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When Spirituality Becomes Spiritual Labour: Workplace Mindfulness as a Practice of Well-being and Productivity

Abstract: Over the last two decades, mindfulness has become popular in Western countries as part of the well-being movement. The corporate world has taken notice and is now hailing the potential of mindfulness as a tool to increase work performance and employee well-being. This view of mindfulness, however, contains an intrinsic contradiction: the core of mindfulness is derived from Buddhist traditions that accept the present moment without judgement, while neoliberal productivity demands constant renewal and a drive for stronger performance. The ethnographic data for this study was collected in an environment emblematic of the neoliberal service economy: a professional service firm with highly skilled employees.

This chapter develops the concept of spiritual labour, which is informed by the ideas of post-secularisation and spirituality in the sociology of religion and the concept of emotional labour in organisational studies. Spiritual labour refers to harnessing the spirituality of the employee and incorporating it into the work of the organisation.

Keywords: mindfulness, new spiritualities, spiritual labour, organisations, well-being, post-secularisation, neoliberalism

Mindfulness: A New Form of Corporate Well-Being Practice

Mindfulness has become popular in Western countries as part of the current focus on well-being that has developed over several decades. Hailed as a “revolution” in well-being practices (Harrison 2017; Boyce et al. 2011), mindfulness involves a holistic approach to physical, social, and psychological welfare, including spirituality (Migdal and MacDonald 2013; see Pawar 2016). As part of the corporate well-being trend, mindfulness addresses the demands for healthy lifestyles and fitness (see Cederström and Spicer 2015) and is viewed as providing desirable outcomes for practitioners, such as increasing wellness and reducing stress (Sutcliffe et al. 2016). The corporate world has observed the well-being trend and widely adopted mindfulness practices into workplace organisations; mindfulness has been lauded for the potential benefits it offers for work performance and employee well-being. However, workplace mindfulness contains an inherent paradox: the core of mindfulness is derived from Buddhist traditions that accept the present moment without

judgement (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 3-4), while the idea of neoliberal productivity demands constant renewal and a drive for stronger performance (Elliott 2015; Gill and Scharff 2013).

Although its philosophical roots are grounded in Buddhism, as part of cognitive psychology, mindfulness was developed to alleviate various psychological conditions, such as anxiety and depression (Schlieter 2017). Mindfulness has been referred to as a "neutral" lightweight version of Buddhism, having been removed from its cultural and religious background and its communal and ethical dimensions (Purser et al. 2016). According to a widely used definition, mindfulness is "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 3-4). Mindfulness as a concept may be based on a very different understanding of its nature (Sutcliffe et al. 2016), as the term 'mindfulness meditation' is applied to a broad range of practices and exercises, including two-minute smartphone applications, weekend meditation retreats, and a discipline requiring years of practice. Mindfulness also refers to very different cultural contexts and practices – from a life-changing exercise to a stress management programme designed to meet the needs of a work organisation. Therefore, it is not surprising that an increasing number of researchers now discuss *mindfulnesses* (Good et al. 2016). Consequently, research on mindfulness has expanded across several fields; however, few studies have approached mindfulness from a workplace perspective (Dane and Brummel 2014), and even fewer have employed an ethnographic approach (Karjalainen et al. 2021). To fill this gap in the research, this study utilises ethnographic data gathered in a multinational business organisation that had launched a mindfulness programme in an effort to enhance the productivity and well-being of its highly skilled knowledge professionals.

Mindfulness is attributed with helping practitioners concentrate and remain attentive and thus be more present in the moment (Hyland et al. 2015). Consequently, the business world has demonstrated an enthusiasm for mindfulness by presenting it as a tool to improve employee productivity and work ability (e.g., Hülshager et al. 2013); this is particularly significant when acknowledging the current stresses of working life, which are especially salient in knowledge work, such as time pressure, heavy workloads, increased demands for flexibility, multitasking requirements, and work impacting on home life. A contemporary society with neoliberal and neo-individual tendencies emphasises individual responsibility: neoliberalism produces self-managing, autonomous, and entrepreneurial subjects who, among other things, seek to improve their position through self-development and gain recognition and new opportunities, especially in working life (Gill and Scharff 2013).

Mindfulness cannot be explored in contemporary working life without contextualisation with neoliberalist (Harvey 2007) and neo-individual (Elliott and Lemert 2009; Elliott 2015) trends, which emphasise individual responsibility for well-being and the need for self-renewal; however, mindfulness can also be related to post-secularisation and the individual search for authenticity (Taylor 1992). Although the term ‘post-secular’ has become a widely used concept in various disciplines, including religion, sociology, and political theory, there is still a lack of consensus regarding its meaning (Beaumont et al. 2018). Ingolf Dalferth (2010, 324) described post-secular society and its citizens as neither religious nor secular but rather unresponsive to both because these concepts are “irrelevant for their self-understanding and without import for the communicative, civic, legal, political, or economic operations by and through which they define themselves”. This formulation of neither-nor or both-and illustrates the societal and cultural circumstances in which the most prominent mindfulness figure Jon Kabat-Zinn (2011, 301) has been able to describe MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) as “sacred as well as secular”.

The popularity of mindfulness reflects the rise of secular spirituality, which refers to the search for meaning, personal growth, inner peace, or a deeper inner dimension (Elkins et al. 1988). In this study, mindfulness is contextualised within this notion of secular spirituality, as workplace mindfulness tends to avoid associations with religion and religiosity. In spiritual practices involving the body – such as mindfulness – the body is a medium to access one’s authenticity, or inner ‘core’, to reflect one’s true feelings and thoughts, that is, one’s spirit (Sointu and Woodhead 2008). Thus, spirituality draws from the idea that the human body allows privileged access to one’s spirit and emotions (McGuire 2008; Sointu and Woodhead 2008). These spiritualities can be seen as an intrinsic form of religion: self-responsibility is emphasised by valuing one’s own experience over tradition, appreciating internal independence and freedom, and by gaining authority to an individual’s own experiences (Woodhead and Heelas 2000, 2–3). Self-responsibility affirms individual responsibility for all aspects of life when placed within the framework of neoliberalism, which considers market logic to be the leader of all human activities (Gill and Scharff 2013), including well-being and health. In organisation and management research, it has been noted that new spiritualities can also emerge at work, for example, by highlighting authenticity (Fleming 2009), self-expression (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), mental and spiritual practices, and ‘workplace enchantment’, all of which generate creativity and strengthen the sense of authenticity (Bell 2008; Ogden 2016; Suddaby et al 2017). In recent management research, workplace spirituality has been viewed as a resource that can help employees achieve well-being at work (Aboobaker et al. 2019).

Well-being is a multi-faceted and complex construct (Diener 2009) that can offer different meanings to different audiences. When examining workplace mindfulness, psychological well-being is the central focus and is defined, for example, as happiness (Pollard and Lee 2003), life satisfaction (Seligman 2002), or one's capability to fulfil personal goals (Felce and Perry 1995). In the workplace context, well-being is usually paired with productivity; it is measured by employee absence and employee turnover, which, in the knowledge work context, are generally caused by work-related stress (Goh et al. 2015). This chapter demonstrates that in mindfulness practice, combining a quest for well-being with productivity can, however, lead to unexpected outcomes.

The connection between well-being and an anticipated increase in productivity has provided a foundation for a variety of mindfulness programmes that reflect both humanistic and spiritual aspects of leadership (Islam et al. 2017). Workplace spirituality has been defined as “experiences and expressions of one's spirituality” in the work context (Sheep 2006), and its dimension of transcendence has been related to individual outcomes, such as life satisfaction (Zullig et al. 2006). Currently, workplace mindfulness can be viewed as the most significant trend relating to workplace spiritualities.

In this post-secular and neoliberal well-being context, mindfulness has become an increasingly popular practice in workplaces and private homes. This chapter introduces the new theoretical concept of *spiritual labour* to examine workplace mindfulness and the blurring boundaries of work at the intersection of neoliberal and post-secular well-being practices. I argue that mindfulness practiced in work organisations can potentially become spiritual labour, a new form of work that may undermine, rather than increase, well-being. The new theoretical concept of spiritual labour emerges from the research data and is further developed in this study by utilising grounded theory. The concept of spiritual labour is presented after the descriptions of the study's data, method, and findings.

Ethnographic Research on Corporate Mindfulness

The ethnographic data for this study was gathered for a research project that examined the blurring boundaries of work. The fieldwork was conducted in a professional service firm that was starting the first phase of a mindfulness programme. In addition to the ethnographic data, the data included 32 interviews with the research participants, human resources personnel, and the mindfulness guide, as well as diaries written by research participants and company documents.

The research data was collected in a corporation that has been described as a prototype of the neoliberal service economy (Karjalainen et al. 2015). These companies, which have also been labelled as ‘greedy’ or ‘up-or-out’ organisations (Coser 1974), provide business-to-business services that focus, for example, on tax, accounting, law, management, acquisitions, and IT infrastructure (Karjalainen et al. 2015). As their central currency is intellectual capital and expertise (Alvesson 2004), they adapt quickly to new methods that may improve the capability of their workforce, and they readily embrace the latest trends in work and mental well-being.

The company under study provided a wide variety of organisational leisure activities; however, the mindfulness programme was their first and only activity that was primarily mental or spiritual in nature. The Mindfulness Breathing Space (MBS), as it was called, took place in the national headquarters once a week during a lunch hour. As part of the fieldwork, which lasted four months, I also attended the MBS and helped to organise the event by carrying yoga mats and other equipment. I also talked regularly in an informal setting with the in-house mindfulness guide.

Each mindfulness session lasted half an hour: the participants used the first five minutes to settle, some lay on yoga mats while others sat on the floor or on office chairs. The mindfulness practice would then start, and the mindfulness guide would usually talk throughout the session, introducing one to two exercises. The exercises were never followed by any discussion, nor did the participants ask any questions – immediately after the MBS, the participants hurried back to their desks or meetings. In total, 51 individuals participated in the MBS, which equated to approximately one sixth of the employees located in the national headquarters. Some participants attended weekly and others less frequently, with their attendance based on their tight working schedules, their level of enthusiasm, and whether they were located in headquarters or with clients.

The meditation practice varied for each session and ranged from yoga-type movement practice to breathing meditation, body-scanning, and visualisation: sometimes the participants were asked to move their hands or concentrate on their breathing, while other times they were instructed to ‘breathe peace’ to different parts of their bodies or imagine themselves as mountains; all the activities were typical mindfulness exercises (Schlieter 2017). I attended the weekly events to conduct carnal ethnography (Wacquant 2014), an intense form of participant observation and a method that is well suited to observing spiritual-physical practices in which the human body allows privileged access to one’s spirit and emotions (McGuire 2008; Sointu and Woodhead 2008). As a method of inquiry, carnal ethnography facilitated utilising my own bodily experiences (such as frustration, boredom, pain, sense of peace, happiness, or a heightened sense of awareness) as part of the research data,

thus helping me to understand the experiences of the other participants who were also embarking on mindfulness practice (Wacquant 2014). The discomfort of sitting still, the wandering mind, and the boredom as well as the tranquillity, joy, and bodily awareness were all part of the experience; these thoughts, emotions, and sensations offered a foundation for gaining first-hand knowledge of the mental and bodily aspects of mindfulness meditation, as an embodied understanding contributes to the construction of knowledge (Turner 2000). I had been meditating for several years prior to the fieldwork; therefore, the experience was somewhat familiar. However, I had never participated in corporate mindfulness practice in a workday office setting.

Interviews were conducted with human resources personnel, the mindfulness guide, and the employees who frequently participated in the MBS. The study entailed 25 individual face-to-face interviews, each lasting between 45 and 100 minutes, and seven individual interviews conducted via e-mail. The research participants were knowledge professionals in various fields within the professional service firm, and the group was balanced in terms of career type (consultancy or business support), career stage (entry level, lower management, or higher management), and age (under 30, between 30-40, and over 40; these categories were the most relevant in the career-oriented, up-or-out-focused organisation, as there were very few employees over 50). Of the 51 participants, only two were male and both were unwilling to continue after their first mindfulness session. This gender ratio was not entirely unexpected given the recent research that has shown 'new age' organisational programmes often contain gender discourses that reflect gendered power difference (Zaidman et al. 2018). In addition, contemporary holistic spiritual practices both legitimise and contest traditional discourses and practices of femininity (Sointu and Woodhead 2008, 73).

The interviews focused on the reasons and background regarding the participant's interest in mindfulness, their expectations, fears, and doubts, the prospect of regular practice, and the problems they believed could be addressed with mindfulness. Furthermore, the interviews included questions on worldviews, spirituality, and authenticity. The Collaborative Interactive Action Research (CIAR) method (Bailyn and Fletcher 2007) was adopted to discuss personal questions: second interviews were employed as part of the preliminary analysis; therefore, there was an opportunity to elaborate on the themes and progression of the MBS and the participant's own practice.

The research participants kept a semi-structured mindfulness diary in which they reflected on the following key points: (a) How often did they think about mindfulness during the day; (b) Did they engage in any kind of formal or informal mindfulness activity; (c) How did they feel about the

mindfulness activities; (d) Did they experience any problems with practice; and (e) Other thoughts on mindfulness. Eleven research participants returned the diary. Finally, the company material on the mindfulness programme was requested from internal communications and the mindfulness guide, this included the mindfulness material and information that had been distributed via the organisation's intranet.

The analytical starting point for the study was the view of organisational reality as discursively constructed (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al. 2010). The multiple data gathered through multifaceted research methods was analysed by triangulation of data, ethnographic analysis in the case of fieldwork (carnal ethnography and unofficial discussions), and discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell 2001) for the acquired texts (interviews, mindfulness diaries, and company material). In the absence of a suitable theory, grounded theory was utilised in the analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The constructionist approach included the thematic coding and theorisation of the data, which was conducted by moving iteratively between data and theory to formulate a group of evolving conceptual categories; this method allowed for the development of a new theoretical concept while maintaining a close adherence to the data (Charmaz 2006). Thus, the idea of spiritual labour emerged from the analysis: this new concept combines theories of emotional work in organisational studies with debates on post-secularisation and new spiritualities in the sociology of religion and, more broadly, in the study of religion.

Mindfulness in the Corporate World

The analysis revealed four themes that highlight the dynamics of well-being and productivity and operate at both the individual level and the level of organisational culture and practice: holistic worker, coaxing and controlling spirituality, spiritual solutions for work-related problems, and spirituality as performance.

Holistic Worker

The MBS was the first extra-curricular activity of a spiritual nature offered by the organisation, despite the provision of other programmes that also focused on the body, such as a running club. The human resources manager, who had only recently joined the company, provided an explanation: "There is lots of physical exercise, but I saw immediately that this is a house of professionals, and the other piece is missing. And I was just thinking about yoga, meditation, Pilates... until I learned about mindfulness and saw that this is even better". The human resources manager regarded mindfulness as spiritual, an 'other piece' that complemented the well-being

services that were already provided by the company. The goal was to create holistic workers: “I have a holistic perspective, the whole well-being”. The human resources manager explained why the company supported the development of holistic employees: “We are offering this to people – instead of burnout or stress or any problems – we want to bring a little happiness to their lives, presence, to help them in their work, so that they would be present in the moment and not try to do ten things, and also that it would show in leisure and elsewhere”. Holistic thinking was readily manifested in the mindfulness lessons: in addition to breathing meditation, the meditation alternated between body meditation, mountain meditation, and peace meditation. The mindfulness guide explained the motivation for this holistic approach:

All those people who attended [mindfulness class] are women who demand a lot from themselves, who know they want to take care of themselves in many ways, and who have recognised how the hassle affects their daily lives. They now have a really easy tool for everyday to enhance their well-being for their colleagues, for themselves, and for their home. Finding balance, that’s what they want.

The holistic perspective in human resources management is based on the idea that spirituality is a part of the employee and that it is possible to incorporate this resource into work and hence into the employer’s resources. The company believed that improvements in employees’ resilience, concentration, and acceptance would benefit work performance. The goal was to harness an employee’s spirituality and well-being as a tool to improve efficiency and performance. Thus, the company offered mindfulness as a method to help employees operate more efficiently in a fast-paced work environment.

The following theme addresses the perspective of employees as holistic beings whose spirituality is a resource for the organisation; the provocation and management of spirituality becomes a central focus as spirituality is made a visible part of organisational practice.

Coaxing and Controlling Spirituality

While workplace mindfulness coaxes spirituality in multiple ways, it is simultaneously controlled, as spirituality remains a controversial topic in organisations. Spirituality is first addressed in organisations by utilising the rhetoric from both science and religion to move between potentially opposing dialogues (Karjalainen et al. 2021). The relationship between mindfulness and Buddhism is multifaceted and even controversial, and the relationship between mindfulness and spirituality is at the center of the dispute. For some, mindfulness is the core of the Buddhist meditation tradition;

however, many of the current forms of mindfulness are distorted because they do not adhere to the fundamental belief system of Buddhism (Purser and Milillo 2015). In addition, others view mindfulness and Buddhism as two distinct practices: while Buddhism has inspired the initial concept, mindfulness has developed as a completely separate exercise of consciousness (Brown and Ryan 2003). This ambiguity was also reflected in the MBS, which combined scientific and religious rhetoric. The mindfulness guide relied on both science and Buddhism, instrumentalising both as she praised the mindfulness of “two and a half thousand years of Buddhist monks’ product development” and referenced Buddha, the Dalai Lama, and the medical studies on mindfulness. This position appears to define mindfulness in the business world: mindfulness is justified by academic research but is also aligned with ‘Asian spirituality and wisdom’ (Karjalainen 2016). Western science carries a powerful legitimating force that may be used to validate a practitioner’s self-cultivation and self-improvement projects (Brown and Leledaki 2010). Mindfulness thus becomes an ‘empty signifier’ (Islam et al. 2017), a code that can be applied to almost any concept (Bodhi 2011), including spirituality, well-being, and productivity.

Departing from a spiritual focus midway through an exercise is the second way to both provoke and simultaneously shun spirituality. Buddhist meditation consists of several types of exercises that are considered important (Goldstein 2003). Compassion is a central element of Buddhism, but it was almost entirely absent from the MBS. When I asked the mindfulness guide about compassion, she mentioned *metta bhavana* – a ‘loving kindness’ – meditation, which is a popular form of Buddhist meditation that is also practiced in the West (Gethin 1998). She said that she would not present *metta bhavana* in the current sessions: “Maybe later. There are three kinds of people: those who understand the idea, those who start crying, and those who get angry. I don’t want any of that in this milieu”. The halfway-approach was also reflected in her explanations of her teaching method: “Then I should go to theory and content and tell people what we really do. Yes, it [mindfulness] comes from Buddhism, but since I just teach beginners, I’m not familiar with it yet”. The mindfulness guide rejected the idea of telling the participants what “we really do”. I also asked the mindfulness guide what she thought of mindfulness exercises that focus on concentration but ignore compassion. Her response aptly described the complex relationship between mindfulness and spirituality in the business world:

According to research, one can go only so far with it [mindfulness without compassion]. But somehow the compassion rises when your frontal cerebral cortex on the left lobe... when you develop better connections. Then empathy strengthens

naturally. Desire towards it comes naturally, but how to support it? So [compassion] exercises can be given to them to practise at home.

The guide's teaching drew and relied on Buddhism and thus provoked references to spirituality and religion. Paradoxically, she also shunned spiritual and religious aspects by departing from a spiritual focus halfway through the sessions, which left the participants insecure about the context. Simultaneously, the guide relied on the scientific interpretation of compassion, recognised the need to support it, and was ready to provoke this type of spirituality in a working life context; however, she did not want to include compassion in the mindfulness classes. When I ask the human resources manager if they intended to address *metta bhavana*, she quickly responded in a small voice: "I think we're going to take a little of it as well". (Buddhist) Compassion seems to be a controversial topic within human resources management that is repeatedly highlighted but frequently set aside.

The third way to both coax and shun spirituality is to ignore the emotions and experiences that may arise when spirituality is provoked. In one session, the mindfulness guide led the participants through a self-compassion meditation, which is somewhat similar to *metta bhavana*. The following extract from the field diary described the event:

The second meditation is a compassion meditation, where we first imagine a spot of refuge where we have a good and safe feeling (fireplace, meadow, cottage, grandma's place) and then someone who is compassionate, kind, and loving towards us. We were to imagine a beloved friend, mother, Buddha, god, dog, or some abstract thing, for example. These were mentioned in this order. (Field Journal)

Afterwards, the guide explained that she avoids compassion exercises because of the reactions of the participants: "That's why I didn't go to *metta bhavana*, I made a lighter version. I've seen how some have tears in their eyes, but I have not in any way got involved in it". The guide was motivated to keep the exercises light: "These have been light exercises; it can be tough to get back to work fast after a long meditation". Spirituality in a workplace context was provoked, shunned, and controlled, often simultaneously, as although the organisation believed in the effectiveness of mindfulness, they did not want to manage every potential outcome.

After examining the organisational level of spiritual labour – viewing employee's spirituality as an asset that can be introduced and utilised in an organisational setting – we turn to the use of mindfulness as an individual solution for work-related problems that is structured by an organisation to enhance employees' well-being.

Spirituality as a Solution for Work-Related Problems

Time pressure and interruptions were particular challenges for the professionals in the organisation, and the human resources manager considered mindfulness offered a solution: “It has always been, for as long as I have been in the business world, so in every company it is ‘how do I manage my time, how can I control my time’. Now this question comes in another form”. The human resources manager had already spoken about spirituality and compassion and now regarded mindfulness as a technique that could improve employee effectiveness. Agnes¹, 39, explained that it is common to seek help for working life pressures in mindfulness:

Yes, these pressures come from reconciling work and home, lack of time, and... If I were a person who could do one thing at a time or I would have a job I could leave behind after day’s work. But I have a hundred lists and 13 things swirling in my head all the time. I don’t know if I would need mindfulness if the job was different.

Agnes further discussed the reasons that led her to participate in the mindfulness programme: “I was half present. My work was about meetings one after another, the cellphone beeping, someone asking for advice and you are already thinking about the next meeting... How much time and energy get wasted in this, it would be easier if one focused properly”. The goal of mindfulness was practical: to solve the problems caused by constant interruptions and the need to hurry. Seeking help at work and finding ways to control one’s mind were given as other reasons to participate in the mindfulness classes. Mid-level manager Tina, 36, described her motivation: “If I can change something about myself – that I will stay calm without getting nervous or stressed. If I can handle things internally. Concentration and tranquility could support all activities”. Tina believed that through individual growth, specifically self-control and self-transformation, she could improve her work and her home life.

Vera, a consultant who had already experienced two burnouts before the age of 30, explained how she was trying to reduce her exhaustion through meditation: “Last year I just noticed the exhaustion and started doing meditation to help with burnout. You go into the tunnel, and you don’t remember anymore what is a feeling, what is normal, what is life. I began mindfulness because of my job, so that I could cope”. For Vera, meditation became a question of survival, while consultant Lisa, 25, sought skills that could help with control: “Controlling my mind. I would like to work more

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the research participants.

consciously and with more focus. I could tune my brain". Lisa's colleague Helena, 26, shared similar thoughts: "I hope mindfulness will make working more effective, tools for controlling my mind. [---] In a way, I would train myself". Although Vera was focused on well-being, both approaches – meditating to survive and tuning the brain for higher performance levels – address organisational-level pressures through individual 'choices' that utilise spiritual exercise to cope with work-life demands. Thus, mindfulness is seen as a technique to control and train oneself to fit in and build resilience at work.

Mindfulness is often presented as a solution to the many problems encountered in working life (Wilson 2014); spirituality thus becomes subordinate to the results of mindfulness, such as the acceptance of circumstances, improved concentration, or increased work efficiency due to overcoming work-related exhaustion. Workplace mindfulness is utilised as a tool to address two different challenges in working life: first, concentration may improve managing the more practical disruptions caused by time pressure and interruptions, and second, one's ability to cope and survive working life may be increased by creating a calm mind.

Spirituality as Performance

The fourth theme in this chapter discusses spirituality as a performance. The company's culture of performance and achievement was reflected in the guide's views on mindfulness: "I believe that if everyone of us could work on acceptance, that we could accept ourselves as what we are, here, in this position, that when I try my best all the time, that is enough." The mindfulness guide continued to explain her perspective: "There are thousands of studies, oh my God, starting from skin diseases. Mindfulness is such an easy tool. So, I believe that people will stop their laziness and start working on themselves". This view of mindfulness was also reflected in the reactions of the MBS participants. Paula, 37, working in business support, described the difficulties she encountered when performing spirituality in mindfulness classes: "You shouldn't expect too much, you shouldn't ask yourself why everyone else seems to be relaxed while my thoughts keep swirling?" Agnes identified a similar problem: "I keep paying attention to others, I need more peace around me to do this". An exercise that was meant for perceiving and acceptingly one's own mind in a non-judgmental manner became a disruptive moment of comparison with the performances of others. "I'm trying too much", Paula explained, recognising the paradox between the comparison of trying too hard and the fundamental concept of mindfulness. Vera described how the performance-emphasising corporate culture penetrates mindfulness meditation: "You once failed in meditation, or you didn't fail, but you couldn't concentrate, so you describe yourself as crap in meditating".

The company's human resources department admitted to hiring overachievers who are primarily goal oriented. This personality trait was also evident in the company's meditation classes, sometimes with rather paradoxical results. The following example illustrates one result of provoking and practicing spirituality in a workplace context. A mindfulness breathing exercise involved slowly and repeatedly counting to 10; the goal was to observe the wandering mind and carefully bringing it back, over and over again, to a central focus. Lena explained how she understood the practice:

It was terribly easy to concentrate on it today when we were breathing, so probably 30 times I counted to 10 without having any problem with waning. I probably thought about having lunch once throughout the whole thing. This seems terribly easy, what is the point?

Lena was so eager to achieve her goal that she appeared to miss the idea of the exercise. Meditation can become a new achievement that must be accomplished with high scores, while the essence of meditation (a non-judgmental focus on the mind, senses, feelings, and the environment) is forgotten or never understood.

Vera explained how she sought help from spiritual growth in order to fight burnout: "For two or three years, I did an awful lot of spiritual growth just because I had to, otherwise my head would explode." She continued by describing the complex relationship she had established between spirituality and performance:

The mind is tough, you cannot set goals for it. I read a lot and thought about things, but it was always a project. I always order tons of books, I organise it, I set up all the stuff, and then I do it. And when I start feeling like *you've done it*, even that you can't measure it, I start to get bored. Then I take another project.

Vera performed spirituality and then suffered from the fact that spiritual growth is not easily measurable. The company recognised that it recruited competitive over-achievers, but still decided to offer a mindfulness programme to help with work-related problems. However, competitive individualistic achievers may misdirect the purpose of mindfulness and be inclined toward over-achieving spirituality.

Spiritual Labour

This study sought to introduce a new concept, spiritual labour. The ethnographic data did not easily align with any existing theory; thus, grounded theory was utilised to develop a concept that could interpret the findings. Four themes illustrating different aspects of spiritual labour were identified in the data. First, ‘holistic worker’ operates at the organisational level: spirituality is viewed as an essential part of the employee that can be harnessed for work-related purposes. Spirituality becomes both a form of labour and a trait of workers and is thus acquired as a resource that can be utilised by the organisation. Second, once an employee’s spirituality is viewed as a company asset, the organisation can progress to identifying the spirituality of its employees as company property that can be provoked and controlled. Organisations are thus required to manage and regulate spiritual labour, as only a certain kind of spirituality is appropriate in the workplace context. Third, mindfulness can be offered as a tool to enhance well-being and productivity by resolving work-related problems, such as stress, the feeling of being rushed, and a lack of concentration. Organisational-level problems are transformed into spiritual labour as individual’s are assigned with the task of finding solutions through spirituality. Finally, these three aspects of spiritual labour collectively lead to the view of spirituality as performance, a practice in which goal-oriented overachievers try to score highly in mindfulness, transforming it into a work task and thus turning mindfulness into spiritual labour. The ‘greedy’ and ‘up-or-out’ culture of the industrial sector, which emphasises individual performance and comparison, reinforces the performative culture (Coser 1974). In this context, spirituality becomes an accomplishment.

The notion of *spiritual labour* is derived from emotional labour, a widely accepted concept in organisational studies that was originally conceived by Arlie Hochschild (1983), who suggested that contemporary service economies commodify emotions in the same way that factories previously utilised physical labour. Hochschild (1983, 7) defined emotional labour as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display”, focusing on the internal aspects and management of workers’ emotions. Spiritual labour, however, has not been widely studied, although it is easily identified in current work cultures. Tammy McGuire (2010) opened the discussion with a study on the spiritual work of parish school employees, but the ideas have not been fully developed (Byrne et al. 2011). In order to fill this research gap, this chapter introduced the concept of spiritual labour. Spiritual labour refers to the harnessing of employees’ spirituality for work-related purposes, and it can involve several aspects, such as appropriating spirituality as a workplace asset, coaxing, controlling, and managing spirituality, instrumentalising spirituality in the work context, and employees’ overachievement of spirituality. Ultimately, the goal is a positive

end result for the organisation – for example, enhanced occupational well-being, work performance, work efficiency, or resilience or a reduction in exhaustion.

Mindfulness discourses have become widespread in contemporary society and are prominent within companies (Good et al. 2016; Purser 2019). Workplace mindfulness practice is perhaps best described as a form of secular spirituality, as the aim is an individual quest for personal growth – a search for meaning or inner peace – rather than any pronounced form of religion or spirituality. When practised in an organisational context and within the sphere of secular spirituality, mindfulness may more readily turn into spiritual labour. The neoliberal organisational life of contemporary knowledge professionals, which emphasises the individual's need for self-renewal by making each worker responsible for their own well-being, is likely to turn certain aspects of life and selfhood into a form of work, such as emotional (Hochschild 1983), aesthetic (Warhurst and Nickson 2009), or social labour (Fleming 2009). It has been claimed that the neo-liberal market logic roughly guides all aspects of social life (Esposito 2015). Emotions have long been recognised as an essential aspect in one's employment, and now it appears that well-being of the mind (Cederström and Spicer 2015) is also entering the sphere of work. This observation resonates with an emerging trend that examines well-being of the mind as a form of secular spirituality (see e.g. Harrison 2017), as attested in the recent growth of mindfulness literature, gurus, and workshops.

Within the alliance of neoliberalism and secular spirituality, the neoliberal self tends to seek practices that promise enhancements and general improvements in all areas of life, including work performance and the ability to always be consciously present in an era of multiple electronic devices and digital interruptions. As the neoliberal self reaches for the seemingly appropriate aims of spirituality and well-being of the mind, it is not surprising that this effort can turn into a form of labour. Spirituality and well-being then become tasks among other tasks, aspects of life that must be taken care of alongside keeping fit, being a good spouse and parent, excelling at work, and living a 'full life'.

In workplace mindfulness programmes, psychological well-being is the most common focal point, whether it is verbalised as life satisfaction, happiness, or achieving one's goals (Decuyper et al. 2021; Hougaard et al. 2016). Furthermore, well-being at work is generally discussed in the context of productivity as the ultimate goal (Caring-Lobel 2016; Purser and Milillo 2015). This study demonstrated how this understanding of secular spirituality, when paired with the corporate world's understanding of well-being, generates surprising outcomes, as mindfulness is turned into a form of

extra work, that is, spiritual labour. Thus, this chapter introduced a new area of research into the study of spiritualities.

As a new concept, spiritual labour identifies a phenomenon in which spirituality becomes performance and is acquired as an organisational resource; however, more research is required to broaden the understanding of spiritual labour by utilising different contexts and data. The current study was conducted in a business world, but it is likely that spiritual labour is also found in other areas of working life. Future research should examine the concept of spiritual labour in different work environments, from companies through to public organisations and single entrepreneurs. It would also be beneficial to study how the concept of spiritual labour is employed in organisations that have explicit religious affiliations, as it is unlikely that spiritual labour is limited to mindfulness. The concept of spiritual labour therefore requires further evaluation and development; in particular, future research should utilise empirical data obtained in different work environments.

The coexistence of post-secularisation and neoliberalism enables and supports the flourishing industry of workplace mindfulness (see Bell et al. 2020; LoRusso 2017). Focusing on a post-secular and neoliberal context, this chapter combined the analysis of multidimensional ethnographic data on mindfulness with established concepts drawn from the study of religion and organisational research. The findings aligned workplace mindfulness practice with spiritual labour within this broad theoretical framework. As cultural and societal developments, post-secularisation and neoliberalism have facilitated the popularisation of mindfulness programmes; thus, organisations are able to harness employees' spirituality as a resource under the guise of enhancing well-being.

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The Data

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