Affectual Demands and the Creative Worker: Experiencing Selves and Emotions in the Creative Organisation

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Self-expression is arguably at the core of creative practices and creative work. As creative work is focused on the production of aesthetic products largely through autonomous and self-regulated work practices, individuals and selves are called upon more directly in its production. For example, it has long been observed that creative workers express a strong sense of attachment to their work that is unrivalled in other forms of work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Thompson, Parker, & Cox, 2016). Creative work, therefore, is particularly relevant for understanding new work norms that demand an intimacy in the experiences of self and work (Gregg, 2011). Similarly, creative work settings are viewed as sites that are increasingly reliant on 'mobilising the subjectivity of labour' (Thompson et al., 2016) in order to capture qualities of the individual that benefit the production of creative work. Management attempts this by capturing the desires of the workers, including those for self-realisation, thereby aligning

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the interests of the worker with the interests of capital. Work is no longer seen as a constraint on the individual's freedom to 'fulfil his or her potential through strivings for autonomy, creativity and responsibility', but rather as 'an essential element in the path of self-realization' (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 27). Such attempts reflect a kind of 'soft capitalism' approach to work that tries to incorporate intimate 'life' experiences of the worker directly in and through work in the hopes of securing worker commitment and replacing more coercive forms of control, which are often resisted more actively (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Heelas, 2002; Thrift, 2005).

And yet, an individual's attempts to capture life and intimacy in his or her work have a largely affective component; that is, they call on emotional experiences of 'love' and 'fulfilment' in what can be considered a new form of affective labour (Gregg, 2011). Such demands inspire the collapsing of boundaries between self and work. This collapsing of boundaries and workers' emotion work in attempting to navigate them is particularly salient within an organisational setting, where individuals are guided by dominant organisational discourses and practices. This chapter attempts to make sense of the 'new normal' experiences of living and working with the self in the creative organisation by exploring the emotion talk of creative workers within an organisation that develops video games.

Creative work, self, and affect

Much has been already said about the rise of the 'new creative class', about the rise of creative labour, cultural work, and cultural and creative industries and their economic significance (cf. Howkins, 2013; Menger, 2014). While little agreement is reached about how to label this new frontier of work, creative work and creative workers are 'in the cockpit of attention, front and centre of the latest rollouts of neoliberal programs' (Ross, 2008, p. 32). Addressing creative work as defined by the activities and work that stems from the symbol-making of immaterial production casts a very wide net and almost captures the activity of individuals in many, if not almost all occupations. Instead, like Hesmondhalgh and

Baker (2011), I include here in my definition of 'creative worker' those working in organisations where the primary activity is to produce aesthetic products.

Empirical research on creative workers and their conditions have focused on various conditions of their work, including autonomy, specialisation, and social engagement (Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016), identity (Alvesson, 1994; Taylor, 2010; Taylor & Littleton, 2013), as well as establishing definitions of 'good' and 'bad' creative work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008, 2011). Despite the contemporary interest in the creative worker, most recent studies continue to call for more empirical research in the area, as it appears that a superabundance of individuals are answering the call to creativity (Caves, 2000). As Banks (2007, p. 4) states, 'we still know very little about the working lives of this new army of dot-commers, music-makers, fashionistas, net gurus, brand-builders, cool-hunters and image-entrepreneurs'. Of the studies published since Banks' observation, we know that creative work is primarily described as flexible, insecure, highly mobile, poorly paid, and with a 'mixture of anxiety and attachment to creative endeavours and aesthetics' (Thompson et al., 2016, p. 3). The most frequently discussed aspect of creative work seems to be uncertainty (cf. Menger, 2014), or the political and precarious nature of work where stable forms of work are absent and boundaries are porous (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008; Thompson et al., 2016).

The majority of in-depth empirical studies on creative workers have therefore explored creative workers working in precarious positions within organisations (for example, as on short-term contracts, Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008, 2011), either as aspirants (McRobbie, 1998; Taylor & Littleton, 2013) or as self-employed (Taylor, 2015). The demands and experiences of work in a creative organisation under stable employment may imply rather different structural and socio-psychological dynamics. In these settings, workers become hardened subjects of organisational discourses and structures that offer resources for creative work but also regulate behaviours and norms as well as experiences. Studying the dynamics of creative work in the setting of a creative organisation can further develop our understanding of creative work and workplace relations of the creative worker. Critical literature examining workplace relations in organisations argues for the unequal power relations between employer and employee or between management and worker. To this end, studies have been quick to

criticise management approaches that attempt to incorporate aspects of the individual as part of the means of production by aligning organisational interests with individual interests (Andersen & Born, 2008; Bojesen & Muhr, 2008; Du Gay, 1996; Hanlon, 2017; Heelas, 2002). These theorists address the capturing of desires for self-realisation but also the capturing of affect as part of the demanded intimacy of the new normal of contemporary work (Gregg, 2011).

Not only are experiences of self and work regulated by these new approaches within organisations, but so is the workers' capacity and demand for emotional expression, as witnessed in the emotion talk of workers. This type of emotion work is clearly exhibited in other in-depth studies of creative workers (cf. Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Taylor & Littleton, 2013). The regulation of selves in organisational environments has already been studied empirically through the lenses of identity (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2010), organisational culture (Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992), the dialectics of control and resistance (Fleming & Sturdy, 2010), and even emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), to name just a few key dimensions. However, the creative organisation as a context for exploring relations of selves and work offers a new frontier for exploring these dimensions further.

These existing studies present detailed accounts of organisational activities but also of individuals' reactions to them. In most accounts, there has been a great deal of ambivalence in the experience of, and attempts at, self-regulation at work, with many coping by distancing the self from work through cynicism (Fleming & Sturdy, 2010; Kunda, 1992) or questioning the authenticity of self-performances (Hochschild, 1983). These studies also show how workers who attempt to capture their selves in their work are able to articulate and reflexively redraw the boundaries between themselves and their work through their talk, which is a form of resistance and coping. In this chapter, I show how such activity becomes rather challenging for creative workers, how the individual's relationship to his or her work becomes difficult to uncouple in the shadows of the affectual demands of working in creative fields. The complication of selves and these affectual demands on individuals implies the potential value of exploring the emotion talk of creative workers in creative organisations to offer new insights about the experiences and challenges of work and life in the contemporary creative organisation.

The case of Octant Studio

The empirical material that forms the basis for this chapter formed a part of a larger research project exploring the relationships between creativity and identity in a creative workplace. The study's aim was to explore and unpack the experiences of creatives working in a creative organisation and relate them to the broader organisational qualities. The nature of this research project was qualitative–interpretive, gathering largely observational and interview material at a Swedish video game development company over a seven-month period. The materials collected over this period comprise 41 semi-structured interviews with organisation members and field notes from observations at meetings and everyday interactions. Interviews were conducted on site at the organisation in various private meeting rooms. They were audio-recorded and later transcribed. All 41 interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 40 and 100 minutes, with the average interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. All names, including the organisation's name, are pseudonyms, to respect the promised confidentiality of the interviewees. During the interview sessions, the talk focused on (1) the individuals' backgrounds and life stories, (2) the relationship between the self and creativity, (3) creativity issues they experienced, and (4) creativity and the organisation. The interviews were conducted mainly with workers directly engaged in various forms of creative work, for example, game and concept artistry, music and sound design, level design, and game production. Nearly all interviewees identified themselves and their work as being highly creative, with creativity being particularly meaningful to their self-understandings. Observations in meetings and everyday interactions corroborated the narratives of these creative selves. For example, the observation of a team-building exercise involving one of the design teams and run by Human Resources, encouraged team members to reflect on results from psychometric testing they had done in order to 'make sense of who you are' and to 'get to know yourself' for the purposes of 'working better in the team'. This reflected how the organisation was rather instrumental in fostering selves as a part of the work. Such observations contextualised the talk and texts of the creatives and offered insights into the organisational dynamics of creative work. These observed organisational dynamics further contextualised the

emotion talk of interviewees, or the 'speakable emotions', as discursive constructions (Coupland, Brown, Daniels, & Humphreys, 2008) and allowed a deeper understanding of the social constructions of emotions in the context of contemporary creative work within a creative organisation.

Octant Studio (Octant), a major video game development studio in Sweden, began in 1999 as a start-up company producing small, easy-to-market games. Their attention to detail and production of high-quality games slowly began to garner the attention of the global market, and the studio was swiftly purchased in 2008 by a well-known global video game producer. Following the purchase, the studio became one of the key developers of a major game franchise and, in 2014 (when the fieldwork began), was in the last stages of developing the blockbuster (triple A) game that would launch the franchise. For the purposes of developing the blockbuster game, the studio was undergoing a period of significant growth, growing the employee base as much as 20% within one year. The structure of the organisation went through several changes during the growth period, with many promotions of individuals to team 'leads' and changes to the production management team. The game itself had also seen a number of changes to its initial design, with people taking some 'big hits' and even walking off the project, which some felt had 'cut features to the bone' and consequently things were 'going in all and any directions'. These changes, coupled with impending deadline pressures, were expressed as 'difficult' and 'horrible'. With this challenging and insecure working environment, as well as the growing organisational demands on individuals, the studio was an appropriate site for exploring the 'new normals' for selves and emotions that may be called upon and experienced in contemporary creative work settings.

The collapsed self

The interviewees were asked about their general ideas around their work and their relationship to it—if they struggled with it, how they experienced it, and how it made them feel to do creative work. Similar to the findings of other studies of creative work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Taylor & Littleton, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016), many of the interviewees

expressed a strong and personal relationship between themselves and their work:

> I think for me … this might be very personal but … I really like the feeling of using my creativity to deliver a something that is unique to me, 'this is a piece of me right there' […][1] I find that very interesting and fun and engaging. (Felix, Sound Engineer)

> But when I bring something to the table that [colleagues] can't do … that isn't based on expertise … that isn't based on how long I've worked here … that's based on *me.* And that's the difference between being good at something and having learnt something. (Aidan, Level Designer)

> I guess it's also a matter of not being too afraid of putting yourself out there. Because I guess being creative is a bit intimate in that sense … it's very much you, you're putting *yourself* out there … like it's part of my personality and I'm expressing myself when it comes to music or art or something. (James, Games Artist)

> I want them to understand how good I am […] Like when we show stuff to the world … like that is directed by me or written by me or … or the whole creative package *is* me on a plate … it's me … everything that you see here is … it's me … that's me. (Ryan, Game Designer)

In their accounts, Felix, Aidan, James, and Ryan expressed a very entangled relationship between themselves and their work. They experience their work as not only representative but actually constitutive of who they are—'I'm expressing myself'—so that through their work they have the opportunities to work on and construct desirable selves. As Ryan states, he wants others and the world to 'understand how good' he is and it is through his work that he has the chance to be recognised as the 'good' creative worker he desires to be. This relationship between self and work, therefore, has a deeper meaning for individuals. For Felix, delivering a piece of himself is a source of interest, fun, and engagement and brings joy to his experience of work. Aidan is able to prove himself relative to his peers by delivering something that is a part of him. For James, expressing himself through his work is a part of how he understands himself, which is a very personal and intimate experience for him.

Such accounts do not represent a simple and superficial attachment to the individual's work but are constitutive of much more complex and complicated entanglements of selves with work. These entanglements blur or even collapse boundaries between self and work. Individuals describe their work as a 'part of' themselves and their self-understandings, as well as an essential part of how they derive meaning from their work. The collapsing of these boundaries is particularly interesting in the Octant context, where such collapsed self-understandings are actively encouraged through the organisation's practices. For example, at Octant, 'loving your work' is considered an ideal, and having love and passion for one's work is disciplined through the discourses of the 'ideal worker'. We see this as Tim, a senior producer on the game, describes what he considers important when recruiting new organisational members:

> I mean it's important to us that they are so in love with what they do that […] most of the guys [in the job interview] we ask them 'what do you do in your spare time?' and if the answer isn't 'oh I love games, I play games … I wrote this mini game for the Apple … for the Apple iOS' … if they say 'no' to that then we kinda go—'Okay so you don't play games in your spare time? You don't programme in your spare time? You're not interested in art outside of work? Okay well maybe we're not the employer for you.' (Tim, Producer)

This disciplining of an intimate relationship with one's work is evident in the accounts of other senior managers, some of whom clearly articulated to me that passion and care for one's work is 'super important' for individuals to exhibit at Octant. In the following account, James describes how such views are part of the culture at Octant, where people working here have a 'passion' for the kinds of games that are produced there:

> I guess it has to do again with like the scope of the project they have here and the size of the company like it's very hard-core in that sense. In some other companies you might get a bit more of a varied … like they [workers] are all from different backgrounds and it's kind of weird how they all ended up there … but here it's just the profile the company has and the type of games they're developing. So you're not just going to end up here by

accident, you kind of have to actively be interested in these types of games and have a passion for working with them. (James, Games Artist)

In line with these demands, many workers did express strong feelings of love for their work:

I think it's something I *need*. I think you learn that there are some things that give you joy. Like some people have joy by doing bank stuff, for other people it's running or just climbing things. For me this is something that makes me very happy. It's one of the things I love the most. (Janet, Level Designer)

I love it but I work really really hard. Harder than I should actually … which is really interesting. There's a lot I constantly think about cause I do probably do the most hours […] Oh I live for this. I live for … the rest of … I mean I have a lot of joy in my life—in fact my life outside of work is wonderful. I have a great life but the reason I do everything in my life is to do this well. (Charlie, Team Lead)

I felt like 'oh my god I created this, I wrote this story' and it was a really good feeling in my stomach and I always felt like that. Being creative is, when it goes well, it's almost like a drug. You get some kind of dopamine … whatever the good chemical is in your body … it's a really fantastic feeling. (Daniel, Programmer)

From these accounts, we see that the close relationship between self and work can be a source of meaningfulness and many positive emotions for individuals carrying out creative work. Workers experience emotions such as love, happiness, fulfilment, even a 'rush' from doing creative work. In this way, encouraging affectual and intimate relations between workers and their work may be beneficial to individuals' sense of selves and their well-being. In further exploring the emotion talk of creative workers at Octant, it became evident that just as experiences of positive emotions were intensified by the relationship to one's work, darker and more challenging emotions were also expressed and dealt with in response to the new norms that demand affections for one's work and that ultimately collapse the boundaries between selves and work.

The emotional self

Although this strong coupling of selves to work may be a reason for workers to have powerful, positive emotional experiences of work, it became clear in the workers' talk that this coupling also resulted in a variety of other less positive emotional experiences, including pain, resentment, frustration, anger, disengagement, fears, and insecurities:

> With this project that I was talking about that I was immensely proud of it was eventually scrapped so that was quite painful to be honest. It can be very very very painful because I was very proud of the work we had done and I was a very happy with the work itself … and I had put a lot of myself into it and then it took a while to readjust. And for a while I was quite bitter that I had to work on a project that I thought was less creatively satisfying. (Conrad, Game Designer)

> The most frustrating aspect of this is if you're working on a prototype project and for some reason it doesn't get approved […] This was your baby that you were working on […] First of all you feel very frustrated because you spent a lot of time working on it […] so cutting out one of the things you might get a little bit angry because you wasted your time working on it. (Anthony, Producer)

> See that's why it hurts so much if somebody cuts [something] off … or if they criticise it. So you need to be both brave and a bit hard but still when it's creative work you need to be very sensitive and give a part of yourself—so I think that's why it's so difficult. If you put yourself into it and it doesn't go well it's really hard not to take it a bit personal. So it really hurts. And after if this happens I think after a while you get very distant and you say 'ok I will not put myself in this at all'. (Linnea, HR)

> I still get very upset and passionate. Like I would feel very strong about something and I would be protecting it like it's my baby and I could be upset to the core of me because *it is* the core of me and then I would regret being so upset afterwards […] so I need to take all the good with the bad … like everything is a part of me. (Ryan, Game Designer)

In the emotion talk above, workers expressed a variety of emotions, most of which resulted from the intimate and personal relationships they had developed with their work. Expressing such darker and more challenging emotions uncovered the insecurities the individuals experienced. In the case of Ryan, who earlier in our interview states that he is 'super dependent on a pat on the shoulder' and getting recognition from his work, the strength of his relationship to his work made him so dependent on getting constant affirmation of his desired self from others that he felt a need to deliver something that would produce this affirmation every week. Not receiving this desired recognition had serious outcomes for him, and could affect his life quite dramatically:

> *Iva*: And how do feel if you don't get that recognition?
>
> *Ryan*: I feel bad. But sometimes all I need is … I need a boss that recognises that … that sees me … and I need something … someone I can trust and I can understand is always there for me …
>
> *Iva*: And if you were working at a place where you felt you didn't have that …?
>
> *Ryan*: I would quit … I wouldn't work there … I couldn't because it would affect my life too much. I would feel too bad.

This instability and insecurity meant that many struggled to cope with the emotional experiences they felt as a result of their relationship to their work:

> Different contexts that I find I struggle in … one is like I said I deliver my creativity to somebody else and they do something with my creativity. If that person doesn't take care of the work that I provide them then it becomes difficult to hand your baby over to them which was a problem with a few people earlier in the project […] I would like to get recognition for the job I've done among the people I'm doing it for. So that's one thing … if I don't trust the person that I'm supposed to deliver [my work] to that affects me. (David, Programmer)

David's relationship to his work leads to an issue of mistrust as he struggles to deliver his work to others. For Ryan, this becomes something more detrimental to his well-being, as it transpires into 'mental issues'.

> I don't know. I don't know how to deal with … I've tried so many things.
> The thing is now we're not talking about creativity like 'drawing a picture'
> we're talking about my mental fucking issues. (Ryan, Game Designer)

In previous studies of work, where selves and affect are co-opted into contemporary work and organisational settings, we are able to see a variety of responses that enable individuals to resist such organisational initiatives by distancing themselves or redrawing and carefully demarcating the lines between selves and work, or between selves and organisations (Casey, 1995; Hochschild, 1983; Kunda, 1992). The collapsing of the self into work increases both the positive and negative emotional experiences and presents challenges for workers trying to cope with them. The new normal demands creative workers entangle their selves and affect in experiences and conceptions of work at Octant give us a glimpse into the sometimes rewarding and often challenging emotions elicited as a response to such affectual demands and new norms in organisations and contemporary working life.

Discussion

In making sense of these experiences of work, we first turn to understanding why these affectual demands may be made in the context of creative work. Creative work is largely dependent on constructing novel and imaginative ideas—many of which are not necessarily derived from following strict processes, but rather are an outcome of individuals' cognition or subjectivity. Creative products then, rely on unique configurations of subjectivities that can be considered a 'consummate expression of individual selfhood' (Negus & Pickering, 2004, p. 4). Creative organisations may seek to capture this selfhood in work for dual interests. First, creative products may be better off if the incorporation of selves in work delivers particularly novel or valuable work. Second, promoting affectual relationships with employees' work not only aligns with their desires for meaning in work but also inspires commitment to their work (working 'really really hard' because you love your work), which negates the necessity for harsher controls of workers as workers become largely

self-disciplining in line with organisational goals (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This can be interpreted as another source for the enchantment of work, in addition to ideologies and other work practices that lead to positive work affect (Endrissat, Islam, & Noppeney, 2015). As such, the language of love and intimacy with one's work is a source of positive experiences that capture the desires of an 'aspiring professional class that seeks ultimate fulfilment and passion in creative work' (Gregg, 2011, p. 170). These positive experiences of working with the self at work also explain some of the mysteries around tensions between the self-actualisation and self-exploitation of creative workers (Taylor, 2010), where workers engage themselves in insecure employment, long working hours (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), precarious working environments, and a general blurring between life and work (Fleming, 2014).

Admittedly, disciplining the self through discourses of love and passion for one's work may not result in altogether bad outcomes for individuals. For many, this personal relationship was experienced as a source of meaning, joy, fulfilment, and happiness. Positive experiences of collapsing the self into work is a way of both instilling engagement and self-realisation while drawing personal meaning from the work. At a time when meaningfulness of work is of scholarly interest (Bailey & Madden, 2017), it may be possible to argue that we see the experience of meaningfulness more commonly in creative work than in other work settings. However, it is also possible to explore the darker and more challenging experiences and outcomes of the collapsing of self and work. These come in the form of the emotion work that individuals carry out. Experiences of work can become painful and frustrating, while also leading to struggles and 'mental issues' that have a powerful impact on the quality of their experiences, not only of their work but also of their lives and their well-being, especially given the tight coupling of the individual's self-understanding with their work.

The collapsing of the self into work, therefore, may teeter into an area where there is little room to construct boundaries around selves outside of work, making self-understandings dangerously dependent on work and work outcomes. For this reason, we need to do more to understand affectual relations in contemporary experiences of work as well as the norms that govern such activity. As Wetherell (2015) argues, affect involves 'many

complicated flows across bodies, subjectivities, relations, histories and contexts', which entangle and intertwine to produce affective moments. In the context of the creative organisation, it is therefore important to understand these affective articulations in the emotion talk of individuals as situated within the sociocultural, as well as governed by organisational demands on these individuals. Simultaneously exploring creative work from an organisational and individual level allows us to make sense of some of these complex relations and structures that shape the norms of contemporary work and life. Creative organisations and other sites for creative work may make emotion work particularly salient (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), but more could be done to explore these affectual relations and their implications across different contemporary work contexts.

In exploring the experiences of work of creative workers at Octant, we can observe how contemporary creative work demands an intimacy where selves become inextricably entwined with work. This demand for intimacy is a new form of affective labour where workers' experiences and affect are constantly regulated (Gregg, 2011). Such attempts may be beneficial to organisations that turn to new 'soft' forms of controlling workers, and in the case of creative work, employing affect may benefit the creative product. From the case of Octant, we see how subjectivities such as love and passion for one's work are articulated in the discourses of senior members of the organisation and how such discourses are replicated in the talk of many individuals, so that it essentially operates to collapse boundaries in the relationship between selves and work. Although such activity may prove rewarding for those who derive personal meaning from their close relationship with their work, in others it inspires intense emotion work, which may ultimately have a significant impact not only on their work but also on their lives. Understanding the organisational context is particularly illuminating in understanding the intricate challenges faced by creative workers who work in contemporary creative organisations.

Note

1. Transcription style: … indicates a pause in speech prior to the next utterance; […] indicates a sentence or more has been omitted; [words in brackets] are inserted to clarify meaning.

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