



Dystopia as an Organizational Metaphor

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DYSTOPIA AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL METAPHOR

This introduction to the dystopian metaphor incorporated a description of the exegetical methods used to interpret Scripture. The Deuterocanonical verses from the Catholic canon provided insightful teachings spoken by the Jewish lecturer Jesus Ben Sirach. The following pericope contains the specific passages:

Many have committed sin for a gain, and whoever seeks to get rich will avert his eyes. As a stake is driven firmly into a fissure between stones, so sin is wedged in between selling and buying. If a man is not steadfast and zealous in the fear of the Lord, his house will be quickly overthrown (Ecclesiasticus 27:1–3, Revised Standard Version).

In order to properly exegete these verses, this study involved three methods of interpretation: (a) McGrath's (1998) explanations of historical and philosophical theology, (b) Osborne's (2006) methods of hermeneutics and contextualization, and (c) Heinisch's (1950) text on Old Testament (OT) theology. According to McGrath (1998), "Theology is an intellectual discipline in its own right" with an emphasis on "systematic analyses

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of the nature, purposes, and activity of God” (pp. 2–7). In other words, the purpose of any theology pertains to an intentional study of God’s influence in any context so that sacred learning can occur. Philosophical considerations provide a framework for theological research in order for a researcher to decipher between one’s intellectual assumptions and truths derived from sacred writings. Osborne (2006) defined hermeneutics as “that science and art which delineates principles or methods for interpreting an individual author’s meaning” (p. 21). Furthermore, Osborne (2006) listed three levels of hermeneutical interpretation: (a) “exegesis”, (b) “devotional”, and (c) “sermonic” (p. 22). These three aspects of his model guided the exegetical and qualitative study of Sirach’s lecture.

OT theology represents the third method of interpretation in this study. According to Heinisch (1950), “OT theology points out what religious ideas and moral requirements were defended by enlightened souls, what the masses should have accepted, and what the religious and moral conditions were among the people” in Israel and the nations around them (p. 23). This methodology held strong importance regarding the risk of researcher bias affecting the interpretational process. In order to reduce the likelihood of committing eisegesis, Heinisch’s (1950) findings counterbalanced all three hermeneutical levels of interpretation so that the results could have some generalizability and objectivity.

The purpose of this study involved the development of a new metaphor to describe organizational societies with dysfunctional behavior: dystopias. Organizations can be metaphorically described as societies: collective bodies of citizens who bring their assumptions, worldviews, opinions, and upheld beliefs about work relationships and all organizational variables that directly or indirectly impact them into the workplace (Presthus, 2012). According to Morgan (2006), “The metaphors and ideas through which we ‘see’ and ‘read’ situations influence how we act” (p. 340). In other words, the mental images that organizational citizens use to evaluate behaviors and statements made by others determined to a degree the effects of those evaluations on current and future memberships within those collective bodies. In fact, organizational psychologists may refer to these social patterns with the imagery of scripts: mentally and socially constructed patterns of evaluative thinking reinforced through social exchanges. However, many of today’s organizations resembled dysfunctional societies in which their citizens expressed a plurality of worldviews that clashed, a plethora of beliefs and ideologies that threatened the livelihood of members in those social bodies, and a learned expectation that a

society's citizens have expendable, disposable value. Philosophical analysts analyzed the worldviews expressed by workers in today's companies. Their findings revealed a plethora of perceptions held by company members that led to negative results for an organization's overall performance (Belloc, 1937; Hart, 1993; Velasquez, 2006). The following research proposed two themes that described an organizational dystopia from a social identity perspective: (a) a consistent emphasis on the mentioning of precarious employment in order to influence workers to maximize their output and (b) a dehumanization of service members through devaluing of their emotional and mental labors.

According to Strow and Strow (2011), "Society can be defined by geographical location, familial relationship, or shared interest" (p. 62). In essence, the term society lacked a universally accepted definition. Some researchers stated that "the definition of society must cover a specified number of individuals in a precise space for a precise amount of time" (p. 61). This type of definition provided a good description for an organizational context. A set group of workers operates daily for a specified period of time within a specific location and perform routine tasks that fulfill organizational purposes. Their work relationships provide psychological stimulation and exchanges of information that help to coordinate processes and complete procedures. These relationships also develop personal relationships that add meaning to employees' sense of value and self-worth. The difference between a society and a culture holds importance for this study because cultures reveal "learned mental patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting" among individual workers (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 4). However, organizational societies reveal preexistent relationships and shared rituals that guide routines performed by the society's citizens.

The terms utopia and dystopia provided a dichotomous image of two extreme ideals. Utopia refers to an ideal society of harmony or one being in a perfect state of peace. In this ideal image, a utopia's citizens coordinate each other's actions in a shared effort to achieve organizational outcomes without using tactics that cause harm to any organizational citizens (Hart, 1993). Mannheim (1936) stated that "a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs" (p. 192). In other words, the concept of a utopia in one's vision of a future organizational state of existence conveys a longing for complete peace and peaceful relationships among all citizens within an organizational community. A dystopia represents the image of an organizational community

whose citizens not only violate each other's rights of membership, but they also act with a mindset that believes in the inevitability of discord caused by a passive acceptance of toxic behaviors occurring on a routine basis. Unhealthy standards of coordinating social relationships and production represented a normalization of abnormal ways of conducting daily tasks and maintaining one's membership within an organization.

Two types of organizations exemplify traits of organizational dystopias: (a) call centers and (b) customer service operations (CSOs). These two types represent most organizations in the United States, India, and Europe. Workplaces where knowledge-transfer and customer service transactions commonly take place constitute a large segment of the job markets today (Hira & Hira, 2005). In fact, Woodcock (2017) noted that "from the mid-1990s, the most dynamic area of growth in white-collar employment internationally has been in call centers" (p. 14). However, the jobs that composed call center workplaces had negative reputations associated with high burnout, high attrition rates, and a perceived lack of value toward the workers' mental and emotional labor. According to Michel and Ashill (2013), "Call center agents perform an essential role in the implementation of customer contact strategies and in the delivery of frontline services, which is crucial to the management of customer relationships" (p. 245). In their study, Michel and Ashill (2013) sought "to draw on various models of burnout and test hypotheses relating to anticipated differences in the burnout process between inbound versus outbound call center agents" (p. 245). The researchers discovered "significant differences between inbound and outbound call center agents in terms of the extent to which emotional exhaustion impacts depersonalization as well as the extent to which depersonalization influences feelings of reduced personal accomplishment" (Michel & Ashill, 2013, p. 245).

Woodcock (2017) performed a case study in a call center located in the United Kingdom. The purpose for the study involved a desire to "identify a shift from the exploitation of the bodies of workers during the Fordist mode of production to exploiting the minds of workers in increasingly larger numbers" (Woodcock, 2017, p. 55). The researcher used qualitative methods and perspectives to analyze call center phenomena which included the Marxist philosophy, ethnography, narrative analysis, Taylorism, and the concept of the Panopticon. Based on the analysis, Woodcock (2017) made seven conclusions:

- The arrangement of the call-center floor resembled a Panopticon in that the supervisors arranged the environment in a way to intensely inspect or survey the call agents for physical performance and to observe their computer screens.
- The workplace operated with the created sense of precariousness around the workers. The workers felt that their employment always had unstable status, their relationships with the employer had high insecurity, and that their employment with the call center could be immediately lost without due process and for the slightest error. The constant feeling and warning of precarious employment from management caused a slave-like orientation among representatives to the point of submitting themselves into the acceptance of capitalistic exploitation.
- Managerial bullying stifled the push for unionization by causing too much turnover.
- The style of Taylorist management transcended from the factory lines of the twentieth century to the call centers of the twenty-first century through a shift from factory workers to chain workers.
- The managers created a highly controlled environment in which the struggle between capital and labor remained a constant theme among the representatives and their supervisors. The constant call surveillance, low wages, high stress, precarious employment, draining emotional labor, and pervasive electronic surveillance created a shared sense of workplace toxicity.
- Call center representatives suffered from the exhaustive mental labor of fearing any deviance from call scripts which they had to comply with during every call.

CSOs represented another large portion of employers in today's service-driven economy. Tseng (1999) stated that "the growing importance of the service sector in almost every economy in the world has created a significant amount of interest in service operations" (p. 50). CSOs involve constant interactions between customers and workers where customers actively participate in the organizational processes of production (Tseng, 1999). In fact, the research performed by Barnes, Hinton, and Mieczkowska (2005) indicated that "in today's increasingly competitive markets, greater emphasis is being placed on customer service as a means of achieving competitive advantage" (p. 17). However, the increased push for the highest quality of customer service performance often led to a

strong focus on customer satisfaction and low placement of value on the employees' emotional and mental reactions. Heinonen and Strandvik (2015) stated that "customer-dominant logic (CDL)" strongly influenced perceptions of customer behaviors in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (p. 472). The CDL model "emphasized how customers embedded service in their processes rather than how firms provided services to customers" (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015, p. 472). Due to the strong emphasis on customer satisfaction, the effects of customer behaviors on employee morale received little concern from organizational leaders. The degree of customer satisfaction greatly determined the present and future status of an organizational member's position or role within the organizational community. The following research proposes that this overemphasis on customer satisfaction, while deemphasizing the psychological, emotional, and sociological effects on an organization's citizens and internal community, led to the current problem of dystopic phenomena within both call centers and CSOs.

METHOD

This study involved an exploration of secondary data recorded on the Glassdoor website. Purposeful data emerged from entries made under two organizational profiles. The first profile represented a call center operation and the other profile represented the CSO. Both organizations employed over 1000 employees and had over 500 employee-entries recorded. Both profiles also had an overall rating of 2.7 out of 5, which indicated a lower-than-average satisfaction score by their current and previous employees. The following analysis treated the words employee, citizen, and member synonymously.

In order to interpret the data, this study incorporated the truth-oriented theory. According to Patton (2002), "The presumption is that there is a real world with verifiable patterns that can be observed and predicted- that reality exists and truth is worth striving for" (p. 91). In other words, a researcher can obtain objective truths to a reasonable degree that capture aspects of reality using truth-based inquiries and several worldviews when one interprets something.

The data analysis also incorporated the "social identity perspective" (Barentsen, 2011, p. 38). According to Barentsen (2011), "Social identity refers to a person's sense of 'us', of belonging to a group" (p. 38). Furthermore, this perspective incorporates both the psychological and sociological dimensions examined in organizational research:

Identity is understood as people's sense of who they are, as their subjective self-concept. This definition interprets identity as a subjective psychological experience and not as an objective entity...People usually perceive their personal identity as a relatively stable core or essence, but it is more like a psychological reality. Personal identity tells an individual that he is different from other individuals. (Barentsen, 2011, p. 38)

Methods

The data collection involved the use of “purposeful sampling” from two organizational profiles of employee reviews on Glassdoor (Patton, 2002, p. 46). According to Patton (2002), the method of purposeful sampling allows “one to learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 46). The intention of using the purposeful method pertained to the need to capture key themes that supported the concept of a perceived dystopia regarding an organizational environment. The analytical process included an emphasis on repetitive themes that summarized entire paragraphs or reviews.

Since this qualitative study involved an exploratory approach to the data, the method of “holistic coding” guided the analytical process (Saldana, 2013, p. 140). According to Saldana (2013), “Holistic coding applies a single code to each large unit of data in the corpus to capture a sense of the overall contents and the possible categories that may develop” (p. 141). Furthermore, this study incorporated “a general idea of what to investigate in the data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 142). Empirical researchers supported the use of holistic coding in multiple fields of study. For example, Dolan and Ayland (2001) stated three benefits to a qualitative analysis when one builds a theory: (a) the holistic method “provides researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data”, (b) this method also “helps analysts consider alternative meanings of phenomena”, and (c) the method “allows the researcher to be systematic and creative simultaneously” (p. 379). In a qualitative study of the effects of self-directed learning, the holistic coding process “highlighted how both groups of veterinary science students overwhelmingly tended to prefer solo forms of learning, strong teacher guidance and survival study strategies to pass exams and/or get good marks” (Raidal & Volet, 2009, p. 588). A study of teacher effectiveness included holistic coding for the researchers to analyze field notes (Grant, Stronge, & Xu, 2013).

RESULTS

The first holistic analysis involved entries made under a profile that represented a call center operation with over 10,000 employees nationwide and an operation highly focused on business process outsourcing (BPO) services. Based on a total of 1190 reviews available, this analysis included 40 purposeful samples recorded during the year 2018. These samples contained rich explanations of negative traits experienced by non-managerial workers. Based on all 40 samples, the most repetitive themes emerged in the findings: (a) a strong conviction that one has a disposable role easily replaced by a new member from a completed class within a quick period of time, (b) a constant fear of downsizing due to the essence of short-term contracts and limited budgets, (c) a strong lack of effective training in which call agents experienced massive exoduses out of training classes into work-floor cubicles, (d) a consistent disregard to call agents' needs for recognition and personal value to the organization from a long-term perspective, and (e) a significantly high amount of discrepancies observed regarding punishment for perceived violations of standard operating procedures (SOPs).

The second holistic analysis also involved entries made under a profile that represented a CSO with over 10,000 employees. This CSO operated in the retail-grocery industry while serving primarily the communities located in New York, Vermont, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. While only 498 reviewers submitted their reviews on Glassdoor, the overall rating for this CSO from an employee-satisfaction standpoint held a 2.7 out of 5. The analysis included 35 entries based on the richness of content written in each review. Most reviews contained only a few sentences with generalized descriptions. The following repetitive themes emerged from the holistic analysis: (a) a highly inadequate training process which led to employees feeling poorly developed to perform daily tasks, (b) a perceived lack of staff available to perform department functions on a routine basis, (c) a strong disregard from management for job support and help when customers complained, and (d) a shared perception that the employees' psychological and emotional needs held little to no importance.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study involved the development of the dystopic metaphor in order to describe organizational societies with dysfunctional behavior. Based on sociological research into utopias, a normally functioning society represented an ideal community in a state of harmony where its citizens coordinated each other's actions in a shared effort to achieve organizational outcomes without using tactics that caused harm to any organizational citizens. This aspect of a utopian organization incorporates the idea of a psychologically and socially safe community where newcomers can learn, develop, and belong to a broader network of relationships that positively contribute to individual and group learning. However, the behavioral challenges of dystopian members tend to stifle the development of a newcomer's sense of potential belonging to that organization. It is within the probationary period of a new member's training that membership and commitment either grow or diminish. For example, a continued use of poor training methods often leads one to believe that his or her existence within an organizational community has little to no importance beyond transactional goods derived from one's production after successfully completing a training process. Based on the findings, both sets of reviews revealed inadequate training methods that led to internal citizens feeling the four Ds: (a) disregarded, (b) dehumanized, (c) devalued, and (d) disposable. In a healthy, organizational society, each member feels that he or she has perceived value that validates the person's occupational identity from both an individual and a shared perspective. However, a "sick" society within an organization contains a shared emphasis on the invalidation of any individual member's value or contributions to the operational process (Fromm, 1955, p. 217). The citizen's value receives devaluation or deliberate disregard through inconsideration of that person's emotional or psychological labors directly involved in customer interactions. If an organization's internal citizens consistently feel ostracized or dehumanized into merely disposable resources for a service operation, then the external effects directly affect the experiences that customers have inside the organizational community.

The constant fear of downsizing due to the essence of short-term contracts and limited budgets, combined with the experience of perceiving masses of trainees and new hires being exited out of classes into cubicles, conveys the notion that one has precarious value to the working society. The perception of precariousness in one's employment validates the belief

that one does not belong to the organizational community on a long-term basis, that one's identity within that community has short-term value only. Therefore, the opportunity to build a long-term commitment between leaders and followers is stifled by the overwhelming sense of latent rejection conveyed by the atmosphere of disposable laborers, and the toxic leadership behaviors that reinforce the short-term orientation toward societal membership. Newton (2019) noted that a major theme described in the data collection he analyzed pertained to an "inhumane" perspective of employees when leaders emphasized short-term expectations of working relationships (p. 2). In other words, the constant emphasis on short-term expectations of work and longevity created a strong sense of inhumane work conditions that violated one's natural inclination toward building a long-term identity: an identity rooted in belongingness to an organizational society of members working toward an important, and perhaps a sacred, purpose.

A growing body of researchers continue to work toward the reduction of inhumane work conditions by influencing organizational leaders into adopting spiritual frameworks that build a shared sense of a higher calling in one's work (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010). One of the assumptions behind theories of spiritual leadership states that organizational members have natural desires to feel connected to both their work and working relationships from a non-transactional perspective. The members desire a sense of meaning and purposefulness in their daily labor that provides a greater productivity than one of mere financial profit. The concept of an organization as a society supports this assumption because a society refers to a natural grouping phenomenon in which members put themselves into communities where social connections, homeostasis, stability, and mutual validation occur (Moffet, 2018; Schein, 1985). A limitation of this study involved no use of interviews or focus groups. Secondary sources provided all data analyzed in the research. By using secondary sources, the ability to record contextual traits had no opportunity for use. Another limitation of this study pertained to the exclusive use of qualitative research methods. However, the truth-oriented theory provided a basis for interpreting the online comments with a level of certainty in the realities perceived in the reviews. Furthermore, the use of holistic coding provided a broader framework for interpreting the data in comparison to other types of coding that narrowly focus on specific traits.

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