

Peer Review Article

Absencing as Attentional Violence and Its Impact on Well-Being:

Loss of Resonance in Advanced Capitalism

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the impact of *absencing* on well-being. It explores the source of absencing in the attentional violence created by the logic of internalized capitalism: the belief that one's self-worth is linked to productivity, the consumerist model of well-being, and the instrumentalization of relationships. The worldview created through the internalization of capitalist values leads to a stress enhancing, alienating way of life with negative consequences for well-being. Attention is diverted away from the wholeness of self and other, from the quality of relationships, creating a social field where individuals relate to themselves, others and the world through the logic of absencing. When this logic dominates the subjective structure of the inner world it reinforces self-optimization and commodified social relations that undermine well-being. Critical awareness of the internalization of capitalism reveals that even transformative approaches for well-being can become instrumentalized by the capitalist logic. This article highlights the importance of a critical lens to understand how mindfulness and spirituality in organizations can become dominated by a capitalist worldview. It

uses *presencing* in Theory U as a case study of a transformative approach aiming to undermine absencing while being constantly haunted by its influence.

Keywords

well-being, absencing, attentional violence, advanced capitalism, alienation, resonance, critical awareness, instrumentalization

"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity"

(Simone Weil, as cited in Pétrement, 1976, p. 462)

Introduction

The capitalist discourse on well-being highlights the importance of self-care: mindfulness practice, time for relaxation, healthy habits, etc. (Butler, 2019). These individual daily actions are important ways to reconnect to our embodied system and maintain a lifestyle that balances effort and recovery. At the same time, the unilateral focus on self-care obscures certain ideologies and systemic structures that are constantly undermining individuals' best intentions to experience well-being.

Well-being is a psychosocial dynamic concept that includes emotional, physical, cognitive, relational, and spiritual aspects (Hone et al., 2015). It is not only a psychological function but also one that involves relationships, cultural values, and social structures. This paper examines well-being under the ideological conditions of advanced capitalism. We use Butler's (2019) concept of advanced capitalism, which describes an ideological worldview based on self-interest, competition, and materialist values. The cultural values of capitalism contribute to the belief that one's self-worth is linked to the accumulation of resources and personal productivity (Hayden, 1999), and they frame relationships as instruments for self-optimization (Rosa, 2019). This worldview contributes to *attentional violence* by reducing the complex aspects of well-being to an exclusive focus on well-being as individual self-optimization through the accumulation of various forms of capital. In this worldview, individuals see themselves as separate from others and success is seen as the promised outcome of resource accumulation (Ng, 2016).

This paper relies on the concept of *absencing* as used by Scharmer (2008) to explore the impact on well-being of an ego-based capitalist worldview blind to the integral, intersubjective dimension of our humanity. Absencing is a form of attentional violence—an ignorance of the inherent wholeness and interconnected nature of self and others, not-seeing, not paying attention, de-sensing and disengaging (Scharmer, 2023). This mode of perception prevalent under advanced capitalism (Hayden, 1999) undermines the individual pursuit of well-being by reducing its complex dimension to a consumerist mode of self-optimization. The

choice of individuals to invest in themselves and aim to self-optimize through various “technologies of the self” becomes a personal, subjective choice (Foucault, 1993, as cited in Ng, 2016, p. 138), obscuring more insidious systemic forces based on absencing that alienate individuals from the most important sources of well-being. Critical analysis reveals that absencing informs the very structure of subjectivity within a capitalist worldview, leading to the unconscious reproduction of its fundamental assumptions and values (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). This paper contributes to critical awareness about the logic of absencing in a capitalist worldview (Scharmer, 2023), and the narrow focus on productivity, profit and optimization, that may threaten even the best-intended strategies for well-being, such as mindfulness, workplace spirituality or Theory U.

Well-Being as Attentive, Caring Relationship to Oneself and Others

Despite an enormous increase in the wellness industry to 5.6 trillion, nearly 14% higher than its size in 2019 (GWI, 2023) and many large-scale strategies for social transformation, the grip of the capitalist logic continues to expand and dominate at times even the most promising change strategies. Approaches such as mindfulness, spirituality, and presencing aim to contribute to well-being by creating attention to the wholeness of the self and its relational nature. While these approaches are promising, they need to be considered with critical awareness about their potential to reproduce the very worldview they try to counter. We will start with a definition of well-being and its subversion by the capitalist worldview.

Well-being is a holistic concept that includes multiple areas of life. It has been defined by the World Health Organization as a “positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose” (World Health Organization, n.d. p. 10). Well-being is a dynamic, psychosocial concept based on the interdependence between individuals and their social environment (Tay et al., 2023). It includes emotional, physical, cognitive, and relational aspects (Hone et al., 2015). Well-being brings attention to the importance of individual actions and decisions, together with the relationships and structures in one’s social environment, based on a positive dynamic between subjective experience and interpersonal, social conditions (Maté, 2022).

Individual well-being is determined by three major factors: the positive functioning of one’s inner world (mental health), the quality of interpersonal relationships (Wissing et al., 2021) and a sense of meaning and purpose (Seligman, 2004). Mental health can be influenced by cultivating positive beliefs and the development of one’s potential for compassion, creativity, and self-realization (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2004; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006).

Interpersonal and social relationships are also key contributors to well-being. Social inequality and oppression diminish well-being (Prilleltensky, 2008), as do organizational structures focused on productivity geared at financial gain, which contributes to stress and the loss of well-being (Quick & Tetrick, 2011). A worldview of scarcity and competition diminishes the subjective experience of vibrancy and well-being in relationships, as individuals fail to see and connect to each other as whole selves (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014, pp. 9–12). A sense of meaning is a fundamental aspect of well-being connected to motivation, resilience, and quality of life (Seligman, 2004).

Well-being can be elucidated through the prism of Daniel Siegel’s (2016) interpersonal neurobiology framework. The metaphor of a flowing river captures a state of subjective well-being, as an integrated flow of energy and information with “the features of being flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable” (Siegel & Drulis, 2023, p. 6). The threats to the flow of this river of well-being are too much rigidity or too much chaos, which both create suffering (Siegel & Drulis, 2023, p. 6). Well-being is an emergent, positive state of interaction between one’s inner world (psychology) and the external world (social relations), sustained by inner integration, interpersonal connection and engagement. Five of the traits of well-being are psychological: 1) body self-regulation, 2) emotional awareness, 3) regulation of fear, 4) response flexibility, 5) insight or self-awareness, while four are relational: 1) attunement, 2) empathy, 3) compassion, 4) ethics (Siegel & Drulis, 2023, p. 16). Psychological aspects of well-being imply an attentive, caring relationship to oneself while relational aspects imply an open, attentive and caring relationship to others. Attunement, empathy, compassion, and an ethical way of being in the world are relational qualities that contribute to well-being as a state of openness and mutual engagement with others, being in resonance. Well-being is sustained by the capacity to focus and sustain attention on meaningful goals, while paying attention to one’s subjective state and that of others (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p. 695). This definition highlights the importance of expanded attention to diverse aspects of one’s experience and that of others, versus the attentional violence of ignoring these aspects in the pursuit of self-optimization.

Rosa (2019) offers the concept of *resonance* as an experience of meaningful engagement with the world in contrast to the experience of alienation. Resonance is a mutually affecting, emotion-based relationship in which each party is touched, moved by, and transformed by the other in unpredictable ways and without an instrumental goal (Rosa, 2019, p. 166). Resonance creates a sense of open engagement with the world in which we feel and we are being felt by others, that vibrates with resonant wires of connections, in opposition to a mute or hostile world where we feel isolated and invisible (Rosa, 2019, p. 170). Resonance contributes to well-being because of its reciprocal, emotion-based, alive qualities of connectedness, an open and life-giving wire of connection between the self, others, and the world that creates a sense of safety, belonging, and self-efficacy (Rosa, 2019). These aspects of well-being and resonance can be disrupted by the alienating and stress-inducing worldview of advanced capitalism. In a stressful

pace of life and concern with self-optimization, attention becomes either scattered or alienated from one's embodied state and hyper focused on the elusive goals of productivity and accumulation as promises of well-being.

Well-Being Delayed: The Stress-Inducing Logic of Advanced Capitalism

Advanced capitalism is not only a socio-economic structure but also a cultural and psychological worldview based on the value of productivity and the definition of well-being as accumulation of various forms of capital (Butler, 2019). It influences cultural values and the organization of social relationships based on self-interest, competition, pursuit of financial success and consumption (Butler, 2019).

Butler (2019) shows empirical evidence about the social stressors of increasing employment and family instability in advanced capitalism and the psychological stressors of identity formation based on enhanced self-image, individualism, and consumption. The market driven logic is an essential aspect of identity formation that together with the loss of intimate, stable social bonds and social precarity creates a vicious cycle of increased stress and loss of well-being in advanced capitalist societies (Butler, 2019). Advanced capitalism has a negative impact on well-being in two interacting areas of life: 1) the insecurities of employment and weakened social bonds, and 2) socialization processes based on the logic of the market: self-interested pursuit of social status and instrumentalization of relationships (Butler, 2019, p. 202). These socialization processes weaken social bonds and reduce the likelihood of secure and trusting relationships that nurture well-being. They create a double alienation that impacts psychological and relational aspects of well-being: an alienation from one's inherent self-worth and immediate embodied experience, and an alienation from others that diminishes empathy and connection.

Ng (2016) uses the term *homo economicus* to highlight the structure of subjectivity under advanced capitalism "which universalizes the entrepreneurial logic of competitive self-interest as the matrix of all relations" (p. 144). As individuals' very subjectivity becomes structured by the logic of the market, it becomes difficult to extricate oneself from the capitalist worldview despite its harmful effects. This creates a contradiction between what is seen as the personal pursuit of well-being within a worldview and a cultural logic based on blindness to the most important sources of well-being: inner integration (wholeness), and interpersonal connection and meaningful engagement (Siegel & Drulis, 2023). The market-driven individualist and materialist worldview is associated with an increase in mental health issues (Dollard et al., 2019; Seligman, 1990).

Measuring self-worth through productivity and self-optimization enhances absencing by moving attention away from one's emotional, embodied, and relational experience. Well-being is projected far ahead in an idealized future, as the result of optimization efforts. As Rosa (2019) suggests, the ultimate goal in life becomes to optimize one's resources, a constant gesture of postponing one's life

by focusing attention on an ideal future image (p. 3). In the worldview of advanced capitalism, well-being is seen as the reward and achieved result of productivity and future optimization of resources, an elusive promise driven by advertising industries and consumerism. The individualistic, competitive, and alienating ethos of advanced capitalism creates a subject preoccupied with survival and success through accumulation of various forms of capital, which leads to a loss of resonance (Rosa, 2023).

In his explanation of the social conditions of late modern societies, Rosa (2019) refers to “crises of resonance” as an increasing compulsion for acceleration, consumption, and exploitation that have alienated people from a resonant relationship to the world (p. 426). “The secret of consumer capitalism lies in transforming the desire for relationship into a mute desire for objects” (Rosa, 2019, p. 256). This capitalist worldview leads to absencing as a subjective experience of disconnectedness from others and estrangement from one’s embodied experience and needs with a negative impact on one’s well-being (Arnold et al., 2007; Dittmar et al., 2014). Attention shifts away from the fullness of embodied, emotional and interconnected experience becoming instead focused on self-optimization, consumerism, and the idea of future happiness. The next section discusses the impact of this worldview on the quality of attention, explaining the concepts of attentional violence and absencing.

Attentional Violence, Absencing and Alienation

Attentional violence is an invisible and subtle form of violence based on not noticing the inherent dignity, wholeness, and interconnectedness of self and others. It implies lack of attention to one’s embodied emotional life and that of others, a social grammar of indifference and instrumentalization (Scharmer, 2023). Attentional violence can either manifest as a constant state of distraction,¹ or blindness to one’s embodied and relational experience. When speaking about the importance of transforming the ego-system to an eco-system awareness to address current global challenges Scharmer (2023) outlines three forms of violence: direct, structural, and attentional. Attentional violence causes not seeing others for who they really are (Scharmer, 2023). I take further the idea of attentional violence as blindness to the truth of the other to argue that it also extends to not seeing oneself for who one truly is.

From this standpoint, attentional violence is less about inflicting harm, and more about failing to create conditions of well-being: ignoring one’s embodied, emotional life and that of others, becoming blind to one’s inner world the inner

¹ Distraction is another manifestation of absencing based on the pervasive interference of technology in social life. For more details about the impact of distraction on well-being, see McDaniel, B. T. (2015). *Technoference: Everyday intrusions and interruptions of technology in couple and family relationships*. In C. J. Bruess (Ed.), *Family communication in the age of digital and social media* (pp.1-24). Peter Lang.

world of the other and the interconnectedness of the two. This absence of attention makes it impossible to sense the wholeness and potential (of self and others), having a negative impact on resonance and well-being (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014; Scharmer, 2023). It makes individuals absent to their embodied experience and to the presence of the other, their attention narrowed to a sort of tunnel vision in the pursuit of resource optimization and consumerism. How is attentional violence related to absencing?

While attentional violence refers to limited awareness or even lack of awareness about embodied, emotional, interconnected aspects of the self and others, absencing is the behavioral and relational outcome of this level of awareness. Scharmer (2018) explains absencing as a mode of engagement with the world based on a closed mind, closed heart, and closed will (p. 30). The closed mind is the lack of attention to one's surrounding reality, an experience of ignorance and denial (Scharmer, 2018, p. 30). The closed heart is lack of attention to others, lack of empathy and compassion characterized by hate or indifference, while the closed will is a protective worldview that leads to actions and decisions based on fear and aggression (Scharmer, 2018, p. 30). Absencing is a state of engagement with the world opposite to *presencing*, one in which there is no resonance, no intersubjectivity, an ego-based narrow perspective.

Presencing defines an experience of being present to all aspects of one's embodied, emotional and relational experiences, while also sensing the emerging future, the seed of one's full potential (Scharmer, 2018). We will analyze more closely in the last section the tension between absencing and presencing in group processes. Absencing leads to a worldview of separation, disconnection and self-protection that creates destructive relational dynamics and "social coldness," based on three elements: ignorance, hate or indifference, and fear (Scharmer, 2018, p. 31). It undermines curiosity, connectedness and belonging, the human capacities for attention, empathy and compassion that inform well-being. A worldview dominated by absencing is characterized by desensitization, cynicism and apathy, condoning, denying or participating in other forms of violence. It contributes to the reinforcement of what Scharmer (2023, para. 2) calls "the ecological, social and spiritual divides." These divides increase harm and suffering and decrease well-being for the planet, social groups and individuals, creating a paradigm of "organized irresponsibility" (Scharmer, 2023, para. 2).

The firm grip of absencing is, for Scharmer (2008), one of the most puzzling questions of our time: "So if the dark space or cycle of destruction (absencing) is dysfunctional and nobody wants it, why is the world so firmly in its grip?" (p. 288). In an article exploring the difficulties of vulnerability in the creation of open interpersonal fields using Theory U, Cox (2014) offers two possible answers to this question: 1) the addictive compulsion for production and consumption as imperatives of advanced capitalism and 2) a psychosocial immune system gone awry that protects the status quo of the worldview of advanced capitalism and sees change as a threat (p. 33). The harmful effect of this worldview is kept outside of attention and denied because it is too threatening, a form of psychosocial "active

blindness” that pervades the social field of interactions (Cox, 2014, p. 33). Attention to one’s embodied needs, emotions, and vulnerability, as well as an openness to share them with others—these very conditions that make possible social fields of connection necessary for well-being—under advanced capitalism instead become threats. Absencing keeps the heart closed due to the fear of vulnerability and dependency on others (Cox, 2014, p. 39). This vulnerability is a threat to the capitalist logic of individualism and the vision of well-being as optimization of resources, not of relationships.

Absencing is an outcome of attentional violence which manifests as lack of awareness about the very sources of well-being: emotional self-regulation, meaningful relationships, and experiences of resonance and meaningful engagement. Based on the three types of relationships to the self, others, and the world, in the following section we will categorize absencing as inner absencing, relational absencing, and social absencing.

Inner Absencing

Inner absencing is the inability to sense one’s inherent worth, core value and potential (Pomeroy, 2022). It is based on thought, emotional, and behavioral patterns of being “small, overwhelmed and helpless,” a state of self-contraction that prevents well-being (Pomeroy, 2022, para 10). Inner absencing keeps one stuck in stress responses of fight, flight, freeze, or appease, leading to the absence of a “broaden-and-build” approach behavior that contributes to well-being through positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 220). The world is seen as a threat that the self needs to protect itself from, rather than a field of exploration, connection, and expansion. Inner absencing means lack of awareness of one’s own wholeness and inherent worth, and instrumentalization of parts of the self or one’s body.

Butler (2019) gives the example of the objectification of identity driven by advertising and social media technologies where the self is constantly managed to attain an idealized future image (p. 213). The narrow, obsessive attention to one’s future goals and ideal image is a form of attentional violence directed at oneself by ignoring one’s immediate, embodied, and emotional experience and delaying well-being as a future achievement based on resource optimization. Inner absencing is then a form of self-alienation based on ignoring one’s emotions and needs, a general loss of one’s authentic self, and difficulties to self-regulate (Dollard et al., 2019, p. 9).

Relational Absencing

Relational absencing is the inability to sense the inherent worth of others, the absence of connection, empathy, and resonance in relationships. It is based on separation, individualization and self-centered perspectives, where other people become either invisible or a means to satisfy one’s needs. The logic of capitalist accumulation and competition turns relationships into instruments to strengthen one’s position, power, or success in a competitive social field (Rosa, 2023).

Relational absencing is a form of disconnection from others, a denial of our inherently interdependent nature and thus the inability to create caring, compassionate, and reciprocal relationships that contribute to well-being (Dollard et al., 2019).

Self-worth and self-efficacy are pursued in relational absencing from a competitive, individualized search for status, power, or success as accumulation of resources. The relational concern becomes: how can the other help me achieve my goal? Interpersonal bonds are weakened by individualism, materialism, and inequality (Seligman, 1990). When relationships are instrumentalized for self-optimization, social attachment and belonging becomes precarious, leading to a loss of resonance and well-being.

Social Absencing and Alienation

Rosa (2019) outlines a philosophy of the good life through the relational concepts of alienation and resonance that define two kinds of relationship to the world: one that undermines well-being and one that enhances well-being. Alienation is “a specific form of relationship to the world in which subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility (repulsion) and thus without any inner connection” (Rosa, 2019, p. 252). Alienation is the experience of a world that is mute, cold, non-receptive, lacking resonance and thus undermining one’s quality of life and well-being (Rosa, 2019). Alienation defines “a relationship of non-relationship” (Lijster et al., 2019, p. 70), a state of estrangement that destroys the intersubjective social field of belonging, recognition, and resonance. Alienation undermines the value of otherness and reciprocity. In alienation, the world seems hostile and indifferent, non-responsive to one’s needs, an experience that diminishes well-being (Rosa, 2019, p. 118). Alienation means the absence of emotional involvement and connection, a muting of the resonant qualities of emotional exchanges among people that create co-regulation and well-being. Relationships of alienation are “either indifferent or repulsive,” they create stress, anxiety, and loneliness (Rosa, 2019, p. 178).

Inner absencing and relational absencing create an ever-increasing feedback loop between the ego-based focus on self-optimization and instrumentalizing of others that reinforces social absencing as a cultural norm. The forces that pull towards self-preservation and maximization of individual resources increase relational absencing, a phenomenon Seligman (1990) called “the waxing of the individual and the waning of the commons.”(p. 1) Relational absencing leads to individuals see each other as competitors or as instruments, which reduces their interpersonal connection and their mutual recognition. Relationships become a source of stress rather than one of well-being, by creating loneliness, fear, and discomfort (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014, p. 9). The social accelerating conditions of advanced capitalism create hardened, frozen, stagnant conditions of alienation that destroy connection and resonance leading to a rise in burnout and depression (Rosa, 2019, p. 42).

Inner absencing is a reductive way to relate to oneself, losing sight of one's inherent self-worth, wholeness, and embodied needs. Relational absencing is a reductive way of relating to others, in instrumentalizing ways as resources for one's own optimization and losing sight of their wholeness and potential. Social absencing is a self-reinforcing dynamic created by inner and relational absencing that contributes to a social field of alienation and instrumentalization of relationships. Absencing structures one's relationship to the self, others, and the social world, creating a worldview that reduces well-being and contributes to ever accelerating stress conditions.

Acceleration, Stress and Loss of Resonance

Acceleration is the constant intensification of the rhythm of production in advanced capitalism (Rosa, 2015). The speed of technological innovation and social change are accompanied by an acceleration of the pace of life, a speed up of processes of productivity that are increasing stress. This faster rhythm reduces the time available for relationships and the time to pay attention to the fullness of one's embodied, emotional experience which increases stress and alienation (Rosa, 2019, p. 180). Efforts to optimize oneself as "human resource" and the instrumentalization of one's body contributes to physical and psychological alienation that lead to burnout (Rosa, 2019, p. 105).

The constant acceleration of the rhythm of life and work also undermines the quality of relationships, contributing to isolation and depression (Borysenko, 2011; Bourgeault et al., 2021).

Stress has become a catch-all phrase for emotional and physical malaise and attributed as the main cause of multiple problems. Stress is the cause of negative feedback loops between social conditions and psychological responses. If we return to Siegel's metaphor of well-being as a flowing river, stress is the chaos and turbulence that disrupts this flow. Stress appears when the demands of the outside world overwhelm one's adaptive capacities. Work stress for example has been defined as "harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker" (Sauter et al., 1990, p. 6).

Acceleration creates an oversaturated, frenzied, and stressful rhythm of life and work. It contributes to attentional violence because it reduces the time to pay attention to one's wholeness and that of others. The tunnel vision of absencing based on lack of awareness about conditions that nurture well-being, associated with the ever-accelerating speed of work and demands of productivity create a pervasive dynamic of stress and alienation.

We can explore the impact of stress on well-being through empirical studies that showcase the global mental health crisis due to rising stress levels (World Health Organization, 2022). The most common symptoms of stress are burnout and mood disorders. They are different manifestations of the loss of resonance with oneself, others, and the world through built-up stress. Burnout develops

through a sustained accumulation of chronic stress, and it is characterized by exhaustion, negative perceptions, and loss of well-being and satisfaction (Maslach et al., 2001). In Canada, my own context, a report by Mental Health Research Canada (2023) shows that 1 in 3 working Canadians experienced burnout, with healthcare and education as the most affected sectors. Anxiety disorders manifest as constant, generalized feelings of dread out of proportion with real events (Statistics Canada, 2022). Generalized anxiety doubled between 2012 and 2022 from 2.6% to 5.2% in the general population (Statistics Canada, 2022). Fifty-three percent of all Canadians consider anxiety and depression as “epidemic” (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2018). Surveys in the education sector show a significant rise in post-pandemic stress levels that lead to addiction, anxiety and depression for students (Treleaven, 2022) and faculty (Bourgeault et al., 2021). Only 25% of young Canadians between 20-29 reported subjective experiences of well-being in a survey between 2021-22 (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Advanced capitalism creates a culture of competition, acceleration, increased work, managerialism, generalized sense of insecurity and instrumentalization that increases stress and reduces well-being (Dollard et al., 2019). The inner, relational, and social absencing outlined above contribute to alienation and lack of self-worth, while the acceleration of the rhythm of work increases stress, pressure, and time availability to pay attention to the very sources of well-being, such as emotional regulation, intimate relationships, meaning, and purpose. While the wellness industry continues to expand, the capitalist worldview subverts the most basic foundations of well-being and instrumentalizes change strategies. The next section offers a critical reading of two well-known transformative approaches for well-being and the danger of their instrumentalization.

Instrumentalization of Well-Being Change Strategies

The worldview of capitalism is created by complex interconnected sociocultural and psychological factors. The belief that one’s self-worth depends on productivity and accumulation of capital is strengthened by the fact that social relationships under capitalism do recognize and reward status and power (Butler, 2019). It leads to hyper-individualism, the absence of deep, resonant relationships, and social structures based on competition and reward. This worldview places individuals in what has been called “the rat race,” a stressful, frenzied pursuit of success in a faraway future that reinforces absencing. The metaphor of the race is relevant, since it captures the constant sense of acceleration, stress (Rosa, 2015) and the social grammar of absencing (Scharmer, 2018). This busy, time constricting and absencing way of being destroys attunement, empathy, and compassion, the essential relational ingredients of well-being (Goleman, 2008; Siegel & Drulis, 2023). How is it possible to free oneself from such a pervasive, self-reinforcing cycle of absencing? I will focus here on two transformation approaches for well-being, the use of mindfulness and spirituality in organizations, that have gained popularity in capitalist societies in the last few

decades, highlighting the danger of their instrumentalization by the logic of capitalism.

***Mcmindfulness*: Individual Self-care at the Service of Corporate Productivity**

One well-being practice that has become common in the Western world is the practice of mindfulness as the cultivation of attention through the intentional slowing down of the stressful rhythm of life in advanced capitalism. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of the experience moment to moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness is a quality of expanded attention that allows things outside of us to unfold free from projections of ideas, beliefs and desires—the opposite of attentional violence. It is focused openness to present experience, awareness, and acceptance, a way to counteract absencing by bringing attention to one’s embodied, emotional experience, cultivating more calm and acceptance as antidotes to stress (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness practice is a self-regulation tool that improves the quality of relationships to our minds and bodies, other people and the environment, through the intentional cultivation of attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). A key principle in mindfulness is *slowing down*, taking the time to meditate, to become aware of one’s body, emotions, and one’s present environment. While mindfulness practice offers a powerful antidote to the acceleration of life and inner absencing, it also has the danger of becoming instrumentalized as a self-care tool meant to help people tolerate increasingly stressful conditions and enhance their productive capacities through focused attention.

Mindfulness has been embraced by the corporate world and instrumentalized for its role in emotional regulation, training of attention, and positive effects on mental health (Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, p. 76). While mindfulness has indeed positive effects on well-being, its instrumentalization to serve the purpose of increased productivity and efficiency has raised many concerns (Ng, 2016). It can increase the capacity to tolerate and accept increasingly stressful work conditions through meditative practices that build small oases of calm and restoration. Mindfulness increases the capacity to tolerate stress and discomfort by regulating one’s inner rhythm and expanding attention to one’s body and inner experience. It also cultivates non-judgment and in this context more acceptance of power-based, harmful conditions, and structures. Instead of critical awareness of these harmful social conditions, mindfulness can be used to place responsibility solely on the individuals who would only need to change their minds and detach from a stressful reality to experience well-being.

Purser (2019) coined the term *mcmindfulness* to point out the instrumentalization of mindfulness by a capitalist agenda promoting individualist detachment and turning a blind eye to systemic suffering. *Mcmindfulness* is an example of the dangers of instrumentalizing a well-being strategy under the dominating logic of individualism and efficiency—a way to shift responsibility for

systemic inequality, stress, and burnout to individual self-care. If mindfulness is not accompanied by insight and critical awareness, it runs the risk of remaining an apolitical tool for one's individual well-being, or even to be used to increase stress tolerance and productivity (Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017; Taylor, 1999).

The critique of mindfulness shows that despite its potential for well-being and reduction of attentional violence, it can become a technology of self-governance that serves capitalist interests of increased productivity (Ng, 2016, p. 148). Ng (2016) stresses the importance of critical awareness about the normative assumptions and power structures that frame mindfulness practice. Critical engagement with systemic power and capitalist hegemony is necessary when we examine the transformative power of mindfulness.

Workplace Spirituality: More Meaningful Work or the Final Frontier of Soul Commodification?

Another large-scale transformation strategy with the potential to contribute to well-being is workplace spirituality. Spirituality has emerged in leadership and organizational studies in the last few decades as a strategy for transforming the alienating and destructive worldview and values of advanced capitalism (Anello & Hernandez, 2014; Fry, 2003). It is a framework that centers transcendence and the recognition of the essential nobility of all beings (Anello & Hernandez, 2014); mindfulness, selflessness, and compassion (Hougaard & Carter, 2018); connections with self, others, environment, and a higher power (Howard, 2002); hope, faith, vision and altruistic love (Fry, 2003); meaning, fulfilment and belonging (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010).

The integration of spirituality in organizational cultures offers a hopeful possibility for transformation by facilitating holistic participation, a sense of community, and meaningful engagement (Tourish & Tourish, 2010, p. 208). Workplace spirituality comprises a set of values that hold the promise to change absencing conditions by creating awareness of the wholeness and inherent worth of all individuals, concern with well-being for all, promoting transcendence, compassion and joy, and cultivating an interconnected worldview (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010). The integration of spiritual values in organizational cultures shifts the focus from the unilateral profit driven mode of social absencing to a focus on well-being, collaboration, belonging, and collective creativity. The spirituality turn in capitalist organizational culture is seen as response to the pervasive alienation, instrumentalization, and lack of well-being in advanced capitalism (Taylor, 1996). But to what degree does this integration of spirituality in organizational cultures lead to well-being?

Workplace Spirituality as Manipulation of Beliefs and Values

A critical examination of workplace spirituality is necessary given the potential of the instrumentalization of spirituality in human resource development (HRD) at the corporate level to further advance the agenda of capitalist profit (Case &

Gosling, 2010; Tourish & Tourish, 2010). The danger of the instrumentalization of spirituality is the construction of worker subjects who will continue to advance the goals of capitalist corporations under a new guise of purpose-driven, selfless service (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 65). Spirituality becomes in the capitalist logic an untapped inner human resource that can be used to increase productivity and efficiency, similar to the use of mindfulness analyzed above.

If the preoccupation with spirituality, well-being, and meaning are means to transform stressful, alienating and instrumentalizing capitalist work cultures, then what exactly is the danger? The coupling of spiritual longing in an alienated and stressful world with promises of corporations that care for community, holistic development, higher purpose and well-being, is a dangerous one. The business discourse of spirituality seeks alignment between personal values and those of the corporation (Case & Gosling, 2010, p. 12; Tourish & Tourish, 2010, p. 209). The first danger is the potential manipulation of beliefs, vulnerability and spiritual longing in training people to surrender their egos to purposeful service (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 71–72), an “Orwellian” form of affective manipulation (Case & Gosling, 2010, p. 13). Spirituality, in this case, can shift from a vehicle for employees’ emancipation, well-being, and personal transformation into a fundamentalist doctrine of unity created by people in power, that invades employees’ most deeply subjective and personal dimension of experience, the final frontier of soul commodification (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 79).

The second danger is the promise of wholeness, higher purpose, and a sense of interconnected community to workers who feel alienated and threatened by precarious employment. The discourse of spirituality at work can turn into a stifling of dissent and cultivation of willing obedience under conditions of inequality (Case & Gosling, 2010, p. 15). The discourse about the values of community, interconnectedness, and collaboration can be used to make invisible the contradictions and disempowerment created by capitalist systems based on inequality, oppression, and domination (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 77). In other words, the absence of critical awareness about the gap between a spirituality-based vision and the reality of power-based work conditions under capitalism can become a capitalist driven ideology of false unity packed in a noble set of spiritual values (defined by people in power) and difficult to contradict (Tourish & Tourish, 2010). The social control of leaders becomes more pervasive with workers’ uncritical internalization of these values (Tourish & Tourish, 2010, pp. 212).

The third danger is that discourses of workplace spirituality do not sufficiently account for the contradiction between spiritual values and the competitive, money and power-driven values of capitalism. “The creative process, which is at the heart of spiritual transformation, within the HRD nirvana of a learning organization, is distorted into innovation—ideas harnessed to the organization’s advantage—and subjected to organizational norms of accountability and results-based measurement” (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 74). Case & Gosling (2010) take this critique further by examining the scientific collusion in efforts to quantify the profit impact of workplace spirituality (p. 18).

Spirituality holds the promise and potential of transforming absencing into conditions that contribute to well-being through meaning, wholeness and deeper connections, but it cannot do so without critical engagement with the domination-based, instrumentalizing logic of capitalism. The last section will explore the tensions between absencing and presencing using the case study of Presencing in Theory U, developed by Scharmer and colleagues at the Presencing Institute as a method for awareness-based systems transformation.

The Tension between Absencing and Presencing in Theory U

Theory U is a technology for personal and social change based on deep awareness and collective creativity (Scharmer, 2018). It relies on the metaphor of a learning journey, shaped as a U, to the depths of one's inner Source, with the purpose of shifting worldviews and social structures. It is usually done in groups and it is a method for engaging people in deep learning, letting go of habitual assumptions, opening up to sensing the complexity of reality, and connecting to their inner Source. It uses diverse transformative learning methods to develop awareness of one's inner landscape, emotions, beliefs, values and meaning as the first step in initiating a process of collective transformation. Its aim is to create organizational cultures and systems that care for the well-being of all. It is currently used around the globe in leadership training, organizational change, and larger systems change initiatives, drawing on MIT's tradition of action research.

Scharmer uses the concept of *presencing* (2018) to explain the process of "sensing and actualizing of our highest future potential" (p. 30). Presencing depends on the capacity of participants for deep connection with themselves and others that would allow them to access the intersubjective field of collective intelligence. It relies on a process of group receptivity that envisions and actualizes future possibilities (Scharmer, 2018). There are two radically different aspects in this approach. The first one is the exercise of learning from the future, rather than solely from the past, which is the traditional way to learn. Learning from the future implies deep sensing about the kind of future that wants to emerge through people's actions, a way to pay attention to one's deepest aspirations in response to what is needed in the world. The second aspect is the invitation for individuals to tap into their intersubjective experience, to expand their ego based consciousness and enter a state of resonance with others. Intersubjectivity is the capacity to share collective meaning (Cipolletta et al., 2020) through experiences of resonance, vulnerability and connectedness that lead to transformation, well-being and creativity (Cox, 2014). Similar to mindfulness, presencing is an aspirational process, a process of stillness, resonance, and deep listening that is difficult to reach and sustain (Scharmer, 2008, p. 269). Presencing invites full attention to one's immediate, embodied and emotional experience, to that of others and to the larger intersubjective field.

Absencing is the opposite of presencing, a state of frozen rigidity, not listening, being out of resonance with others, caught in a closed, protective self (Scharmer, 2008). As shown in the section above, absencing is a state of limited

awareness based on fear, ignorance, and disconnection that is pervasive and habitual in a capitalist worldview. Presencing can easily turn back into absencing as a habitual condition. The first difficulty of presencing is the risk of vulnerability implied in opening the self to other in a public space. The second difficulty is that groups engage in presencing from a “social field *already created, shaped and controlled by* absencing conversations” (Cox, 2014, p. 34) that dominate social relationships in advanced capitalism. Presencing requires intentional commitment, critical awareness, and openness to transformation. Critical awareness in this case implies making the system see and sense itself as groups can reflect on the quality of their engagement and the way their engagement is shaped by absencing.

Absencing conversations are based on “silencing others’ views,” “blaming,” “hubris,” “harassment and bullying,” and judgment (Scharmer, 2008, pp. 282–87). If absencing is the norm of socialization in the logic of advanced capitalism, then presencing is a practice for transforming the norm. The normalization of absencing creates both conscious and unconscious resistance to processes of deep listening, awareness, authenticity, and vulnerability that can potentially lead to well-being, but are initially deeply uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Scharmer’s (2008) solution to the unconscious shift into absencing is to constantly return to awareness and the deep intention of the higher self, while Cox (2014) suggests a more radical gesture of making visible the forces of absencing by naming them and reflecting on their underlying mechanisms in dialogue. Scharmer (2008) highlights in a more optimistic way the human capacity for attention and return to one’s deep intention and purpose, noticing when we shift into patterns of absencing, while Cox (2014) urges us to become aware of absencing as a reaction of protection against vulnerability and resistance to acknowledging one’s true needs and emotions, a form of “active blindness” (p. 33). Cox (2014) encourages open engagement with emotions and relational risks based on the recognition of underlying patterns of resistance and a conscious commitment to face interpersonal vulnerability with compassion. Without this recognition and critical awareness of absencing, the process of transformation can turn into yet another experience of collective blindness (Cox, 2014, p. 36).

Mindfulness practice, spirituality-based organizational practices and the Theory U based method of presencing are three approaches that aim to transform the alienating and stress enhancing worldview of capitalism, creating more well-being, meaning and resonance. While there is no doubt about the positive intentions and the contribution of these approaches, they need to be accompanied by critical awareness about their potential instrumentalization.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the impact of the internalized worldview of advanced capitalism on well-being. The worldview of capitalism leads to a structure of subjectivity that replicates the logic of the market: self-interest and competition, tying self-worth to productivity, attentional violence based on lack of awareness of

one's wholeness and potential, and instrumentalization of relationships. This worldview undermines well-being as inner, relational and social absencing: a way of being where self-worth is tied to productivity and social status, relationships are used for self-optimization and social structures are based on competition and alienation.

The individualization of well-being as personal self-care obscures the forces of inner, relational and social absencing that undermine the fundamental sources of well-being. Even transformative approaches that aim to counteract this pervasive worldview and contribute to well-being are in danger of being instrumentalized to further advance the capitalist logic of productivity and efficiency. Mindfulness, workplace spirituality, and presencing in Theory U create attention to the wholeness of the self and others, to well-being, meaning and resonance. While these approaches are promising, we need critical awareness about their potential to reproduce the very worldviews and values they try to resist. We can create better conditions for well-being through critical awareness, resistance to the alienating and instrumentalizing logic of advanced capitalism, and attention to the fundamental sources that contribute to it.

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