific event or one specific working practice: its organization and legitimization stem from a network of “investors”. These investors can be professionals, organizations, or institutions, but what they are not is gender-, place-, or time-neutral (Hey & Bradford 2004: 703). Yet, all too often in the analysis of public discourses, the element of power inherent in geographical affiliation is overlooked (see Rönneblom 2008). A concluding point of this present study is, furthermore, that power exists not only in the ascription of certain attributes to certain places; it also exists in the insight that there are geographical dimensions to events. Such spatialized power structures were intertwined with professionalism in gendered audit regimes. In the case in hand, new routines for time reporting, the way work was organized, and the long distances between the institutions of power in Stockholm and the agency’s offices in a town 600 kilometres away contributed to putting in place labyrinthine regulations for daily working life that the employees had to act upon—and against. As long as a young work-force made up of ambitious girls was spoken of in the same breath as New Public Management techniques such as job rotation, agency employees could continue to be defined as generalists and so poles apart from the experts—who first and foremost were thought to be in Stockholm. In the process of moving, the work-place employees became vested in a fantasy of “ambitious young girls” that entailed certain expectations of flexible and mouldable civil service workers.

There has been criticism of NPM and audit culture from feminist quarters and calls for a critical study of their effects on the organization of the public sector, prompted in part by the question of the nature of professionalism when such practices can be said to erode professional integrity. Whenever the number of well-educated women increases, and whenever more women are active in the labour market, research has also found that there are strong opinions about what is appropriate work for young women—the type of work-force they should be (see Archer 2008).

The neo-liberal practices conceptualized here as audit culture contributed to constructing gendered professional subjectivities that in turn could sustain and organize such practices at work. It is particularly interesting to consider this gendering of professional knowledge workers. Dean (2008) argues that one very intriguing aspect of neo-liberal ideology is that it can “arrange antagonism and produce enjoyment” (2008: 53). Dean has analysed the role of the fantasy of free trade as sustaining neo-liberal practices and points to the complexity of how enjoyment becomes organized by such a fantasy. Dean argues that the fantasy of free trade “promises that everyone wins, uses losses to reconfirm the necessity of strengthening the system so that everyone wins, and perpetually displaces the thieves of enjoyment throughout the system as warnings, exceptions, and contingencies” (Dean 2008: 59). Although Dean’s analysis does not address any aspects of gender, I think it is possible to believe that a fantasy of ambitious young girls could function in a similar way in that it constructs professional subjectivity as a promise of enjoyment as well as a potential thief of that same enjoyment. In this study, ambitious young girls were posed as a promise of enjoyment of audit culture, as they were seen as being able to fulfil the new requirements of flexibility and mouldability of public sector

knowledge workers. They could also be posed as scapegoats for any failure of such enjoyment, a conclusion that also corresponds with the double role of girl subjectivity outlined by Gonick (2006).

Moreover, when competition between the “ambitious girls” became fiercer, anxiety was gendered in the process. Anxiety about being insufficiently useful, about imminent restructuring at work, or about financial crises or general elections all became gender-specific. Such anxiety has been described as inherent in audit cultures, but Hey and Bradford (2004: 703) argue that audit culture not only gives rise to anxiety, but also to desire, given that identities are vested in normative practices, and as such they too are gendered. Individuals or institutions that try to challenge or “stand outside” the governance that audit culture necessitates will pay a high price in the shape of reduced credibility and status (Shore 2008: 291).

Notes

¹ The word “girl” has been discussed in a Swedish context within the emergent field of Girlhood Studies (see Frih & Söderberg 2010). As a concept, “girl” is described as difficult to define and charged with multiple meanings. In the case of this study, “girl” is translated from the Swedish word *tjej*, which is synonymous with the word *flicka*, although *flicka* may be more commonly used for describing children. Frih and Söderberg (2010: 11) note, however, that neither *tjej* nor *flicka* is necessarily associated with a particular age or phase in life, but is dependent on the context in which it is articulated.

² In 2005 Sweden’s then Social Democratic government decided that the agency should be relocated from Stockholm to Östersund (see also Lokaliseringsutredningen, 2004). The travel time between the locations is approximately one hour by plane or six hours by train and closer to eight by car. Between 2005 and 2009 I conducted some 40 interviews and participant observations on almost 30 occasions. The field-work required that I spend time with agency employees in both locations. Throughout the course of the agency’s relocation I stayed in regular contact with employees by email and telephone.

³ The Swedish National Audit Office wrote in its economic assessment of the agency’s relocation that 100% of the analysts were new employees recruited at the time of the move. Only one person moved from Stockholm to Östersund (Riksrevisionen 2009).

⁴ When the offices were in Stockholm, 75% of employees were women (agency’s documentation). This figure did not change when the new employees were recruited to Östersund. The average age of the workforce was 44 in 2004, when the agency was still based in Stockholm, and 45 in 2008, when the agency had completed its relocation to the new offices (Riksrevisionen 2009).

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