

Towards emancipation through organizational (re)design? Exploring integral organizational renewal from a critical management perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a more pragmatic critical management studies (CMS), by exploring the emancipatory intent of organizational (re)design concepts and ideas from the modern sociotechnical approach integral organizational renewal (IOR).

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is of a conceptual nature in that it engages with relevant literature from the fields of CMS and IOR, guided by a focused conceptualization of emancipation from CMS literature.

Findings – It is found that although IOR can to a large extent be considered as an emancipatory project, it contains a number of dangers which jeopardize its emancipatory potential. Complemented with other sociotechnical approaches and ideas, however, it appears that IOR could make some valuable contributions to a pragmatic CMS.

Originality/value – This paper is unique in engaging in an exchange of ideas between CMS and IOR. By doing so, it contributes, first, to the debate on a more pragmatic CMS; second, to the dialogue between CMS and “mainstream” organization science; third, to the field of organizational (re)design.

Keywords Critical management, Sociotechnical theory, Emancipation, Integral organizational renewal, Organizational redesign

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the critical management studies (CMS) tradition has provided us with valuable critical assessments of management and organization theory and practice (see e.g. [Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a](#); [Grey and Willmott, 2005](#); [Prasad *et al.*, 2016](#)). In addition, it put forward the goal of advancing this organizational praxis in an emancipatory way ([Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; b](#)). In this endeavor, however, CMS has been criticized for having focused almost exclusively on the negative, theoretical part of its project, leading to the call for a renewed focus on its practical mission of emancipatory social



change (Spicer *et al.*, 2009, 2016; Barros, 2010; Voronov and Coleman, 2003; Bokeno, 2003; Voronov, 2008; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). This call for a pragmatic CMS is clearly formulated by Spicer *et al.*, (2009, p. 555), who seek to:

[...] transform CMS from a negative enterprise into one which seeks to rearticulate and re-present new ways of managing and organizing. This would hopefully empower CMS researchers to not only engage in systematic dismantling of existing managerial approaches, but also try to construct new and hopefully more liberating ways of organizing.

However, concrete attempts to realize these “new and liberating” ways of managing and organizing soon backfired, with action researchers reporting that “the negative CMS theory is unable to articulate alternative practices,” thus impeding the achievement of real and substantive organizational change (King, 2015, p. 262; King and Learmonth, 2015). CMS scholars thus seem to be “able to point into the right direction without being able to show how to get there” (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010, p. 370).

One way out of this impasse, is to engage in a dialogue with what is sometimes constructed as “mainstream” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; b; Visser, 2010) management and organization science. While Visser (2010) for example argues that “a rapprochement” between CMS and “mainstream” organization theory might increase CMS’ practical relevance, Spicer *et al.* (2009, 2016) consider exploring potentials and alternatives that already exist in current discourses or in practice to be an important element of what they call “critical performativity.”

In this paper, we seek to contribute to a more pragmatic CMS, by exploring the emancipatory intent of certain organizational (re)design concepts and ideas from sociotechnical design theory. If an emancipatory intent could indeed be attributed to the ways of managing and organizing this theory proclaims, they might be used for bridging the gap between CMS’ emancipatory aims and current management and organization practice.

While some organization (re)design theories seem to be mainly oriented toward organizational outcomes, others seem to be primarily focused on increasing the self-managing abilities of employees. Sociotechnical design theory, which is closely related to the human relations movement and the works of the Tavistock institute (Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976), is an example of the latter approach. In this paper, we focus on a specific development within the sociotechnical tradition, known as “integral organizational renewal” (IOR).

IOR is a sociotechnical design theory which was developed by the Dutch sociologist Ulbo de Sitter (see e.g. Van Eijnatten, 1993; De Sitter *et al.*, 1997; Van Eijnatten *et al.*, 2008). It is a general and systematic approach for structural (re)design and social innovation of organizations (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020), which at first glance seems to possess various emancipatory characteristics, such as a focus on employee participation and autonomy and a genuine interest in increasing the quality of working life.

Based on a review of relevant literature from the fields of CMS and IOR, guided by a focused conceptualization of emancipation from CMS-literature, we inquire whether IOR can be considered as an emancipatory project. Rather than seeking to be exhaustive, our review aims to serve as a preliminary assessment of the potential contributions of IOR to a pragmatic CMS.

Our analysis contributes to several strands of literature. First, we contribute to the debate on a more pragmatic CMS, by exploring the potential contribution of IOR in this regard. Second, our theorizing complements and supports the dialogue between critical and “mainstream” management and organization theory, by engaging in an exchange of ideas

between CMS and the field of organizational (re)design. Finally, we contribute to the field of organizational (re)design *in se*, by investigating IOR from a new, critical-emancipatory perspective.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We first introduce and conceptualize the idea of emancipation within the CMS tradition. We then proceed by situating IOR within the sociotechnical tradition and outline some of its main features. The subsequent section presents an analysis of IOR from a critical-emancipatory perspective. We end by providing some conclusions and reflections on the contribution and limitations of our analysis.

Critical management studies and emancipation

After various critical studies of management, work and organization since the 1970s, [Alvesson and Willmott \(1992a\)](#) introduced the label “Critical Management Studies” to connect these threads of critical analysis ([Spicer et al., 2016](#); [Prasad et al., 2016](#)). Earlier that year, a very influential paper in CMS history, titled *On the Idea of Emancipation in Management and Organization Studies*, was published by the same authors, which appeared in revised and expanded form in [Alvesson and Willmott \(1996\)](#). Within these texts, a conceptualization of emancipation is articulated, which can be regarded as “the organizing goal” ([Voronov, 2005](#)) of the CMS project.

Emancipation is the name of a process, starting with a situation in which “the development and articulation of human consciousness” is constrained by “unnecessarily restrictive traditions, ideologies, assumptions, power relations, identity formations, and so forth” ([Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b](#), p. 432, 435). In its negative formulation, the end result of emancipation is a situation in which people have been freed or liberated from these constraints. Formulated in a positive sense, it is a state of affairs that does justice to this development and articulation of human consciousness, which includes qualities like freedom, autonomy, rationality, spontaneity, creativity, purposefulness and participation ([Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b](#)). In the remainder of this paper, we refer to these as emancipatory variables, as they can vary in their level of presence.

This idea of emancipation, which CMS adopted from the intellectual tradition of critical theory, has been the subject of various critiques, like “aloofness and idealism” and being overly grandiose ([Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b](#), p. 437). As a response to such critique, and to retain a commitment to emancipation, [Alvesson and Willmott \(1992b\)](#) developed a more modest conceptualization of emancipation, tailored to management and organization studies, in which the abstract and over-demanding ends from critical theory are exchanged for more concrete and modest practices that can facilitate liberation from repressive conditions. This idea of emancipation is primarily focused on organizational rather than social and ideological conditions, which makes it a well-suited conceptualization for the assessment of pragmatic strategies for change. It is also in this context that Alvesson and Willmott noted that humanist approaches within management and organization science can receive “a reserved” (1992b, p. 433) or “carefully qualified welcome” (1996, p. 162). This stance on emancipation is a condition of possibility for our analysis, where we explore IOR – which could be regarded as such a humanistic approach – from a critical-emancipatory perspective.

Further, [Alvesson and Willmott \(1992b\)](#) developed an operationalization of emancipation in the form of a 3×3 matrix, distinguishing between different dimensions of an emancipatory project. To our knowledge, this emancipation-matrix has never been applied for research purposes. This is unfortunate, as it:

- has been developed within the foundational texts that form the basis of the CMS project;
- is specially reconstructed for management and organization studies; and
- captures many aspects that are relevant in emancipation, hence enabling a “holistic” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b, p. 452) investigation.

So although we acknowledge that the debate on emancipation has evolved over the past decades (Alvesson *et al.*, 2009; Huault *et al.*, 2014), we have decided to apply this matrix for investigating IOR as a potentially emancipatory project.

Alvesson and Willmott (1992b; 1996) emphasize that the value of their matrix is heuristic; the cells are likely to overlap. In fact, they warn that “the narrow targeting of a specific space within our matrix is to be avoided because it fragments and subverts the idea of emancipation, which is to open up, challenge and transcend constraints” (1996, pp. 179–180). We take this caution to heart by using all dimensions of the matrix separately for exploring the emancipatory intent of IOR. What the categories of the matrix entail is introduced at the beginning of each corresponding part of the analysis.

Sociotechnical design theory and integral organizational renewal

In our analysis, we focus on the organizational (re)design approach “Integral Organizational Renewal,” which is a specific development of sociotechnical design theory. The origin of the sociotechnical tradition lies in studies executed in the British coal mines in the 1950s, where the relation between the social and technical aspects of organizations (hence “sociotechnical”) was investigated, in the light of more humane ways of organizing (Van Amelsvoort, 2000; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). Up until today, the sociotechnical approach has been further developed with insights from both system theory, providing it with a strong theoretical foundation, and practical experiences in organizational consulting and practice (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997; Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020).

The main goal of IOR is the improvement of an organizations’ ability to simultaneously achieve excellent organizational performance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, as well as excellent employee-related outcomes such as commitment (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997; Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). An organization is viewed by IOR as a social interaction network. These interactions are substantially influenced by the organizational structure, which refers to the grouping and coupling of activities to subsystems (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). IOR uses structural parameters to characterize such organizational structures, of which “functional concentration” is often considered to be the most important one, describing the degree to which similar activities are concentrated within specialized departments (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). A (bureaucratic) functionally concentrated organization structure, in which specific activities are grouped at separate subsystems, is thought to contribute to crippling complexity of the social interaction network (i.e. structural complexity) and a decrease of autonomy at specific departments. According to IOR, this is likely to result in a variety of problems for organizational members, such as stress, a lack of involvement and a lack of opportunities to learn and develop.

Functional ways of organizing are still dominant within many organizations (De Sitter, 1998; Alvesson and Thompson, 2006; Van Amelsvoort and Van Hoogtegem, 2017; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). To change these structures, IOR proposes to reduce the complexity of the social interaction network and to increase worker autonomy by lowering functional concentration. Subsequently, IOR advocates integral and organization-level participative organizational (re)design to achieve such de-concentration. This transformation should result in flexible

and humane organizations, with a low level of complexity: “simple organizations with complex jobs” (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997).

Analysis

In their emancipation-matrix, Alvesson and Willmott (1992b) first distinguished between questioning-, incremental- and utopian types of emancipatory projects. In the first part of the analysis, we explore to what extent these types may apply to IOR, which gives some preliminary insights into the background, assumptions and overall vision of this approach. Alvesson and Willmott (1992b) further differentiated between the different foci emancipatory projects can have, namely, ends, means and social relations. In the second part of the analysis, we explore and evaluate the ends and some of the means of IOR, and the effect of these ends and means on social relations, on their emancipatory potential.

Types of emancipatory projects

Here, we follow the sequence of Alvesson and Willmott (1992b), distinguishing three types of emancipatory projects, which as such highlight different aspects of emancipation.

Questioning. Notwithstanding the call for a renewed focus on CMS’ constructive mission, the CMS project in general, and emancipation in particular, retains a critical element. This aspect was translated by Alvesson and Willmott (1992b) as a “questioning” type of emancipatory project, which “involves the challenging and critiquing of dominant forms of thinking,” and as such is concerned “with investigating and problematizing” (pp. 449–450). They identified the image of man as *homo economicus* and the principles of scientific management from F.W. Taylor as such a dominant way of thinking within the field of management (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b, p. 436). More recently, Spicer *et al.* (2016, p. 240) have expressed that “a negative outcome that involves the removal of harmful aspects” and “ideas that [...] have passed their use-by date” is still “essential,” even in a more pragmatic CMS. To what extent can IOR be considered as such a questioning type of emancipatory project?

According to De Sitter (1998, p. 3), many organizations are still predominantly designed on the basis of principles stemming from the past century. The heritage of Taylorism in particular, proclaiming *inter alia* standardization, a high division of labor, and a separation between action and thought, has proved influential (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). In the footsteps of early sociotechnical thought (Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Cherno, 1976; De Sitter, 1981), IOR is very much concerned with critiquing and problematizing these principles and the bureaucratic organizational structures resulting from them. Such structures are often characterized by many specialized departments, many subtasks and many relations between these (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). Scholars within the sociotechnical tradition have extensively investigated and described three major negative effects of such structures for the members of the organization:

- (1) Stress. For De Sitter (1998), following Karasek (1979), stress is not the result of occurring problems and disturbances as such, but of the inability to deal with them. Since the chance of disturbances in bureaucratic organizations is high – e.g. because of the many relations – but the separation of action and thought and the splitting up of tasks leaves little to regulate when a disturbance occurs, the outcome of these structures is often precisely this situation: high working pressure, but low regulatory potential (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010).
- (2) A lack of involvement. Many small and specialized tasks, which are dispersed throughout the organizations’ social network, result in a lack of overview for the

individual members of the organization. Not only are they likely to be unaware of the (coming to be of the) end-product and/or the customer they are working for, they often also do not know who to ask for help when something goes wrong, obstructing successful communication. Organizational members are thus unable to see the meaningfulness of their contribution, are barely involved in regulation and decision-making and experience a lack of “engagement in a network of social relations” (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010, p. 264). The result is likely to be alienation, demotivation and a decreased feeling of responsibility (De Sitter, 1998; Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020).

- (3) A lack of opportunities to learn and develop. The division and separation of activities leaves little room for significant improvement, regulation, initiative, change, etc., hindering experimentation and learning (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010).

In addition, the high division of labor of these organizational structures necessitates central coordination and hierarchical control (Van Amelsvoort and Van Hoogtegem, 2017). Improvement and regulation are reserved for managers, who are often not involved in the tasks to be improved and detached from the activities they are supposed to manage, because of the separation of action and thought and the limitation of regulation and improvement to specialized tasks within specialized departments (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010).

We conclude that IOR can be regarded as questioning type of emancipatory project. Although De Sitter (1998) and others within the sociotechnical community criticize bureaucratic structures because they demobilize human resources, from a critical-emancipatory perspective these structures also hinder the potential achievement of high levels of the emancipatory variables: conditions for employee autonomy, spontaneity, creativity, purposefulness and rational problem solving are not met. This also applies to groups of people, because cooperation and shared responsibility are hindered as well (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). IOR thus problematizes and criticizes ways of managing and organizing that hinder the development and articulation of human consciousness. As such, CMS can regard IOR as an ally, in particular in counteracting the “powerful dogma” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b, p. 436) of Taylorism.

Incremental. CMS seeks to empower others than the “managerial elite” in designing and constructing organizational reality (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a, p. 12). Incremental types of emancipatory projects are in line with this, focusing on “liberation from certain forms of suppression,” and often on “participatory processes” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b, p. 450). With regard to the first aspect, we highlight the issue of suppression by standardized rules and procedures within IOR. As for the broad concept of participatory processes, we concentrate on the role of participation in the (re)design process of IOR, as Alvesson and Willmott (1992a) remarked that “exercises designed and controlled by managers to improve levels of “involvement” and “participation” amongst employees will invariably be limited in their effectiveness so long as employees are excluded from the design and operation of these programs” (pp. 7–8). We review other participatory aspects of IOR in the sections on means and on social relations.

IOR places much emphasis on the importance of regulation opportunities for employees (De Sitter, 1998; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020), from which it follows that “suffocating procedures, which limit regulation opportunities, must be avoided” (Van Amelsvoort, 2000, p. 50). As Kuipers *et al.* (2020, p. 208) explain, a high level of specification hinders the “own judgment and resourcefulness” of organizational members. In addition, Van Amelsvoort (2000, p. 78) notes that “procedures are often laid down on the basis of a negative assumption about the

intentions of people.” The alternative of IOR is the sociotechnical principle of “minimal critical specification,” which states that “no more should be specified than is absolutely essential” (Cherns, 1987, p. 155). As such, IOR is aiming for “a minimum of rules and procedures,” while arguing that the remaining, “essential” rules and procedures should be “drawn up by the employees involved themselves” (Van Amelsvoort, 2000, p. 82).

For organizational (re)design, IOR advocates the combination of a participative and expert approach (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997). Although IOR emphasizes that more directive, management-driven elements are inescapably part of successfully transforming bureaucratic organizations (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020), it has a “participative change strategy” as an explicit element of its approach (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997, p. 516). The IOR change-process starts with a “strategic orientation” on the relations of the organization with its environment, but it is emphasized that this orientation should involve more people than “just a small elite group” (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997, pp. 517–518). After exploring structure and non-structure related problems, IOR prescribes learning employees to analyze and design their own organization, by means of on-the-job training (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997). It is acknowledged that although expert-knowledge on sociotechnical design is required, “involvement of the workers in redesign is an essential condition,” for example, because they possess the relevant knowledge and experience (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997, p. 521). Some (design) issues might be fixed by the top of the organization (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020), but as De Sitter *et al.* (1997, p. 521) express: “The redesign has to be “their redesign” and not a solution introduced by outside experts.” Eventually, Kuipers (1998) argues, employees at all organizational levels should be enabled to self-design their structural organizational context over the course of time.

We conclude that IOR has a qualified claim for being incrementally emancipatory, for by eliminating suppressive work standards, IOR seeks to do justice to the knowledge, experience and rationality of all organizational members and to create more room for spontaneity, creativity and autonomy. In addition, it advocates a participatory (re)design process which focusses on increasing the ability to self-design of employees. Yet, as a fully participative, bottom-up and non-directive redesign process is considered as unfeasible by IOR, it remains exposed to the possibility of expert-driven elements getting the upper hand, potentially nullifying its emancipatory potential.

Utopian. Utopian types of emancipatory projects do not necessarily give clear-cut alternatives, but rather present an ideal, vision or utopian state (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b; 1996). Spicer *et al.* (2009, p. 551; 2016) have argued that in a more pragmatic CMS, “utopias” might need to be transformed into the Foucauldian idea of “heterotopias,” that is, “other places,” that are less distant from reality. To investigate IOR as a utopian type of emancipatory project, we first try to extract what the utopia of this approach might look like and subsequently examine the emancipatory potential of this ideal. We then proceed by drawing attention to the role of utopias and heterotopias in the (re)design process of IOR.

As for the IOR utopia, the approach aims at “simple organizations with complex jobs” and “Human Resources Mobilization” (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997; De Sitter, 1988; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). Together this forms a simple organization, in the sense of low structural complexity, which mobilizes “the responsibility and involvement of human resources (which is to say, “human beings”)” (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020, p. 154). The members of the organization and their capacities thus play a central role in the utopic element of the IOR approach. Yet, IOR is essentially a structure-focused paradigm (Van Eijnatten, 1993), which could be both useful and restricting at the same time, since some, but definitely not all issues regarding emancipation are structure-related. By emphasizing structure/content instead of form/process (cf. Van Eijnatten, 1993, p. 71), IOR is vulnerable to subordinating the organizational

change process to ideal typical structure-determinism, hence establishing a new restrictive ideology instead of overcoming it, the latter being the aim of both CMS and IOR itself.

Moving on, utopias and heterotopias also seem to occupy a central function *within* the (re) design process of IOR, as it prescribes that multiple (re)designs should be made: realistic ones (say, heterotopias), and one “castle in the sky”: an ideal-type of design, developed by the sociotechnical expert and organizational members, that should not be constrained by current reality and considerations of feasibility (Kuipers, 1998; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). This utopic castle in the sky functions as visionary exploration of possibilities in the long-term future. As Kuipers (1998) remarks: an important task of the sociotechnical designer is the creation of a certain tension between “how things are and how they should and could be” (p. 253). As such, IOR can be attributed both a default utopic and heterotopic element.

We conclude, first, that although IOR might be accused of a restrictive and potentially anti-emancipatory focus on organizational structure over process, the utopia of IOR can be said to have at least some emancipatory features. Second, heterotopias and utopias turned out to be central elements within the IOR (re)design-process. When these designs are conceived as detailed blueprints to be rigorously implemented in practice, this approach could be attributed little emancipatory value. If these tools are used as points of orientation within specific local conditions (Kuipers, 1998, p. 252; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020), however, IOR can to some extent be considered as an utopian type of emancipatory project.

Foci of emancipatory projects

For the second part of the analysis, we slightly modify the sequence of Alvesson and Willmott (1992b), who distinguished three focal points (means, social relations and ends) of an emancipatory intent. Because the means of IOR can best be seen in relation to their ends, we use this ends-means-sequence and complete the analysis with investigating the issue of social relations.

Ends. A first focal point of emancipatory intent is ends, which “refer to the purpose of organizational or managerial activity” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b, p. 450). Strongly opposing instrumental rationality, central elements within CMS are: (1) criticizing the improvement of means toward given and predominant ends; and (2) the call for considering ends in themselves (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2005). The latter also applies to the CMS tradition itself: to make CMS more pragmatic, Spicer *et al.* (2009, 2016) argue, critical scholars should be clearer about what their desired outcomes are, and these outcomes should be relevant and specific. Projects with ends as their focal point of emancipatory intent focus on “unfreezing” and challenging “the rationality of existing ends” and starting the debate about alternative ones (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996, p. 177, 179). Here, we investigate to what extent IOR can be considered as such a project.

De Sitter *et al.* (1997) state that the “main objective of IOR has been to develop a systematic approach to design which supports improvements in both the quality of work and what is called ‘the quality of the organization’” (pp. 497–498). While the quality of organization criterium consists of predominant ends like flexibility, quality, efficiency, etc., quality of work or -working life on the other hand refers to “the ability of an organization to mobilize involvement and motivated responsibility” (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020, p. 162). This requirement consists of ends like “controllable stress-conditions” and “opportunities to: be involved; learn; and develop,” and is complemented with demands related to the quality of working relations, such as “shared responsibility” and “participation in communication” (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010, p. 242). As such, the capabilities of organizational members play a key role in the ends IOR proclaims.

The combination of these quality of organization and quality of working life criteria appears quite remarkable, as many organizational (re)design approaches focus on the first, and neglect the second (Van Amelsvoort, 2000), perhaps because it is often assumed that fulfilling these two conditions simultaneously is difficult, if not impossible. IOR, however, argues that a high quality of working life does not contradict high organizational performance: structures designed according to sociotechnical principles are claimed to facilitate the achievement of multiple goals (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997; Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). The overarching end of IOR is thus, according to De Sitter *et al.* (1997, p. 506), “not to improve a systems’ capacity to achieve a certain goal according to prescribed criteria [. . .] but to improve a system’s “controllability”: the ability to achieve a range of objectives” against the background of everchanging environmental conditions. The goal of design, as conceived by IOR, should concern the organizational system itself, and its capacity for adapting its ends over the course of time (De Sitter, 1998).

We conclude that IOR can be attributed an emancipatory intent with regard to ends, for it challenges the sovereignty of one-dimensional perspectives that only take quality of organization-related goals into account, opens up the discussion about multiple value creation and initiates two alternative domains of ends, that are both centered around the members of the organization. By stating quality of working life and working relations as *explicit* and *separate* ends in themselves, IOR seeks to move beyond instrumentalism with regard to employees, toward the coexistence of multiple and adjustable goals.

In addition, it seems that IOR could make a valuable contribution to a more pragmatic CMS in this regard, by providing ends which show resemblance with the emancipatory ideal of CMS, but are at the same time more specific (e.g. opportunities to learn, develop and grow, which relates to the more abstract end of human self-realization). CMS might consider incorporating these ends and then complementing them with specific goals in other domains, like equality and justice (cf. Spicer *et al.*, 2016). IOR in particular seems to lend itself for this, given the fact that it aims at increasing the ability of an organization to achieve multiple objectives (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997).

Means. Given the CMS theory/practice-gap we mentioned earlier, “means” might be regarded just as important as ends. Not surprisingly, “Means is intended to refer to discourses and practices that are valued for their supposed ability to make ends achievable” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996, p. 177). Discussing all of the means of IOR is beyond the scope (and intent) of this paper, if this is considered to be an achievable task at all. Instead, we supplement the means already highlighted in the *incremental* section with a rough sketch of IOR’s (re)design strategy, with most emphasis on potentially emancipatory elements.

According to Kuipers (1998), the central principle of IOR’s (re)design strategy is “the reduction of structural complexity by decreasing the division of labor” (p. 235). To do this, IOR first tries to streamline the primary process by grouping connected (execution-, preparation- and support-) activities together (e.g. in relation to a product or customer) in pooled interdependent and conditionally autonomous “flows”. Thereafter, these connected activities can be allocated to “small-scale and independent work groups,” that are “aimed at fulfilling a complete task” (Van Amelsvoort, 2000, p. 68; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). Precisely because these “semi-autonomous groups” are responsible for a whole or complete task, interfaces (i.e. external dependencies) are reduced, and structural complexity is lowered (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997; Van Amelsvoort, 2000). This in turn leads to a lower chance of disturbances, reducing working pressure (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010). In addition, Van Amelsvoort (2000, p. 72) notes that “based on the assumption that people have social needs

in the form of mutual interactions, group work ties in with the social development of individuals.”

In the (re)design of jobs on the individual level – for which the steps above are a precondition – the concept of a complete and meaningful task is equally important (Van Amelsvoort, 2000). Guidelines for the (re)design of an individual task include sufficient variety, learning-opportunities and the delivery of a meaningful contribution to the group process (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020, p. 284). IOR also strongly emphasizes the building in of regulation capacity in the individual job: employees need to be able to “rely on [their] own cleverness, insight, intellect and skill,” in short their own capacities, when dealing with work-related problems (De Sitter, 1998, p. 18, 313ff).

In all, this strategy of IOR should result in “simple organizations with complex jobs” (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997). These complex jobs are “more demanding for workers, but at the same time more challenging, offering opportunities to develop” (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010, p. 275; De Sitter, 1998). In the organizational structures resulting from the use of the means discussed so far, there ideally exists minimal separation of making, preparation and supporting activities and minimal splitting up of sub-tasks. This creates the conditions for *inter alia* more overview for organizational members, who now deliver a meaningful contribution to the end-product, and in the end to the possibility of reaching the ends IOR advocates (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020).

We conclude that although IOR can as such be regarded as a potentially emancipatory project with regard to means, the actualization of this potential strongly depends on the way in which its (re)design strategy is applied. When the steps outlined above are interpreted as rigid principles to be deductively applied, IOR might end up subjugating employees to a grand design plan, and hence as rather anti-emancipatory. When its (re)design concepts are used as a heuristic “compass” to orient oneself in a specific situation in practice (Kuipers, 1998; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020), however, IOR might indeed provide a fruitful strategy for emancipatory organizational change.

Social relations. According to Alvesson and Willmott (1996), means and ends are “embedded in structures of social relations” (p. 178). Emancipation can, therefore, also focus on “the social organization of privileges and power” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996, p. 178). We confine ourselves to the matter of the distribution of privileges and power between managers and non-managers. CMS remarks that in organizational practice “managerial groups are clearly privileged in decision-making and most concepts of it” (Deetz, 1992, p. 24), and that hierarchy – “the idea that coordination implies superiority” – is “taken as natural” (Grey and Willmott, 2005, p. 5). Consequently, CMS sees “de-naturalization” as “a crucial element in emancipation” and seeks to empower “groups other than those of the managerial elite” in determining organizational reality (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b, p. 12, 16; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2005). We investigate to what extent IOR could potentially facilitate emancipation in terms of social relations.

In considering the emancipatory intent of IOR with regard to means, we ended with the design of meaningful and complete individual tasks that have sufficient regulation capacity to deal with work-related problems. This completes the first part IOR’s (re)design strategy and implies that problem solving capacity is fully decentralized from management to employees (i.e. dealing with disturbances does not require the involvement of (multiple) hierarchical levels). In fact, as Van Amelsvoort (2000) explains: “by increasing local regulation capacity, the hierarchical stratification of the organization can be reduced” (p. 70). Here, we explore the second part of IOR’s strategy: decentralizing the regulatory structure, which has much to do with social relations.

According to Kuipers *et al.* (2020, p. 326), “The guiding principle for the regulatory structure is the minimum division and separation of managerial activities and the maximum integration of managerial and operational activities.” The regulatory structure is designed bottom-up (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997), the semi-autonomous teams, or task-groups coming first. Within the new organizational structure, preparation activities (e.g. planning) and support activities (e.g. quality-control) should, according to IOR, be integrated in these teams as much as possible (De Sitter, 1998; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). IOR further suggests to allocate responsibilities regarding regulation and internal and external coordination to a (rotating) team-coordinator, or to divide these tasks and responsibilities over all team-members (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). A leadership role is as such “no longer exclusive to a management position” (Van Amelsvoort, 2000, p. 70). As De Sitter (1998, p. 323) underlines: human resources should not be managed, but *mobilized*. For coordination activities and tactical and strategic regulatory activities that transcend the team-level, IOR suggests to allocate these to “mixed staff-groups,” and only the regulatory capacity that remains after that is allocated centrally within the organization (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020, p. 304ff).

IOR thus proclaims a new distribution of operational, tactical and strategic regulation privileges and responsibilities. These should no longer be solely reserved for management positions, as “the various self-managing units must be involved in essential strategic and tactical decisions” (Van Amelsvoort, 2000, p. 69; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). The (horizontal) organizational structures that IOR aims at are characterized by minimal separation of operational and regulatory activities and minimal splitting up of regulatory activities, creating the conditions for, among other things, opportunities for learning, development and successful communication (Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010). IOR further remarks that improvement and regulation is no longer reserved for detached managers, but integrated with operational activities, all in all enabling the realization of its goals (Kuipers *et al.*, 2020; Achterbergh and Vriens, 2010). The strategy of IOR, centered around reducing the division of labor, “offers a structural base for participation and democratization,” according to Kuipers (1998, p. 235), and “creates conditions for self-organiz[ation] and horizontal coordination (i.e. more job autonomy),” according to Van Amelsvoort and Van Hoogtegem (2017, p. 284).

We conclude that because IOR aims at significant changes the structure of social relations, it could be regarded as a potentially emancipatory project in this regard. In particular, the approach seeks to take the privileges of decision-making, regulation and improvement out of the hands of managers, to be allocated bottom-up to members of semi-autonomous teams, which implies a substantial shift in the organizational power balance in favor of operational work. In this process, hierarchical stratification is to be replaced by horizontal coordination. Hereby, IOR seeks to establish conditions for more equal and democratic social relations, which appeal to emancipatory variables like autonomy and participation. However, its contribution in this regard should be compensated for: (1) its restrictive focus on *structural* conditions in the light of altering existing power balances; and (2) the confinement to the distribution of power and privileges between managers and non-managers.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have explored the emancipatory intent of certain organizational (re)design concepts and ideas from the modern sociotechnical approach IOR, to assess their potential contribution to a more pragmatic CMS. A renewed focus on the practical, emancipatory aims of the CMS project has been asked for (Spicer *et al.*, 2009, 2016; Barros, 2010; Voronov and Coleman, 2003; Voronov, 2008; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). We noted that what

seems to be hindering CMS to become more pragmatic is the lack of an approach to emancipatory organizational transformation, which is able to present alternative ways of managing and organizing. As action research indicated that “the negative CMS theory” is unable to construct such alternatives (King, 2015; King and Learmonth, 2015), we engaged in a dialogue with what was called “mainstream” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; b; Visser, 2010) management and organization science, by investigating IOR as a potentially emancipatory project.

We used the early publications of Alvesson and Willmott (1992a; b; 1996) for the construction of a critical-emancipatory perspective that was used to analyze IOR. The emancipation-matrix developed by these authors, which to our knowledge has never been applied, turned out to be particularly useful for such research purposes, as it distinguishes several important aspects of the idea of emancipation.

We conclude that IOR can to a considerable extent be regarded as a potentially emancipatory project in all aspects of emancipation captured in the emancipation-matrix of Alvesson and Willmott (1992b). As such, it can add this emancipatory feature to its body of theory. Our analysis has revealed that IOR advocates an approach to organizational (re)design that aims at transforming repressive organizational structures into ones that are capable of realizing a high quality of working life. We learned that IOR puts forward an integrated set of (re)design concepts and ideas, that appeal to emancipatory variables like rationality, creativity and participation (e.g. by using the principle of minimal critical specification and advocating a participatory (re)design process), but also autonomy, spontaneity and purposefulness (e.g. by trying to build in local regulation capacity and create meaningful jobs). In addition, IOR questions both predominant organizational ends and social relations and seeks to substitute these for more emancipatory ones, i.e. quality of working life in the case of ends and semi-autonomous teams in the case of social relations. These results are directly relevant for managerial and organizational practice, in that they support the use of IOR as an approach for creating responsible and humane organizations for today’s, as well as tomorrow’s society.

Yet, IOR was also found to harbor a number of dangers which jeopardize its emancipatory potential. Central to these is the fact that IOR is essentially a structure-focused design perspective. This makes it vulnerable to the risk of overlooking other relevant elements of emancipation, as well as subordinating the dynamics of practical organizational change to expert-driven and ideal typical structure-determinism, thereby constituting a new restrictive ideology. There are, however, other sociotechnical approaches which focus on the change and social development process rather than on (re)design content (Van Eijnatten, 1993; Van Eijnatten *et al.*, 2008). These include the “Democratic Dialogue” approach, which, just like Alvesson and Willmott (1992a; 1996), draws on the works of Habermas (see e.g. Gustavsen, 1985, 1992), and the “Participative Dialogue” version of sociotechnical design theory, which advocates a clear anti-expert approach to organizational change (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Emery, 1989). These approaches, which are closely related to action research (Pasmore, 2001; Greenwood and Levin, 2007), provide numerous concepts and ideas that can be used to remedy IOR’s shortcomings.

These conclusions suggest that IOR, supplemented with other sociotechnical approaches and ideas, could make some valuable contributions to a more pragmatic CMS. Most notably, IOR seems to provide an approach to organizational (re)design that might be able to create working conditions that do justice to the freedom, rationality, purposefulness, spontaneity and creativity of organizational members to a much larger extent than traditional forms of managing and organizing. Especially because IOR is “developed to be applied” (Kuipers, 1998, p. 236), it seems particularly suitable for helping CMS in bridging the gap between its emancipatory aims and current management and organization practice. As King (2015, p. 262), in his role of critical practitioner, observed: CMS felt short in being

able “to provide tools to know how to change practice.” Providing CMS with a toolbox of alternative and “more liberating ways of managing and organizing” (Spicer *et al.*, 2009, p. 555) would as such make a valuable contribution to such practitioners, and might salvage CMS from becoming “immobilizing, debilitating and ultimately destructive to any positive action” (King, 2015, p. 262).

Notwithstanding this potential contribution of sociotechnical design theory to a more pragmatic CMS, some points of discussion should be raised. First of all, we acknowledge that there are multiple issues which are relevant within CMS and emancipation in particular (e.g. deep-seated power relations and conflicts), that were not reviewed in this paper. We do not suggest that such issues are irrelevant, but they either surpassed the preliminary nature and scope of our analysis, or IOR was estimated to be of little help in addressing them. If IOR wants to broaden its relevance in this regard, it would need to develop an interest in oppressive conditions which transcend “the purely local level,” such as those related to capitalism or managerial ideology (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b, p. 499). Second, we note that some CMS scholars, including Alvesson and Willmott (1992b; 1996), conceptualize emancipation as a micro-level process, starting with individual resistance, whereas we have investigated emancipation as something which might be achieved through IOR. A point of discussion in this regard is whether such micro-level emancipation is capable of bringing about the real and substantive change that CMS seeks. From the perspective of IOR, emancipation at an individual level can only be facilitated through organizational system-level change. As such, CMS might allow itself to be more open to the idea that emancipatory organizational change inevitably involves system-level changes, which are needed to break through repressive organizational structures (cf. Kuipers, 1998; Kuipers *et al.*, 2020). A final, and related point is that of “human engineering” (Kuipers, 1998), in which employees “appear as objects of managerial action” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a, p. 1). Although we acknowledge that IOR *can* be interpreted as such an engineering approach, we believe this represents a wrongful depiction of the way IOR is meant to be applied. As we have argued throughout this paper, the (re)design concepts that IOR provides are not to be seen as panaceas to be deductively implemented by “outside experts” (De Sitter *et al.*, 1997, p. 521), but rather as conceptual tools to be used as points of orientation within empirical organization contexts, in continuous dialogue with organizational members. In addition, we have noted that other sociotechnical approaches, which are focused specifically on participative dialogue, could be mobilized to complement IOR in this regard. Further research might seek to investigate the potential contribution of these approaches to a more pragmatic CMS, as well as join earlier work (Bokeno, 2003; Voronov, 2005; Visser, 2010) in engaging in a dialogue between the critical and “mainstream” areas of organization science. Our analysis has continued along this path, suggesting that a joining of forces between the CMS tradition and the sociotechnical tradition might generate an unprecedented impetus for creating real emancipatory organizational change.

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