BUSN49: Degree Project in
Managing People, Knowledge and Change

A Saviour Emerges:

A processual view on normative control in practice

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Abstract

This Master's Thesis contributes with a rich description of *normative control* as a social process, through the illustration and interpretation of the practical efforts and sense-making that surround it. These contributions are made possible through an ethnographic case study at a medium-sized, fast-growing dotcom company with a distinct and salient *corporate culture* and *normative control* efforts. The mystery, however, is how the company exercises control and keeps its staff happy while most of them are performing tedious and repetitive work tasks. By applying a dramaturgical framing device, we illustrate how the staff engages in a performance involving the creation of an *organizational anti-identity*. This enables the company to emerge as a saviour, which justifies and legitimizes control efforts, in turn resulting in grateful and loyal employees who accept repetitive work tasks as part of their obligation. Additionally, we show how the concept of *neo-normative control*—rather than providing 'existential empowerment'—enables *normative control* efforts to take a firmer grip on the individuals' identity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). In conclusion, we show how *corporate culture*, *normative control* efforts, and *organizational identity* work can be observed to create a continuous loop of socialization, justification, legitimization, and institutionalization (c.f. Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Keywords: Anti-identity, Corporate Culture, Dramaturgy, Ethnographic Case Study, Narrative, Neo-Normative Control, Normative Control, Organizational Identity.

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1. Introduction

This chapter serves the purpose of introducing the reader to our thesis. By going through a prologue, background, and introduction to our case, the reader is familiarized with the topic and its origin. This is then followed by the introduction of the research objective, which consists of the research gap, the overarching purpose, and the limitations of our thesis in setting the research into context. Further, it provides a guidance by stating our overarching research question(s). Lastly, we provide a comprehensive overview over the disposition of the thesis to smoothen the transition to the following chapters and provide a point of orientation.

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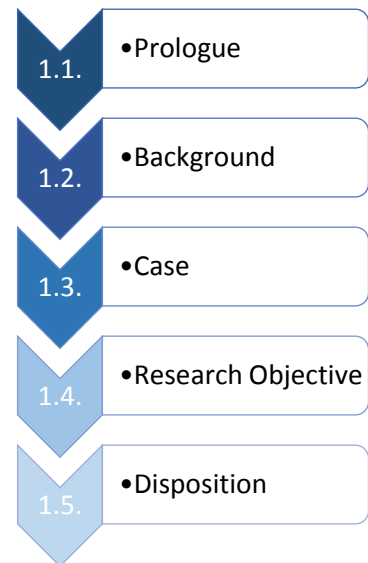
1.1.   Prologue

This first part provides the reader with a brief prologue to the upcoming research. It serves the purpose of raising the reader's interest for the following sections.

We provide the reader with an insight to *normative control* as an ongoing process through an ethnographic case study. The company name has been anonymized and it is hereinafter referred to as Biz-R. Hereby, we aim at facilitating a greater understanding of **(a)** the intentions behind *normative control* efforts, **(b)** how these are exercised in practice and **(c)**, how organizational members make sense of these. Moreover, we are interested in what insights we can gain in terms of the effects, limitations, and unforeseen consequences of normative control. For this reason, we take the reader to a company that forbids the wearing of shoes, allows the staff to play with Lego or to colour books, and rewards the staff with 'Jedi Awards' or brand them as 'Sith Lords' (Biz-R, 2016). The company claims to consist of 'proud nerds' and be driven by 'nerd-power', where the staff only needs to 'be themselves' (Biz-R, 2016). The company has been growing steadily and making substantial profits for more than 10 years. The mystery, however, is that employees express feelings of happiness and freedom while doing repetitive and boring work.

1.2. Background

In this part, we briefly introduce the theoretical background of our study and set it in a more general context. For the reason of theoretical orientation, we touch upon the background of the topic normative control*;* this will, however, be discussed more in-depth in Chapter 2.

The starting point of our thesis can be traced back to the concept of control, which we will refer to as "the power to influence or direct people's behaviour […]" (Oxford University Press, 2017a, para. 1). It is long-established that "the key defining element of any organization was the necessity of individuals to subordinate, to an extent, their own desires to the collective will of the organization" (Barnard, 1968, p. 17 cited in Barker, 1993, p. 409). According to Barker (1993), control is a problematic issue, since individuals need to surrender their own autonomy to contribute to achieving the organizational objectives, which tends to have "big brother overtones" (Birkenshaw, 2012, p. 36). Due to these constant tensions between individual autonomy and achievement of organizational objectives, management control is one of the "central concepts in organizational theory […] and remains perhaps the key issue that shapes and permeates our experiences of organizational life" (Barker, 1993, p. 409). To effectively deal with these tensions, organizations engage in continuous formal and informal control activities to ensure a working behaviour aligned to the organizational objectives (Barker, 1993).

The focus of this study lies in the field of management control*,* which can be subdivided into behavioural control, output control, and *normative control*, as demonstrated in Table 1 (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007). All three forms are distinct from one another in terms of control means and the controlling approach. For instance, behavioural control consists of close supervision and direct orders to subordinates (Ouchi, 1979), while output control supervise organizational members through the deliverables of set objectives (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007). These two forms of control exemplify the aforementioned 'big brother' tension, which is argued to be inappropriate in a modern organization (Birkenshaw, 2012). Thus, organizations generally do not want to express their control efforts; additionally, people generally do not want to feel controlled, which brings us to the third form of control – *normative control* – which rather builds on strong and shared organizational beliefs and values (Williams, 2013). We refer to *normative control* as "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions" (Kunda, 1992, p. 11). Comparing this to the term culture — defined as the "collective programming of the mind" — we see an interplay between these two (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). This also finds

support from researchers like Willmott (1993, p. 515), who states that the creation of a "self-disciplining form of employee [depends] on the development of a strong corporate culture". Therefore, we approach the research from two sides – the managerial control side and the cultural influences on control.

Management Control Form	Control target
Behavioural control	Behaviour
Output control	Result/output
Normative control	Norms, thinking, values, perception

Table 1 Management Control Types 1 (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007, p. 155)

1.3. Case

In this part, we introduce the reader to a more detailed view of the case company. More specifically, the reader is provided with a context to our study, the company's ambition, and some of the challenges they face.

Biz-R, a Swedish dot-com company founded in 2002, dedicates its 250 employees to 'online price comparison' services. However, unlike some other price comparison sites, it receives no money from sponsoring its search results; instead, retailers pay for the visitors that are sent to their sites through the company's website.

Apart from the head office in Sweden, consisting of 65 employees, its largest office is located in Poland and hosts around 120 employees. During the last few years, Biz-R has increased its personnel to its current strength of 250, and the number is growing as they are actively pursuing expansion into new markets (HR, 2017). For our study, the focus is set on the offices in Sweden and Poland due to office size and their relevance to the company.

Biz-R has the salient purpose and vision of being the best in its area, along with a strong customer focus which relies heavily on credibility. Moreover, Biz-R has received several awards for their service in general as well as for their website and phone application. Recently, their offices in Sweden and Poland were ranked as the 15th and second 'best places to work' respectively.[1]

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[1] The poll has been conducted by an international organization and is based on how employees evaluate their employers. The company participated in the segment for medium-sized companies.

The average age among staff is very low, with most staff being just under thirty years of age in Poland and in Sweden, being in their thirties. The Swedish office has the most variety in terms of work tasks as they consist of the management functions and their subsequent teams. Still, most of the work revolves around development and maintenance of the website, its functions, and its content. In Poland, work almost exclusively revolves around administrating data – more specifically, the content that goes into the website, which means indexing prices for a variety of products and putting that data into the system and subsequently onto the website.

Even though the company operates in a highly competitive market, it offers medium salaries and has a low staff turnover. Culture is instead presented by the Human Resource Department (HR) and senior management as a competitive advantage. It is argued that there is a strong business case for building culture, as demonstrated below by Francis a member of the senior management team and one of the main architects behind the *corporate culture*:

> *It boils down to what a consultancy firm just came out with in a survey, where they argued that if you ask people they will say that they prefer culture over compensation. So, it is really a very strong business case for building culture* (Francis, 2017).

The culture is also a salient part of running the company on more mundane and day-to-day basis, as demonstrated in the following statement:

> *We need to fight the whole idea about thinking in hierarchy and status. So one thing to take that away, one small measure of many, is that we don't use any shoes in the office. Because when you take off your shoes, right away you become a little less formal – it's a way to take everything down* (Francis, 2017).

It is held that the culture 'explains Biz-R's core values, guiding principles, management philosophies, and how these are present in everything they do' (Biz-R, 2016). The purpose of the core values – which are acceptance, competence, and credibility – is to guide employees in what they 'should do' and what is 'okay to do' (Biz-R, 2016). On a practical level, the company has the following ambition for its staff:

> *We try to give people as much autonomy as possible and we try to design professional roles where you can always become better, we try to instil a very deep sense of purpose in people that they really, really understand the vision, the mission and the history of Biz-R* (Francis, 2017).

Culture is also a salient part of the recruitment and induction process. The majority of the company's recruitments are done by using a code challenge; it is claimed that anyone who is

able to complete the challenge is an eligible candidate for a job (HR, 2017). There is, however, typically an interview with candidates after the test, to ascertain that they are a 'fit' to the company (HR, 2017). A focal part of the culture is the idea that employees should not have to "invent a work version of [themselves]" (Biz-R, 2016, p. 6).

Another way in which the company tries to ensure that it has a consistent and salient culture is by making it into something tangible. Thus, besides having a Biz-R mascot that adorns almost all internal documents and wall art, the walls are covered in the company's colours and are covered with posters stating the core values, as well as quirky quotes and movie references. But the ambition is to go even further:

> *Now, we want to have grass when you come into the office. We want to make it grass all over the hall in the entrance and create clouds for the celling – that is also culture, how you feel when you are entering for the first time.* (HR, 2017).[2]

However, while a lot of effort is put into the culture, as the company continues to grow, it is also becoming more difficult to ensure the same experience for its employees. HR sees it as the biggest challenge for the company, more specifically:

> *Making it still feel real, because that is usually what happens when you go to big companies. Sometimes people will say that "well there is culture on the walls but it is not real, it is not something we do or believe in its just text on paper". That is what we want to avoid – our main advantage as an employer is culture.* (HR, 2017).

In this thesis, we create our own story as we try to interpret and understand the story behind Biz-R as well as its success factors, limitations, and challenges.

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[2] As this thesis is published, the company has finalized this vision and the entrance is now made of artificial grass and clouds to create an experience of being within a Super Mario Bros.™ video game (HR, 2017).

1.4. Research Objective

In this part, we introduce the overarching research objective, which consists of four parts. First, we present the identified research gap followed by our research purpose and contribution. Thereafter, we establish the limitations of our study and subsequently, concretize its scope. Lastly, we introduce our over-arching research question.

Research Gap

While studying the field of *normative control*, we have come across the works of many popular researchers like Ouchi (c.f. 1980; 1979), Alvesson (c.f. 2004; 2000), and Kunda (c.f. 1992) who have all made significant contributions to the field. However, our impression is that empirical examples of *normative control* in practice — in particular from an employee perspective – are not easily found. Therefore, we see the contribution of our study as providing the business- and academic spheres with an empirical phenomenon exemplifying the process of *normative control* — namely, how it can be seen to be practised, experienced and acted upon. Therefore, we believe we can contribute with a more processual view on normative control, as opposed to the predominant view that largely consists of intent, outcome and implications.

More precisely, our thesis provides four main contributions. First, control is typically connoted as something rather unpleasant, as no-one wants to be, or at least feel, controlled; rather, people supposedly strive for autonomy (Pink, 2009). Our study, however, illustrates that staff members express enthusiasm, passion, and happiness while engaged in repetitive work tasks and subjected to various control efforts. Although this may be due to the employee's unawareness of these efforts, we are interested in the process leading to these expressions, making it well worth scrutiny.

Second, we discover characteristics of Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2011) concept of *anti-identity* at Biz-R where—through an organizational identity—it can be seen to reinforce normative control efforts. Therefore, we add input to this topic by providing further understanding of the term in connection to *normative control* through the application of the concept of *anti-identity* to *organizational identity*.

Third, Biz-R can be seen as engaging in what is referred to as *neo-normative control* (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009)—a concept that we, in this thesis, argue to be flawed and ultimately unrealistic in practical efforts. However, the interplay between *neo-normative control* and *normative control* provides new and interesting insights.

Fourth, we see a contribution of our research towards establishing the distinctiveness of the *corporate culture* at Biz-R, which has never before been studied in such a context.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to provide both the business- and academic spheres with new insights into the exercise of *normative control* with the example of a so-far unstudied company. It is our purpose to facilitate a greater understanding of *normative control* in practice. This means that we investigate and interpret how *normative control* is practiced at Biz-R. Additionally, we pay particular attention to the staff's sense-making efforts within the context of *normative control*. Moreover, we illustrate some effects, limitations, and unforeseen consequences that can be identified and what others can learn from it. Therewith, we aim to provide a greater understanding of how *normative control* is practiced as an ongoing process.

Research Limitations

We limit the scope of our thesis to five aspects. First, we aim to provide a greater understanding of *normative control* in practice, which mean that we do not question the concept as such. Second, we do not provide a generally applicable guideline on how *normative control* is to be practiced. Instead, we provide a rich description of *normative control* as a process. We do, however, discuss the effects, limitations, and unforeseen consequences of normative control as one of our contributions. Third, we highlight that the topic of normative control is a complex field with many influential aspects to it. We cannot cover every influential aspect of it at Biz-R. However, we attempt to focus on the aspects that are particularly salient and that may provide the most insightful contributions. Fourth, we limit the scope of the company's cultural impact to *normative control* and do not take any country-specific culture into account. Lastly, we engage in an ethnographic study with the aim of contributing to new insights on *normative control* as a process. Thus, we do not take a definite moral position, nor have we set out for emancipatory efforts per se.

Research Question

I. How can *normative control* be understood as an ongoing process consisting of corporate intentions, practical control efforts and subsequent sense-making?
   a. What broader insights can we provide in terms of effects, limitations, and unforeseen consequences of *normative control*?

1.5. Disposition

This part serves the purpose of providing the reader a brief disposition of the thesis as a point of orientation for the upcoming chapters, in order to smoothen the transition to the following chapters.

After this **first chapter**, the **second chapter** serves the purpose of introducing the reader to the theoretical background by defining underlying concepts like *normative control* and *corporate culture,* discussing different views on topics and literature gaps, and presenting our analysis of it. The chapter is of utmost importance, as the reader is provided with the guiding understanding and knowledge needed for the subsequent chapters.

This is then followed by a presentation of our methodological approach in the **third chapter**. This means that we provide the reader with the philosophical underpinnings of the research and explain our research approach in regard to the narrative source collection, analysis, and credibility of the report. Here, we also explain our motivation behind the research approach.

The **fourth chapter** presents a narrative with 'thick description' consisting of stories provided by the staff about their everyday experiences to facilitate for an increased insight into the intensions and efforts of normative control and how these are experienced by staff through their sense-making efforts.

The **fifth chapter** illustrates normative control as an ongoing process through the use of a dramaturgical framing device. Thus, we dig deeper into the story presented in chapter four and illustrate effects, limitations, and unforeseen consequences of the company's managing of the *corporate culture* in their *normative control* efforts.

Finally, we conclude and summarize our thesis in the **sixth chapter**. The reader is provided with the outcome of our thesis as well as with suggestions for future researches.
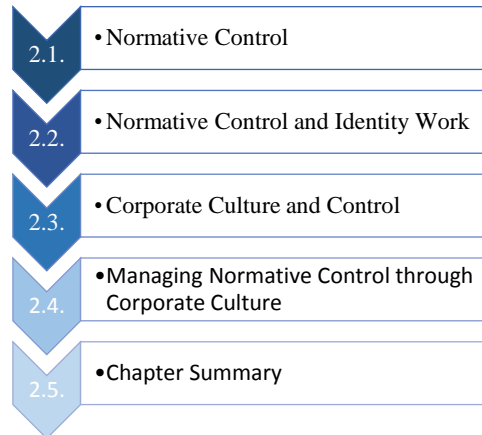
After this, the reader can find a **Glossary of Terms**,[3] the **References,** and the **Appendices**.

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[3] In the Glossary of Terms, definitions to key terms can be found. Throughout the thesis, these terms are written in italics.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter serves to demonstrate the theoretical framework behind our thesis, which consists of two main areas—*normative control* and *corporate culture*. More specifically, it deals with how to exercise *normative control* through a distinct *corporate culture*, which occasionally calls for identity work in terms of an *organizational identity*. The chapter is concluded with a summary.

2.1.	• Normative Control
2.2.	• Normative Control and Identity Work
2.3.	• Corporate Culture and Control
2.4.	• Managing Normative Control through Corporate Culture
2.5.	• Chapter Summary

2.1. Normative Control

The first part of the literature review deals in more detail with the topic of *normative control*. Therefore, we first broach the issue of the origin of *normative control*, as we see here the starting point of the further developments and limitations of *normative control*.

The Origin of Normative Control

As mentioned earlier, the origin of this study can be found in the field of management control methods, which can be subdivided into behavioural control, output control, and *normative control* (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007; see Table 2).

We start our journey into the theoretical background with behavioural control, which involves close supervision and direct orders to subordinates (Ouchi, 1979). For this form of control, Edwards (1981 cited in Barker, 1993) has determined three main concepts of control – simple control, technological control, and bureaucratic control. Simple control is the "direct authoritarian, and personal control of work" executed by a manager, supervisor or company's owner (Barker, 1993, p. 409). Technological control comes from an organization's physical technology (Barker, 1993), while bureaucratic control — which is also the most common form — "derives from the hierarchically based social relations of the organization and its concomitant sets of systemic rational-legal rules that reward compliance and punish noncompliance" (Barker, 1993, p. 409).

According to Barker (1993), a central facet of Edwards' theory is that the *technological* and bureaucratic control forms consist of modifications to the respectively predecessors. Hence, the technological control forms adds modifications concerning technical advances and reduces the despotism of simple control. However, technological control also provides space for "worker protests, slow-downs, and assembly-line sabotage", which may result in worker alienation (Barker, 1993, p. 409). Therefore, bureaucratic control, "with its emphasis on methodical, rational-legal rules for direction, hierarchical monitoring, and rewards for compliance such a job security", is the most commonly used form of control (Barker, 1993, pp. 409-410). However, even this most prevailing form has its limitations. According to Weber (1958; 1978 cited in Barker, 1993, p. 410), organizations are so focused on a "legalistic, rule-based hierarchy" that they become "unresponsive to environmental changes". Thus, organizations become trapped in an "Iron Cage" as they are hardly destroyable and immovable (Weber, 1958, pp.180-181 cited in Barker, 1993, p.410). Furthermore, bureaucratic control makes organizations impersonal, since they would become "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" (Weber, 1958, p. 182 cited in Barker, 1993, p. 411). Therefore, such organizations would simply shape the worker's knowledge towards the willingness to conform to a desired behaviour and to seek after approval (Barker, 1993).

However, oppositions to bureaucratic control are as old as the theory itself. Influential theorists like Follett (1941 cited in Barker, 1993) and Lewin (1948 cited in Barker, 1993) advance the view of rather democratic and decentralized forms of control. This fourth strategic view on control — called concertive control — emphasizes that control does not emerge from a hierarchy, but instead "from the concertive, value-based actions of the organization's members" (Soeters, 1986; Ogilvy, 1990; Parker, 1992 cited in Barker, 1993, p. 411). The whole movement has been raised to a new level by Tom Peters (1988 cited in Barker, 1993) and Peter Drucker (1988 cited in Barker, 1993), who recommended a more value- and ideology-driven approach of control for companies, instead of focusing on formal rules (Barker, 1993). By flattening the hierarchy and reducing the bureaucratic rules, organizations would be able to "cut costs, boost productivity, and increase the speed with which they respond to the changing business world" (Barker, 1993, p. 411).

Concertive control differs from the other three control forms in mainly two aspects - locus of control and locus of authority (Barker, 1993). According to Barker (1993, p. 411), the locus of control shifts "from management to the workers themselves" as they need to reach consensus on the core values according to which they behave accordingly. Furthermore, the locus of authority — the accepted and legitimated control source — shifts from the bureaucratic

authority to socially generated values (Barker, 1993). Consequently, the idea behind concertive control is that the workers of a company collaboratively generate ideological norms and values that guide the working behaviour for a particular autonomously operating group (Barker, 1993; Williams, 2013).

Let us now turn to the second form of management control, namely output control. Basically, the approach of output control is not to set rules or norms on how to behave, but instead to control organizational members through the deliverables of set objectives (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007). This form of control is common in cases where it is difficult to supervise the behaviour of workers or to provide exact instructions (Rennstam, 2007). Researchers who are in favour of the output control theory claim that control should be focused on the deliverables instead of on a worker's behaviour (Ouchi & Maguire, 1975; Eisenhardt, 1985 cited in Rennstam, 2007). According to Rennstam (2007), output control is characterized by clearly set and defined goals, which can be measured after the execution of a task. Commonly, the output is quantitatively measured, which is accompanied by the problem that the quality is disregarded (Rennstam, 2007).

The third form of management control — *normative control* — is based on guiding values, norms, and beliefs that are embedded by the organizational members through socialization (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007). *Normative control* is often exercised when bureaucratic control fails to induce the desired behaviour, or when the work is too complex to prescribe a desired working behaviour and 'post-bureaucratic' control reaches its limits (Ouchi, 1979; Alvesson, 2000 cited by Rennstam, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Then, "shared meanings, values, beliefs, ideas and symbols become key elements of [...] control" (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1992; Ray, 1986; Rosen, 1985; cited in Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p. 196). Even though this third form is reminiscent of the aforementioned concertive control, "normative control is based on strong corporate beliefs and careful hiring process", while concertive control is rather concerned with values, norms and beliefs in autonomously operating teams (Williams, 2013, p. 481).

Referring to our study, we see significant reasons for the development of *normative control*. Apart from the fact that *normative control* serves as a guiding hand in terms of complex work environment, it is also a reaction of the with negative connotations of the word 'control', where people feel trapped in an "Iron Cage" (Weber, 1958, pp.180-181 cited in Barker, 1993, p.410). Hence, we see here an increasing shift from rather *direct control*[4] and management

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[4] In this context, we use the term *direct control* as a group term for control efforts that are easily perceptible to the individual; typically, behavioural- and output control.

towards more autonomy, coaching and leading. Already at this point, we see the first indications of an increasing focus on the employee's identity, as the spirit and personality of each employees are emphasized instead of just managing the person as an employee without a face.

Management Control Form	Control target	Example of method
Behavioural control	Behaviour	Direct supervision, technological control, bureaucratic control
Output control	Result/output	Budget, balanced scorecard
Normative control	Norms, thinking, values, perception	Socialisation, recruiting, identity regulation

Table 2 Management Control Types 2 (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007, p. 155)

Normative Control

The theories of *normative control* can be traced back towards the traditional forms of normative ethics, which provide the organizational member "with rules and principles that attempt to inform what is 'right' or 'wrong' for a given situation" (Leopold & Harris, 2009, p. 110). In the case of *normative control*, the behaviour of organizational members is supposed to be guided through norms and values (Welch & Welch, 2006). Values are seen as desirable ideals or character traits to which everyone is supposed to conform with; norms are the rather unwritten guidelines of a group of individuals on how to behave to be aligned with the values (Alvesson, 1995). Put simply, values and norms "prescribe how the organization should work" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p. 42). In this thesis, therefore, we refer to *normative control* as "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions" (Kunda, 1992, p. 11).

Normative control is also seen as a unique competitive advantage due to the complex processes and time-demanding change attempts of norms and values (Alvesson, 2004; Schein, 1985). It is even questioned whether norms and values can be changed at all, once they are embedded in a company (Welch & Welch, 2006). Additionally, Alvesson and Robertson (2006, p.195) report that "[...] a 'neo-liberal' form of governance [...]" leads to trustworthy behaviour of workers to act in the best interest of a company. This way of guidance and identity constructions shall help the organization to "function effectively in high-ambiguity and somewhat sceptical [...] work contexts" (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p. 195). This, in return, would then lead to rather intense self-management, intensified commitment, and greater acceptance of long working days (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

Organizations exercising *normative control* are, therefore, often characterized by high commitment levels (Etzioni, 1961/1975), which means that they try to control employees indirectly by means of social integration, creating a common purpose and shared values, providing a flat and decentralized hierarchy, and being focused on customer satisfaction (Alvesson, 2004; Leopold & Harris, 2009). Furthermore, they try to develop competence and stimulate innovativeness by creating an environment of problem-solving and 'learning-from-mistakes' (Alvesson, 2004; Leopold & Harris, 2009).

Limitations of Normative Control

Researchers like Kunda (1992) and Fleming and Sturdy (2009) call attention towards the limitations and drawbacks of *normative control,* like the elimination of individual thoughts, values, and beliefs, but also the creation of a homogenous group identity without any diversity — at least according to the theory. Kunda (1992, p. 356) states: "[...] normative control leads to heavy claims against the self – the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of members of work organizations. [...] private [life] come under corporate scrutiny and regulation. What one does, thinks, or feels — indeed, who one is — is not just a matter of private concern but the legitimate domain of bureaucratic control structures armed with increasingly sophisticated techniques of influence."

Also, researchers like Alvesson and Kärreman (2004a, p. 149) raise awareness about the "cultural 'closures'" and a tendency towards creating "an 'iron cage of subjectivity'", which are dependent on the degree of identification and career options. For us, this line of thoughts poses a rather intriguing question of how far a company is willing to loosen its reigns and control efforts and allow a diversity that may not fit the company's view. Another question is how far the individual is prepared to subdue his or her private life and — to an extent — identity in order to conform to company norms that may be better than what is typical without being perfect.

2.2. Normative Control and Identity Work

In this part, followed by the elucidation of *normative control,* we look upon its influences on *organizational identity* as well as the concept of *anti-identity* and call attention towards a newly upcoming notion of *neo-normative control.*

Normative Control and Identity Work

A long time back, Etzioni (1961/1975, pp. 40-41) stated that *normative control* is less common in professional organizations as they deal with remuneration. Even though other researchers have disproved this statement (c.f. Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas & Kärreman, 2015; Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007), Etzioni (1961/1975, p. 42) still made a point by saying that "remunerative powers [e.g. salary] cannot serve as the basis of [...] compliance". However, normative organizations do not make use of their remunerative power to facilitate compliance; they engage in *identity work.*

Here, we refer to *identity work* "as a formal conceptualization of the ways in which human beings are continuously 'engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness'" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003, p. 1165 cited in Watson, 2008, pp. 126 – 127). *Identity work* is argued to typically be grounded in some level of self-doubt that is contingent on psychological- and existential worries as well as inconsistencies in encounters with others or with images of them (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson & Willmott , 2001/2). Hence, they make use of "creating social integration within the company by managing boundaries and creating the feeling of a common purpose and community around an organization's identity" (Alvesson, 2004, p. 124).

Moreover, the construction of an identity can be distinguished into three domains—social identity, organizational identity, and corporate identity (Cornelissen, et al., 2007). Social identity is seen as the individual knowledge about shared meanings and the feeling of belonging to a group (Cornelissen, et al., 2007). The significance of organizational identity closely relates to that of social identity; however, it is more concerned with the shared meanings and sense of belongingness towards an organizational group (Cornelissen, et al., 2007). Lastly, corporate identity is about "the distinctive public image that a corporate entity communicates that structures people's engagement with it" (Cornelissen, et al., 2007, p. 3).

Based on the aforementioned classifications, we see that organizational identity and corporate identity are salient at Biz-R, where the former is reflected in staff's sense-making efforts and the latter in the company's *normative control* efforts. It can be inferred that (organizational) identification here refers to the definition of who an individual is in terms of the organizational 'we' (Alvesson, 2012). This means that it should not be mistaken for organizational commitment, characterized by the belief in and acceptance of an organization's goals and values, the willingness to exert extra effort for the organization, and the desire to maintain membership of the same (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Whether such internalization may occurs afterwards, simultaneously, or not at all is a separate issue (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Thus, we are concerning ourselves with an *organizational identity* at an individual level (c.f. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004b).

Additionally, Alvesson and Willmott (2001/2) argue that *normative control* offers the possibility to create the desired employee through, what they call 'identity regulation'. Hereby, forms of management control can interfere with the workers' self-image and orientation to that extent that they conform to the company's objectives (Alvesson & Willmott , 2001/2). This phenomenon has also been researched by Ouchi (1980, p. 132), who reports that some companies are especially focused on hiring young and inexperienced workers to socialize them towards their organizational objectives and compensate them on the basis of non-performance criteria. By this, organizations engage in what Alvesson (1995 cited in Alvesson, 2004, p. 152) refers to as 'social-integrative management'. This requires the connection of the organizational members with the organization by communicating the uniqueness and 'greatness' as well as developing a 'community' (Alvesson, 2004). Even though, 'social-integrative management' creates "strong cohesion and close social relations" that result in loyalty towards the firm, it is not seen as identity work per se, but reduces "uncertainty around the issue of identity in the corporate context" (Alvesson, 2004, p. 152).

The Anti-identity

Anti-identity is a form of *identity work* coined by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), in which "the deficit Other is constructed to present a counter-picture to oneself" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011, p. 171). The authors argue that the *anti-identity* "[holds] up a *negative mirror* through which the self emerges as distinct, superior and valued" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011, p. 171). In the author's case study, this is illustrated through the distribution of credit and blame. This can essentially be understood by viewing it as the positioning of (1) 'we' or 'I' who deserves the credit and (2) 'they' or 'them' who deserves blame (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Hence, by blaming and depicting the deficits of 'the others' an *anti-identity*

is constructed; through the reflection of the *negative mirror*, the self is able to emerge as more distinct and superior in comparison (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). The process of 'bashing' others in return pushes one's own identity by "repressing doubts about one's own shortcomings" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011, p. 171).

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003; 2011) invented term *anti-identity* — in our view is an interesting approach towards identity work — which offers room for further research. More specifically, the concept broadens the idea of *organizational identity* by opening up for the idea of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The identification of 'in-groups' can be argued to be associated with the salience of the out-group as it reinforces the awareness of one's 'in-group' which underscores the existence of a boundary between them (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Drawing on Wilder (1981), Ashforth and Mael (1989, p.31) suggest that "groups [have] a vested interest in perceiving or even provoking greater differentiation than exists and disparaging the reference group on this basis". Alvesson (2012) adds to this view and argues that identity reinforces the conception of 'we/them' and that one readily over-emphasizes the differences to others to shield ones' own identity.

Neo-Normative Control

A new, upcoming, and — according to Fleming and Sturdy (2009) — so far neglected form of control is *neo-normative control,* which originates from the direction of its namesake *normative control*. According to Fleming and Sturdy (2009), *neo-normative control* developed on the basis of the limitations of *normative control*. We work under the assumption of "the rigidity of homogenous cultures and the cynicism it provokes from employees who distance their 'authentic' selves from the collective norm" (Jermier et al., 1991; Kunda, 1992 cited by Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2). Therefore, *neo-normative control* is based on the idea that employees are not expected to share or conform to organizational values or norms; they shall rather oppose them and "express more of their true selves […], particularly by being playful and having fun at work" (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2). Followers of this theory advance the view that employees are performing their best by expressing their diversity and by simply 'being themselves' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). In our view, Fleming and Sturdy (2009) have provided an interesting article, perhaps mostly so because the resemblance to our own case study is striking. Most notable are similarities to a 'playground-like' atmosphere in general and in particular Biz-R's core principle for employees to 'just be themselves' (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009).

However, while the authors present an interesting and original perspective, we argue that they fail to take the contradictions illustrated within their case company seriously. The authors

argue that while the staff were encouraged to challenge the corporate values 'up to a point', they seem to stop there, accepting this as evidence of *neo-normative control* being practiced over *normative control*. We, however, believe that it is this 'point' that is of interest. Here, it also seems that the authors have missed a key point of Kunda's (1992) argument on 'the cynicism' that *normative control* may provoke. Such cynicism and alienation from the culture may simultaneously be undermined and seen rather as an expression and evidence of the *corporate culture's* inherent strength and logic: "the very possibility of engaging in playful ironicizing of the culture was widely interpreted as evidence of [company name]'s commitment to openness, freedom of expression, etc." (Kunda, 1991, p. 22 cited in Wilmott, 1993, p. 538).

Thus, we argue that Fleming and Sturdy (2009), while having provided a new and insightful concept, have failed to take this tension seriously. Additionally, one can wonder why a company would want and need a set of core values if the point is to resist and challenge them. Hence, we are rather concerned with the interplay between *normative control* and *neo-normative control*. The latter, rather than facilitating for 'existential empowerment', provides *normative control* efforts to emerge as an 'iron fist within a velvet glove'. Hence, the 'therapy of freedom' might prove to be an "underutilized media of domination" (Rose, 1990, p. 257 cited in Wilmott, 1993, p. 525).

2.3. Corporate Culture and Control

Having discussed the concept of *normative control*, it falls into place that the idea behind it is to influence people's thinking and feelings towards a direction that is valuable for a company. Hence, the *corporate culture*—with its norms and values—is a major player in this field. Therefore, the second part of the literature review deals with *corporate culture* and its influences on managerial control. We start by defining the term *corporate culture*, before we discuss if culture can be controlled and connected. We also provide an influencing model for our study.

Corporate Culture

> *"While there is universal agreement that (1) [culture] exists, and (2) that it plays a crucial role in shaping behaviour in organizations, there is little consensus on what […] culture actually is […]"* (Watkins, 2013, p.1)

As Watkins (2013) indicates, culture is a topic with endless definitions. It ranges from the idea of basic assumptions as guidelines (Schein, 1985) to everything that surrounds us (Smircich, 1983). However, culture is most commonly referred to as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group of people from another" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). Accordingly—and this is how we define it hereinafter—culture is mainly about how people in a certain group similarly value and experience their environment compared to another group of people (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2016). Therefore, culture can be seen as something that "stands behind and guides [our] behaviour rather than the behaviour as such" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p. 42).

Besides the lack of consensus on the meaning of culture, it is no surprise that there are also multiple opinions on its application in organizations (Smircich, 1983). According to Smircich (1983), the cultural research can be divided into two overarching camps. The first one treats *culture* as a variable, which means that culture is "something the organization has" (Smircich, 1983 cited in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p.42). Whereas, the second one refers to *culture* as a root metaphor, which "refers to culture as something the organization is" (Smircich, 1983 cited in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p.42). Those two camps can be then even further divided. In the first camp, we distinguish between two views: (1) culture as comparative management sees it as "part of the environment" and (2) the *corporate* culture view, which sees culture as "a result of human enactment" (Smircich, 1983, p. 347). The second

camp of 'culture as a root metaphor' distinguishes between "cognitive, symbolic, structural, and psychodynamic perspectives on organizations" (Smircich, 1983, p. 353) In the following section, we adopt the view of culture as a manageable variable, since the outcome of our studies aims at assisting organizations to deal with culture as a variable (Smircich, 1983). To be even more precise, we refer to culture as *corporate culture*; meaning that the organizations rely on internal variables and "[…] are themselves culture-producing phenomena" (Louis, 1980; Siehl & Martin, 1981; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Tichy, 1982; Martin & Powers, 1983 cited in Smircich, 1983, p. 344). Therefore, "organizations are seen as social instruments that produce goods and services; as a by-product, they also produce distinctive cultural artifacts such as rituals, legends, and ceremonies" (Smircich, 1983, p. 344).

Controlling Corporate Culture

As there is no or little consensus on the definition of *Culture*, there is no such thing as an agreement about the manageability of it (Smircich, 1983). Here, we again face the two aforementioned overarching views on culture. On the one hand, we have, for example, Bate (1994, p. 12 cited in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p. 42) who sees culture as "a label or a metaphor *for*, not a component *of*, the total work organization". On the other hand, we have researchers like Schein (1985 cited by Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016), who invented a model of culture composed of assumptions, values, and artefacts. According to Schein (1985), the *corporate culture* consists of three layers – 'basic underlying assumptions', which are unconscious beliefs and thoughts; 'espoused values', meaning actions taken by the management; and 'artefacts', which are the visible structures and processes. Accordingly, culture needs to be managed "efficiently to achieve optimum organisational effectiveness" (Umobuarie, 2013, p. 3). Consequently, we see culture here treated as something *of* the organization which one can influence to a certain extent.

As mentioned before, we are in agreement with Schein's view as we see *(corporate) culture* as "something the organization has", as a social instrument that produces cultural artefacts (Smircich, 1983 cited in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p.42). However, according to Smircich (1983), those attempts would try to categorize and simplify culture through concepts and models. Smircich argues that culture is too complex for categorization, since it is everything that surrounds us and we are unaware of how we are shaped by it. We cannot categorize something we are unaware of (Smircich, 1983; Smircich and Stubbart, 1985). Even though we take the view of Smircich and followers seriously that there is an inherent risk of cultural simplification, we will continue our paper based on the assumption that it can be

categorized to a certain extent (c.f. Schein's view). It is, however, not our ambition to provide a simplified view of the corporate culture, but to take the ambiguities and complexities of *corporate culture* seriously. In the following section, therefore, we present a model that helps us to identify, categorize, and investigate the culture of Biz-R.

The 'Cultural Dynamics Model'

The 'Cultural Dynamics Model' given by Hatch (1993) — which is based on Schein's (1985) 'Organizational Culture Model' — consists of four elements, namely: assumptions, values, artefacts, and symbols; which are interconnected through processes (see Figure 1).

This model is based on the aforementioned assumption that culture is "something the organization has" and that one can work with (Smircich, 1983). The
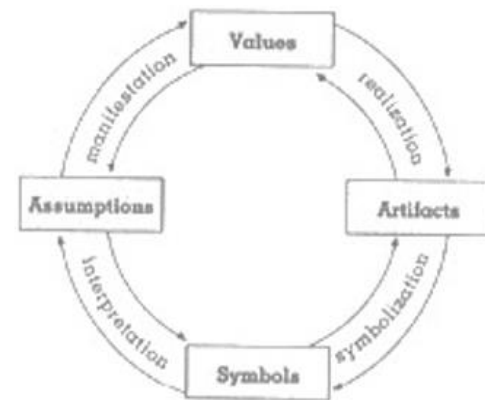

Figure 1: The Cultural Dynamics Model *(Hatch, 1993, p. 660)*

cultural cycle starts with the elements of assumptions and values, which are interconnected with the process of manifestation. This refers to any action of "translating intangible assumptions into recognizable values" (Hatch, 1993, p. 662). The process of realization between the element of values and artefacts stands for bringing the values into being, or transforming the meaning of values into artefacts. According to Schein (1985), these are "the most tangible aspects of culture" (Schein, 1985 cited in Hatch, 1993, p. 665). The next process—called symbolization— connects the artefacts with symbols. This process takes place when forms—which first appear as artefacts—turn into symbols for cultural members through additional cultural processes (Hatch, 1993). Last is the process of interpretation, which connects the elements of symbols and assumptions (Hatch, 1993). Here, "the meaning that interpretation establishes involves the literal and surplus meanings combined by prospective symbolization processes" (Hatch, 1993, p. 674). After this process, the cycle starts again.

In our view, Hatch's model provides us with a theoretical framework for approaching and identifying the culture of the company. Furthermore, it helps us to investigate the cultural dynamic relationships within the company and to identify the mentioned elements and processes that form the culture. We will further deal with this in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.4. Managing Normative Control through Corporate Culture

The final part of the literature review is about how *normative control* can be managed through *corporate culture*. Here, we are especially interested in how culture can serve as a form of control to the extent that direct and external control is 'redundant'. Therefore, we will first discuss the interplay of *corporate culture* and *normative control* before getting more concrete by looking at how someone can be managed through culture.

Corporate Culture and Normative Control

By comparing the definition of *corporate culture* with that of *normative control*, we see that the concepts are seemingly intertwined.

> *"[**Corporate Culture** is] how individuals within a particular group think about and value their reality in similar ways and how this thinking and valuing is different from that of people in different groups [...]"* (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p. 41)

This is also noted by Peters and Waterman (1982, p.81 cited by Kunda, 1992, p. 355), who say that *"strong cultures"* are based on intense emotional attachment and the internalization of *"clearly enunciated company values"* that often replace formal structures". Accordingly, the idea behind this is that employees embed organizational objectives and values—referred to as *corporate culture*—to the that extent that they "no longer

> ***Normative Control*** is "t*he attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions*" (Kunda, 1992, p. 11)

require strict and rigid external control" (Kunda, 1992, p. 355). According to Kunda (1992), the ideal employee would be therefore be someone whose personal interest overlaps with the company's interest. This type of control enables a company to efficiently confront the present-day marketplace, which is characterized by rapid change, complex and ambiguous work environments, intense competition, and customer as well as labour focus (Kunda, 1992; Ouchi, 1979; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Our study builds upon this line of thoughts as we investigate how a company can overlap its interests with the personal interests of its organizational members.

Managing through Corporate Culture

While *normative control* and *corporate culture* interplay with one another, the question arises as to how they can be managed. According to Welch & Welch (2006, p. 16), this can happen "through a process of socialisation, members learn how to act accordingly". Hofstede (1991, p. 5) refers to this as the "collective programming of the mind". Based on the behavioural alignment with the shared and accepted values and norms, members get rewarded and punished, to which we than refer to as *normative control* (Welch & Welch, 2006). If we, then, say that people can be managed through *corporate culture*, we refer to the informal control attempts of a company's higher management to shape, modify, or change the *corporate culture* and thus, the shared and accepted behavioural norms (Welch & Welch, 2006). By doing this, we advance the view that culture can be guided and influenced from the top of a company (Welch & Welch, 2006). Consequently, the management of a company needs to ensure that the organizational members 'live' and act according to the culture, so that every strategic decision or move is automatically conforms to the guiding values and norms (Welch & Welch, 2006).

The embodiment of the *corporate culture* shall substitute the direct control as the organizational members are in consensus with the value system, which in return provides guidance (as presented in Figure 2). Referring to Welch and Welch (2006), since employees get rewarded for and therewith, reinforced in believing in and acting upon it, they will most likely repeat it. We see character traits of this approach practiced by our case company, wherefore this concept helps us to identify and analyse it more in-depth. So far, we have a neutral stand towards this concept, however, we are curious about its effects, limitations, and unforeseen consequences.
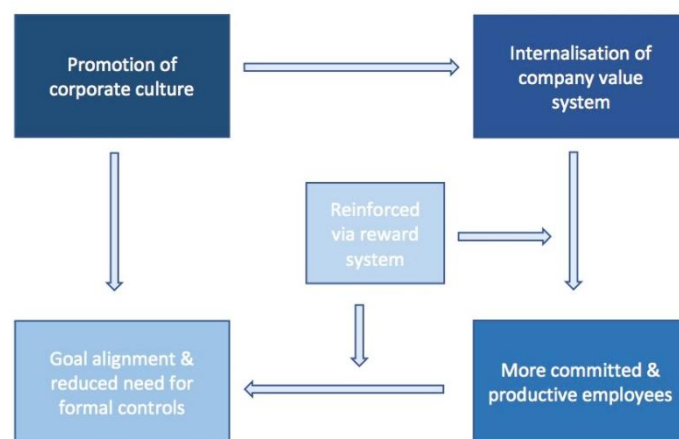

Figure 2: "Managing through the promotion of corporate culture" (Welch & Welch, 2006, p. 17)

Chapter Summary

This part provides the reader with an overview of what has been presented in this chapter. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature review.

In this chapter, we introduce the reader to the theoretical background of our thesis. We have defined *normative control as* "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions" (Kunda, 1992, p. 11). We have connected *normative control* to topics like *identity work* and *neo-normative control*, which are of interest for this thesis. Then, we have continued by defining the topic culture and introducing our perspective on the field, namely that culture is the "collective programming of the mind" of a group of individuals (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5) and more precisely, we refer to it as *corporate culture*, which means that we see it as an internal variable of an organization (Smircich, 1983).

In addition, we introduce Hatch's 'Organizational Dynamic Model', to which we return in Chapters 4 and 5. Finally, we have discussed the interplay of *normative control* and *corporate culture*. In our view, a strong culture serves as the basis of *normative control* as "strict and rigid external control" is said to be no longer needed when employees embed organizational objectives and values, to which we refer to as the *corporate culture* (Kunda, 1992, p. 355).

Having introduced the reader to the theoretical background, we continue this paper by providing insights into our methodology behind this research.

3. Methodology

In the following chapter, we present the methodological approach behind our thesis. We start by introducing the philosophical underpinnings of the thesis, followed by going through the research approach, the narrating source collection and the narrating source analysis. We then continue by giving an insight into the credibility of this study, before we finish the chapter with a summary.

- 3.1. • Philosophical Underpinnings
- 3.2. • Research Approach
- 3.3. • Source Collection
- 3.4. • Source Analysis
- 3.5. • Chapter Summary
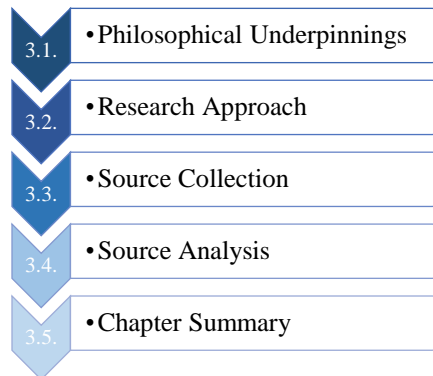
3.1. Philosophical Underpinnings

The first part of our methodical chapter serves the purpose to clarify our philosophical considerations of ontology and epistemology.

As made clear in the forthcoming section, we are concerning ourselves with a qualitative research approach. However, in order to better understand this approach, some underpinning assumptions need to be brought to the surface. Quantitative and positivist research, typically holds the promise of objective truth presented as facts—a cut-out of reality that calls out to the researcher to be gathered and systematized (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In the context of our research, we refute such a claim of an objective social reality and instead subscribe to the idea that such realities are constructed through the meaning(s) attached by individuals to objects, events, and interactions (Prasad, 2005).

Objective reality is not refuted per se; rather, we aim to bring to attention the social interpretation and meaningful sense-making efforts behind such realities (Prasad, 2005). Thus, we are concerned with ways in which reality can be understood, created, and enacted. Hence, we agree with Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) that the observed reality is an expression of deeper underlying processes. These, we argue, call for a more interpretive approach of a socially constructed reality. More specifically, we are interested in understanding individuals' 'typification' and creation of different roles for themselves and others (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The individual can here be seen as enacting one or several roles. These enactments, in turn, make institutions "come to life" in addition to other representations, such as linguistic and physical artefacts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 27). This instils a layer of

meaning at both an individual and institutional levels, which needs to be 'legitimized' for new generations when it is no longer self-evident. This is made at both a cognitive and normative levels. However, as inferred by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009, p. 28), "while the individuals create their reality, the institutions and their legitimizations […;] this created reality in turn creates the individual". This, it is argued, is done through 'socialization' in which "individuals internalize social norms and knowledge" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 8).

Furthermore, in research, one typically distinguishes between an inductive and a deductive approach. While the former "involves a risky leap from a collection of single facts to a general truth" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 3), the latter does the opposite, thus explaining a single case through a general rule. What is ultimately does is "not really […] explain anything, but rather avoid explanation" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 3). We engaged in neither of these, but instead in an abductive approach that Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) explain in the following way: "one often surprising single case is interpreted as from a hypothetic overarching pattern, which, if it were true, explains the case in questions".

Moreover, as "the only thing we can write about is the past, since the future does not yet exist" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 107). We need to deal with "fragile, more or less uncertain, contradictory and 'polysemic' bases for our process of interpretation" - to which we, in this context, refer to as *sources* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, pp. 107-109; Ricoeur, 2006). Even though the word 'data' is often used in these contexts, we want to clarify that 'data' is usually more suitable for quantitative research as it does not exactly cover the bases of our interpretation. More precisely, we refer to it as a *narrating source* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). A narrating source "has passed through a subjective medium, and hence is always exposed to risks of distortion" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 109). More so, "the narrating source [expresses] an event" as opposed to a remnant source, which expresses the "effect of an event" without any risk of subject distortion (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 109). Although, these two source types are often used in combination, we can use them interchangeably through the single use of a narrating source (hereafter, in short 'source'), as a distinct separation serves no purpose in the context of our research.

3.2. Research Approach

The following part provides the reader with a more tangible aspect of our study, namely, our research approach. Here, the aim is to inform the reader about our course of actions.

As mentioned, we have engaged ourselves in a qualitative and interpretative study to facilitate a better understanding of the subjective realities of our research subjects and their constructions of reality (Prasad, 2005). More specifically, we have engaged in an ethnographic study with the ambition to develop close connections with the subjects and the situations being studied—herein referred to as the natives and their local context (Prasad, 2005).

Using an ethnographic approach, we are interested in the meaning behind complex symbolic systems, which Geertz (1973 cited in Prasad, 2005, p. 79) refers to as 'webs of significance', where "all human action is suspended in webs of significance that can be apprehended only by grasping the specific local interpretations engaged in by the natives themselves". Thus, we have tried to get as close as we can to the natives, their local context, and their everyday experiences (Prasad, 2005). These local contexts include attempting to gain an understanding of the cultural practices taking place within the organization, which pervade everyday social interaction (Prasad, 2005).

Our abductive approach has facilitated the continuous adjustment and refinement of the empirical area of application and the theory of an over-arching pattern (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Thus, while we originally set out to study the *corporate culture* at a broad level, our empirical material and the mysteries with which it has presented us call for scrutiny and for a theoretical over-arching pattern to explain the phenomenon at hand. Finally, we reached a point in our empirical material where we can spot an over-arching mystery that requires particular scrutiny, namely, the exploration of the interplay of *normative control* within the rather bizarre *corporate culture* we are presented with.

3.3. Source Collection

The following part goes into more depth in regard to the primary and secondary source collection. Hence, the reader is informed about the techniques and procedures used to acquire the narrating sources for this study (Ricoeur, 2006 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The section aims to support the credibility of the thesis.

Case Study

We had heard about Biz-R before, in terms of presenting themselves as being in the forefront of *corporate culture*. Additionally, the culture seemed rather bizarre, which also provoked our interest in what the company is doing, how they are doing it, and how the staff experience it. Thus, we chose to study Biz-R for two main reasons. Firstly, the idiographic nature of the company in terms of its salient and rather distinctive *corporate culture*. We argue that this makes it an interesting company to study and which may provide new insights on the influence of *corporate culture* in general and on *normative control* in particular. Second, while the organization's approach to culture and control may be seen as unique, the underpinning approaches, at their roots, are not. Thus, it is our ambition to make some valuable and generally applicable interpretations may be made.

Source Collection

Our sources are collected through a multi-method qualitative approach with the underlying ambition of getting as close as possible to the natives and their local contexts (Prasad, 2005; Saunders, et al., 2012). Hence, we base our research and subsequently our empirical material on primary and secondary sources like semi-structured interviews, 'observer-as-participant'-observations, and company documents (Saunders, et al., 2012). Moreover, we supported and strengthens the primary and secondary sources with literature such as books and peer-reviewed journal articles, as discussed in Chapter 2. The interviews can be seen as our main primary source, as most of our analyses are based on our interviews, while the observations have rather underlined and provided additional perspectives, insights, and context.

As we need to understand both the natives and their local contexts, we have tried to conduct as many interviews as possible, to cover a broad spectrum within the company (Prasad, 2005). One way of getting closer to their own interpretations is to ask broad and seemingly mundane questions in our interview settings to facilitate for a range of every day experiences;

this has also helped us — to some extent — to dodge rather scripted responses by facilitating for conversation and dialogue rather than holding an inquisition.

Thus, we conducted 19 semi-structured interviews in person, with the staff in in Poland and Sweden, spanning from top management to entry-level positions (see Appendix 1). Hereby, semi-structured interviews can be understood as "conversations with structure and purpose" (Kvale, 1996 p. 6).[5] This offers us the possibility to conduct rather structured interviews with prepared key questions to ensure relevance, but also to be flexible in terms of follow-up questions and further individual elaborations on the part of the interviewee (Saunders, et al., 2012). Furthermore, since we conducted all interviews in quiet and undisturbed environments, we were able to record the interviews for a proper transcription afterwards.

Most interviews were conducted in English; i.e. the interviewees responded in using a non-native language. For the purpose of adequate English text, some interview quotes have been slightly edited to make them easier to read. It is important to say that the editing concerned only the English grammar and the elimination of expletives and not the content itself. Hence, nothing has been added or removed that endanger the quality of the narrating sources or the sentiment of the quote (Ricoeur, 2006 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

The observations were made in the manner of 'observer-as-participant' – observations, which means that we observed while revealing our identity and purpose to the observed person (Saunders et al., 2012). This approach is generally preferred within ethnographic research, as it facilitates an authentic account of the natives (Prasad, 2005). All conspicuous elements of our observations were written down and analysed for inconstancies and tensions between claims and observations (Saunders et al, 2012). The observation process was executed during company visits for two and a half days in Sweden and a two-day stay in Poland.

Credibility

To ensure credibility, we engage in 'source criticism', "which sets up a number of criteria for the evaluation and interpretation of [narrating sources]" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 108). Therefore, we focus on criteria like the authenticity, bias, distance and dependency of a source, which support our hermeneutic approach to achieving greater understanding (Alvesson &

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[5] Over the course of our study we adjusted the questions depending on context such as who was being interviewed and the mystery that was salient and present to us at that particular time. Generally, on a broad level, our questions involved themes such as performance management, induction processes, impressions, atmosphere, leadership, decision-making, interactions and relationships between staff and also between staff and their managers. The only specific question regarding culture was how it affected the interviewee's daily work. The purpose of this was to avoid scripted responses of the corporate culture and instead focus on what this actually meant to the employees through rather mundane day-to-day experiences. Thus, all questions were created to facilitate broad, open and descriptive answers and make room for reflexive follow-up questions.

Sköldberg, 2009). Moreover, the source-critical approaches seems to be appropriate for case studies as they "have points in common with historiography" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 115). In particular, this counts as proper for our interview and observation material as an "elementary source-critical checking [to] remove many mistakes" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 115).

Therefore, we strategically approached the interviewees in two ways. First, with the support of the HR department, we scheduled interviews with management depending on the availability and willingness to participate. These participants were seen as key-figures in terms of position. In all, five people were approached in this way. Second, the remaining 13 interviews were based on a voluntary basis, as we sent out a flyer inviting participation. The idea behind this approach was that we wanted to interview people who were interested in the project and who wanted to talk and provide information. Moreover, by this way, we were able to offer anonymity as staff were able to approach us directly.

A side effect of this may be that we have received respondents who are typically more prone to being sociable (and valuing this) as well as people on the outer edges of a bell curve— for instance, people who are highly positive or negative. However, we would argue that it was the best approach. Additionally, the number of interviews and observations is likely to have made up for such concerns. Our approach worked well in Sweden, as the staff contacted us directly with no inference from the company. In Poland, however, we had some issues as the local HR department took the lead in gathering people to participate. While this can be interpreted as the company presenting us with the most enthusiastic employees, there is little in our findings that supports such an interpretation per se. However, we have assumed a rather sceptical approach to overcome this issue. Additionally, we have provided our own interpretations as a way to accommodate a slight lack of critical perspective during some of our interviews.

It should be noted that we ensure anonymity and confidential treatment for all interviewees to facilitate open and honest discussions and thus, credible sources (Ricoeur, 2006 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Therefore, all interviews are anonymized and stripped of traceable content like position, function, and specific work tasks. In addition, interviewees are given a randomized name and gender.[6]

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[6] Our anonymization efforts were purposively reiterated prior to, and upon initiating, each interview in order to counter-act, or at least discourage, interviewee's to engage in image management and to positioning themselves in a more favourable light, as traceable information would be removed, making such efforts futile.

3.4. Source Analysis

The fourth part of our methodology serves to introduce our analytical approach to the reader. Here, we take a closer look at the process behind the empirical material that is ultimately presented to the reader and the intentions behind it.

Analytical Intentions

As we conducted an ethnographic study, we have continuously aimed towards a meaningful understanding of what Geertz (1973, p. 43 partially cited in Prasad, 2005, p. 81) calls the 'structures of signification', which means "wading through multiple complex layers of local interpretations […] [to] arrive at a more comprehensive and insightful cultural portrait". Additionally, our ambition has been to provide the reader with as much pluralism, contradictions and tensions as possible within the scope of our thesis.

Moreover, alethic hermeneutics sets out to reveal something hidden (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). For our study, this means revealing what lies behind the claims of a salient and distinct *corporate culture* and how *normative control* can be understood in its context. Thus, while we have applied an ethnographic approach to our research as well as to the presentation of our analytical data, we have simultaneously applied an alethic hermeneutic approach when analysing our empirical data. Within this approach, we have recognized that the whole (the culture) is made up of several parts (for instance, how employees understand and enact the culture). Hence, in order to understand its parts, we have strived for an understanding of the whole. Subsequently, we need to understand the parts in order to understand the whole, thus creating a continuous loop of moving between the whole and its parts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This has enabled us to get a progressively deeper understanding of the phenomenon as we have progressed through our material.

Our abductive approach has facilitated the continuous adjustment and refinement of the empirical area of application and the theory of an over-arching pattern (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Alethic Hermeneutics is further interested in understanding the causes and outcomes of the studied phenomena (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). For us, this means that we are interested in understanding the effects, limitations and unforeseen consequences of *normative control*.

In the course of our study, we have developed a deep familiarity with the culture being studied and have tried to convey this in our empirical material. Thus, we have attempted to provide the reader with a 'thick description' (term coined by Geertz, 1973, cited in Prasad,

2005), which means that we provide our reader with an insightful narrative of our fieldwork to facilitate a multitude of interpretations. Such descriptions are, as argued by Prasad (2005, p. 80), are only possible if the researcher "attend[s] to the multiple and frequently contradictory levels of local meanings in the field". Thus, while 'thick descriptions' are provided, they are not taken at their face value but are provided with an additional layer of interpretation (c.f. Prasad, 2005).

Analytical Process

After conducting all interviews and observations, we transcribed the interviews and wrote down our observations. Then, based on our overall view, we extracted a few broad themes, which we inserted into an Excel sheet. The Excel sheet was structured with the X-axis consisting of the themes and a Y-axis for the natives. The purpose of this was to see a consistency within the themes as well as to maintain a feeling and connection to each individual. While going through the transcribed material, we looked for sensitizing topics and meaning-overlapping themes, which we interpret as relevant (Swedberg, 2012). We also looked for tensions in our empirical material like contradictions or inconsistencies. This overarching process can be understood as looking for 'structures of signification' (Geertz, 1973 cited in Prasad, 2005). During the process, we added additional themes, merged others, and removed some that we found to have been either irrelevant or not credible.

After having put in all relevant sources, we made several iterations. The first iterative process involved ensuring that the themes were consistent, credible, and coherent. This was essentially done by going through each theme, seeing how salient and characteristic these themes really are, and relating them to other sources as either a contradiction or a support for our observations. Second, we looked at the quality of each individual part—the voices—and coded them by separating them into three piles: (1) voices that support the theme but are not considered as being worthy of quoting (mainly due to simplicity or poor language); (2) voices that support the theme but do not add anything to it; (3) voices that strongly support the theme and bring something additional to it (Prasad, 2005).[7]

In the next step, we placed all themes, along with the corresponding sources, into a coherent text and narrative. The idea here was to present the reader with the empirical material (Chapter 4) as a narrative in an attempt to invite the reader to get closer to the material and open up for additional interpretations and multiple views (Prasad, 2005). However, additional context and interpretations are needed as the material is highly condensed and, moreover, the

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[7] While this approach may seem like cherry-picking, it should be noted that the primary data consisted of more than 150,000 words and after several iterations the data from the third pile had over 18,000 words.

voices of the natives should not be taken at face value (Prasad, 2005). Thus, throughout the narrative, we offer additional context to what is being said as well as adding our own interpretations, based on our observations and empirical sources. This enables us to move in and out between the parts and the whole, in order to provide the reader with such perspective.

We have tried to emphasize important details that also bears tension, contradiction, and a variety of interpretations. We have tried to use as much of the native voices as possible, while also providing our own observations, interpretations, and reflections in order to open up to an array of additional perspectives and interpretations. We have attempted to give the natives a familiar feeling while still maintaining and ensuring anonymity. Thus, we have tried to create a narrative and convey a strong storyline that gives the reader a glimpse into the local context and reality of the natives to facilitate the additional generation of insights.

As we eventually turn to our discussion (Chapter 5), we provide the reader with a deeper understanding and subsequently facilitate additional and new insights by utilizing an additional interpretive method—the dramaturgy. This approach serves two purposes. First, it acts as a framing device that enables us to address the empirical material from a new angle, address our central arguments, and raise the level of discussion. Second, by utilizing Goffman's (1959) concept of a 'frontstage' and 'backstage', we address how a company's *normative control* works and how the staff engage in sense-making efforts in regards to various tensions, contradictions, and ambiguity surrounding these efforts. The approach is used purely as an analytical vehicle to provide for an increased understanding and 'unmask' hidden agendas, conflicts, and identity work (c.f. Prasad, 2005). Hence, we utilize and draw upon dramaturgy and concepts such as 'scripting', 'staging', and 'performing' (Prasad, 2005), and illustrate these through the allegorical usages of movie production.

A point of particular interest is the 'scripting', which provides "[…] guides for collective consciousness and action" (Benford & Hunt, 1992 p. 38 cited in Prasad 2005, p. 49) as well as direction on how to behave and act, even though it is flexible enough to provide additions 'backstage' "where roles are created for antagonists, protagonists, and supporting cast members" (Prasad, 2005, p. 49). 'Staging' refers to individual or group efforts at managing and directing materials and cast members with the purpose of impressing an audience (Prasad, 2005). Finally, the 'performing' aims at enacting the script, but more importantly, how one or more actors handle improvisation when faced with unforeseen circumstances (Prasad, 2005), or as illustrated later on, with contradictions, tension, and ambiguity in the script given to the performers.

3.5. Chapter Summary

In this final part, we provide a brief summary of our methodology.

We have conducted an ethnographic case study where we have taken an abductive approach. For us, this means that we have tried to get as close as possible to the natives and their local context (Prasad, 2005). This is done by conducting 19 semi-structured interviews and five and a half days of 'observer-as-participant' observations in the company's offices in Poland and Sweden.

An abductive approach provides us with a flexibility in the sense that we have not been restrained by a too-narrow focus and approach. On the contrary, we have continuously been guided to different locations by our empirical material and provided with an array of mysteries. Ultimately, the most thought-provoking issue is how to understand *normative control* within this case study.

When analysing our *sources*, we have utilized an alethic hermeneutic approach, meaning that we have 'set out to reveal something hidden' and have continuously moved between whole and its parts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Ricoeur, 2006).

We have looked for 'structures of significance' in our material and ultimately thematized the material around these (Prasad, 2005; Geertz, 1973). We aim to present the reader with a 'thick description' of the local reality of natives in their own voices as much as possible while still providing additional interpretation and context (Prasad, 2005). For our discussion, we have utilized a dramaturgical approach as a framing device and analytical vehicle to address the empirical material from a new angle and raise the level of discussion. Thus, we have ultimately tried to present our empirical material to the reader in a credible and convincing manner that hopefully facilitates additional interpretations and insights.

4. A Narrative of Sources: A Biz-R Experience

In this chapter, we present a narrative and 'thick description' to facilitate for an insight into the intensions and efforts of *normative control* as well as how this is experienced by staff through their sense-making efforts. The narrative consists of stories provided by the staff about their everyday experiences along with our own observations, reflections and interpretations. The material is divided into four thematized parts, which are presented to the right. Each part consists of a number of themes referred to as sub-sections. The chapter concludes with a summary, which provides an overview of the chapter and our findings.

4.1. • The Employee Experience

4.2. • Not Wearing a Mask

4.3. • Dealing with Boredom

4.4. • The Opposite

4.5. • Chapter Summary
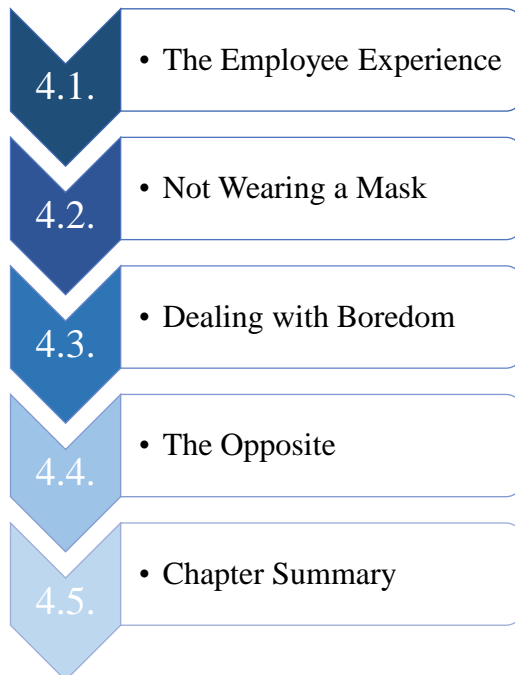
4.1. The Employee Experience

In this part, we illustrate how the *corporate culture* is experienced and implemented by the staff, in what the company refers to as the 'employee experience'. We will discuss this topic in five sub-sections. In the first section, we see how the company attempts to manage the culture. In the second section, we see how the staff reflect upon joining the company as well as on the induction process. In the third section, we introduce the company values and how the staff see them. In the final two sections, we describe the atmosphere of Biz-R.

The Employee Experience

The company is actively working with its *corporate culture* and can be seen to take the concept rather seriously in its efforts to create and maintain a coherent 'employee experience'. As Francis, a member of the senior management team and one of the architects behind the *corporate culture*, who we met in the first chapter, states:

> *We are very heavily centred on the term 'employee experience'. That is our philosophy.*
> *That we are in control of the employee experience and that we need to take responsibility*

and to design it in all ways we can. That you feel that you can understand the whole purpose and feel engaged by the story-telling that we have which ties everything together (Francis, 2017).

While the ambition is clear, there are some parts that call for certain emphasis. We are presented with the scope of the *corporate culture* efforts, as the company sees itself as "in control of the employee experience" and more so, that they are actively attempting to "design it in all ways [it] can". This suggests that the culture is seen as a variable that the company can exercise influence over. The most central way of doing this is presented with the overarching idea behind these efforts; namely to create engagement by having a purpose, and additionally by creating a convincing narrative —'the story-telling'—where all parts should be tied together.

We see the different ways in which the company is attempting to maintain such a narrative, and thus a characteristic culture. These attempts are supported by our observations, where almost all walls inside the offices are painted with the bright colours of the company logo and are covered with humorous quotes, posters and awards. It is apparent that a lot of time and energy has been put into converting the physical workplace into a tangible artefact of the *corporate culture*.

The Accident

Another salient and characteristic theme throughout our interviews is the idea of joining the company as being accidental. This is illustrated by Jess, a junior manager at the Polish office, in her recollection of how she got into the company:

It was kind of an accident, my friend who also works here, he told me that there was a job opportunity. I was in a moment of my life when I was delivering food and [that] job was terrible. So, I gave it a try and it worked out – so a total accident (Jess, 2017).

Jess lets us know that she was referred to the company by a friend.[8] It is interesting to take note of the fact that Jess, through this "accident", was able to escape a "terrible" job. Vic, another co-worker at the Polish office, shares a similar experience:

I don't know actually - maybe it chose me because it was all by accident. I didn't exactly know what they were doing here... (Vic, 2017).

In addition to sharing the view that joining the company was accidental, Vic presents us with an additional layer—namely that he did not even know what the company was doing when he

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[8] It can be mentioned that we are told in our interview with Bobbie (2017) that the company has a referral program where staff receives an emolument for a successful referral.

decided to apply for and subsequently join the company. This is rather characteristic for the Polish office, along with a seeming lack of formal qualifications and escaping some form of unsatisfactory work situation. The lack of formal qualifications is explained by Jess:

We are not hiring only people from informatics studies or something, because you can learn everything here (Jess, 2017).

To put this into a broader context, what we can learn from this statement is that only a rudimentary computer knowledge is required for the vast majority of jobs at the office in Poland —which is supported by our interviews. It can be noted that emphasis is placed on personal fit, interpreted by us as the potential to fit in. The company also applies a work test prior to the interview to assess the candidates' ability to do the actual work. It should also be noted that a successful interview is followed by a three-month probationary period (at the Polish office). Dale, a co-worker who just recently joined the Polish office, recounts his experience from the interview:

They were just searching for people that were friendly and open (Dale, 2017).

As emphasis is primarily placed on personal aspects, it can be noted that practical knowledge comes later, through the utilization of a mentoring system. Newcomers first take part in a two-week induction process, briefly explained by Bobbie, another recent new-comer to the Polish office, as being:

Mainly about the company, culture and how we do things. No technical stuff, just cultural stuff (Bobbie, 2017).

Thus, to summarize the initial skills required can be interpreted as being a personal fit and by understanding the culture and how things are done at the company –interpreted by us as how to behave. Bobbie reinforces this interpretation by adding a somewhat speculative perspective (which may be understood by the rather special circumstances under which the Polish office is operating under):[9]

I never had an argument with anybody, I think they get rid of those people during the interview process (Bobbie, 2017).

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[9] While the Swedish office is quite poorly located which often results in extensive commuting, the Polish office is located at an attractive location near the city center. Additionally, whereas the work in Poland consists of mainly unqualified labor, the Swedish labor market is a bit tougher and the work demands more qualifications which may account for a more troublesome recruitment process for the Swedish office - in terms of securing both competence and a cultural fit.

The Values Are Not Only On The Wall

Furthermore, we are presented with a view of the values as an important and salient part of the *culture* – something that is also reflected in the aforementioned recruitment and induction process. More so, this is something concrete that is truly affecting the people and their daily work. This is explained by Shellie, a co-worker at the Polish office, who draws on his experience when starting at the company:

> *We had a course about the values and I saw that the values are not only on the wall but these values are really in this firm* (Shellie, 2017).

The values are "not only on the walls" but "really in this firm" (Shellie, 2017). It is important to notice the difference. At every office we visit, the values are literally posted on almost every wall. Thus, it is not a metaphor but rather a highly tangible cultural artefact within the company to which Shellie is referring to. The second part, however, is the most interesting. Here, Shellie tells us that the values are real; not just on the walls but something that can be seen throughout the company in people's everyday actions and behaviour. There are several explanations for this, among them, that in addition to the company's core values there are instructions for what employees 'should do' and what is 'okay to do' (Biz-R, 2016).

Furthermore, the company has a yearly reward ceremony where members of the staff receive special recognition and a cash price for having been an ambassador for the culture and the values. In the course of our observations, we found these awards posted on the walls in every office; we interpret them as a tangible symbolization of the ideal employee.

A Friendly, Welcoming and Helpful Atmosphere

The aforementioned efforts seem to pay off; in most of our interviews, people typically describe the atmosphere as friendly, welcoming, and helpful. Charlie, another member of the senior management team, argues that:

> *It is hard not to feel welcome at Biz-R. If there is something that Biz-R does very, very well, it is the culture. It is easy to fit in* (Charlie, 2017).

As we visit the office in Poland, it is indeed a salient phenomenon. Nickie, another new co-worker at the office, shares this general view and adds:

> *Everybody will help you with a smile on his face. It is just a great feeling and it lets you help other people because you know that whenever you will need help, you will get help. So, whenever someone else needs help, you will give them help* (Nickie, 2017).

While it creates a "great feeling" there is also a mutually reciprocal normative element (Nickie, 2017). If one receives help, one should also be ready to offer it to others.

A Funeral Every Day

While the aforementioned experiences seem rather characteristic throughout the company – at a discourse level – our own observations differ when it comes to the office in Sweden. In an interview, Robin, one of the managers at this office, he shares his first impression of the company—an experience that differs from most other accounts, yet is very similar to our own:

> *I remember the first weeks it felt like they had a funeral every day – it was so quiet – it was like "am I the only one working here?" I remember that it felt a bit awkward because you couldn't really walk up to somebody's desk and just say: "hello, how are you?" that would be like an awkward thing to do because everyone would look at you and think "where did he come from?" So, nobody did that* (Robin, 2017).

During our visits to this office, we found the silence truly striking. More important is, however, Robin's use of the word 'they'. It expresses a distancing from himself and the company – suggesting that he, at least initially, did not 'fit in' at Biz-R. Additionally, there seems to be a strong social protocol on how one should interact with people, largely interpreted as not disturbing them. This can be explained by an underpinning assumption of being an introvert company. This is something that Louie, a rather senior co-worker at the office, experiences but does not agree with:

> *I guess HR believes that Biz-R is a very introvert company; everybody is so introvert is what they usually say. I guess a lot of people are very introverted and nerdy and quiet; but my department is more loosened and young. I think a lot of us are also more sociable and actually enjoy speaking with each other - we sometimes joke about it and that we don't really agree (*Louie, 2017).

Here, Louie presents us with a rather severe tension. The company is built around the premise of being an introvert. This creates friction as a large number of staff members, according to Louie, are more sociable and "actually enjoy speaking with each other" (Louie, 2017). The keywords here are 'actually' and 'they', because it is here Louie who accentuates the tension here— namely that that there is a taken-for-granted assumption of people not wishing to be disturbed by social interactions. According to Louie, this assumption is incorrectly reinforced by HR. The cynical remark, hence, expresses a conflict between HR, the alleged introverts, and more sociable staff.

4.2.   Not Wearing a Mask

In this part, we view some of the most salient core principles of the company and how these are experienced and implemented by the staff. This part is also divided into five sub-sections. In the first two, we take a look at the idea of 'not wearing a mask'. In the third part, we contrast this to the rather strict application of a 'no-shoe policy'. In the fourth section, we look at the 'no-speak policy' and its underpinning assumptions. In the final section, we portray the inherent tension between 'just being yourself' while also maintaining a positive and fun atmosphere (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009).

Not Poisoning People

Another core principle within the company is the idea of 'not inventing a work version of yourself' and 'just being yourself' (Biz-R, 2016; c.f. Fleming & Sturdy). However, as Shellie elaborates, we are presented with a somewhat conflicting view:

> *We only need to be ourselves and I think that is very good, because we don't have to poison people like they do at most other firms* (Shellie, 2017).

Here, Shellie presents us with idea that the staff "only needs to be [themselves]". Herein lies a conflict, as the act of just being oneself is seemingly in contrast to adopting and conforming to the core values and the culture. However, this is somewhat ironically explained by the second idea in her statement about not 'poisoning people'. Within its broader context, we interpret it in the following way: if people accept the values as inherently nice (arguably, they are rather self-evidently good),[10] it is not viewed as something that is forced upon them. In the following quote, we see Eddie, a team manager in Poland, largely in agreement with this interpretation:

> *The culture is created in such a way that people agree with you, so as long as they agree and see the culture as something that they are proud of there is no problem* (Eddie, 2017).

Thus, the opposing view that other companies are 'poisoning people', can be seen to facilitate for the company's values depiction as distinctive and good. Their rather self-evidently good nature is strengthened by the comparison and the company gains buy-in, meaning that the staff

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[10] The three core values are: Acceptance, Credibility and Competence. By reviewing their opposites, the picture becomes clearer; thus, as a case in point illustration: Refusal, Absurdity and Incompetence.

accepts them as their own, as ultimately portrayed by Georgie, a co-worker at the office in Sweden:

> *I feel like the values of Biz-R are my values* (Georgie, 2017).

Not Wearing Masks

As mentioned initially, a characteristic and salient theme within the company is 'being yourself' by not being someone else—in other words, by 'not wearing a mask' (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Biz-R, 2016). Francis helps us better understand the basic idea:

> *I would say it's about the tolerance that we have and display towards people that are not, you know, the typical career person. You don't have to invent this external shell that is formal, that you use in your career. Usually, you have your private self and you have your public self and you wear your public self to work and it is a bit tiring to act like you are someone else – this career person that you have invented* (Francis, 2017).

The key here is not being 'the typical career person', while the overall sentiment is one of acceptance. Based on our interviews and observations, we see a deeply held assumption of this being such a bad thing that it would be close to impossible to enact such a 'career identity' within the company. Put differently, the focus is not so much on being oneself but rather on fighting the image of a 'career person', seen as formal, hierarchical, status-oriented, and more importantly, fake – an invention. Our interpretation is that there is an assumption that one cannot truly identify as a *career person* but instead is putting on a show. This is reinforced by Bernie, another co-worker at the Polish office:

> *I don't feel that I go to work and I wear a mask and I go home and leave the mask – there is no fake me here* (Bernie, 2017).

Here, Bernie is able to show that she is the real deal by accentuating that there is no faking – no mask. A similar view is expressed by Jess:

> *All my personality is in here, like literally all of it. Because if I choose to leave some of myself behind the door it would not be honest* (Jess, 2017).

Jess essentially takes Bernie's argument and builds on it. Not only is there no fake Jess, but there cannot be, because it would be dishonest. Her integrity is, thus, reinforced by the idea of not wearing a mask.

The No-Shoe Policy

One of the most salient and bizarre parts of the company culture is the strict application of a 'no-shoe policy'; staff members wears a variety of rather bizarre slippers.[11] Francis elaborates on the idea behind the policy:

> *We need to fight the whole idea about thinking in hierarchy and status. So one thing to take that away, one small measure of many, is that we don't use any shoes in the office. Because when you take off your shoes, right away you become a little less formal – it's a way to take everything down* (Francis, 2017).

The keyword is clear: there is a fight to be fought—hierarchy and status are the enemy and wearing slippers—or at least not wearing shoes—is a way to victory: "a way to take everything down" (Francis, 2017). Below, we see an explanation by Louie of different reactions to the policy, but its strength and strict enforcement within the company are mainly illustrated:

> *It would annoy me very much if we were ever supposed to start wearing shoes indoors. I know my boss thinks it's a horrible thing because she loves wearing shoes indoors and she doesn't want to take them off, but it's a rule here. If you don't take off your shoes people will be like "take off your damn shoes!"* (Louie, 2017).

Louie tells us something rather interesting, namely that the policy – and maintaining an informal atmosphere – is more important than being yourself if there is a conflict between the two values. Louie's boss thinks it is a "horrible thing" and "loves wearing shoes indoors", but the policy prevails: it is "a rule here" and it is clear that leaving one's shoes on would result in enforcement of the policy. As a side note, it is interesting to note that in this scenario it is the co-workers who are forcing a manager to do something, namely, to not wear shoes and to not act formal. Thus, the 'no-shoes policy' can be seen to be effective, as hierarchy and status are quite literally taken down. Thus, this is a clear example of a situation where the cultural norms prevail over the idea of 'just being yourself' (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009).

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11 Some noteworthy themes which we observe include: Hobbits, The Simpsons, Unicorns, and Star Wars.

The No-Speak Policy

We previously touched upon the company's assumption of an introversion. In this part, we see how this is manifested in what Robin refers to as the 'no-speak policy':

> *Sometimes people are here but you cannot really reach them because we have this, if we call it, 'no-speak policy': do not disturb people who are working because they are working and thinking and want to be alone* (Robin, 2017).

We are here presented with a rather contrasting experience compared to the welcoming and helpful experience that most people at the company described as being characteristic in the previous part. Instead, we see a feeling of not being able to reach people. More importantly, we are presented with the underlying assumption behind the policy—it is presumed that people who are working do not want to be disturbed.

In a broader context, there seem to be a taken-for-granted assumption that introverted people demand little external stimuli; instead, the work tasks should provide such stimuli and facilitate an intrinsic motivation. Social interaction or speaking thus interrupts concentration and is therefore prohibited; instead, an in-text messaging called 'Slack' is used. Vic, whom we met in the previous part, reaffirms the policy:

> *We don't accept that some people are feeling too loose and that they are talking too loud or make some loudly conversations. This bothers other people* (Vic, 2017).

Here, Vic confirms the effectiveness of the policy. However, it should be noted that it is not – according to our observations – as strictly enforced at the Polish office. This can be explained by the ambiguity around the core value 'acceptance'. We interpret the word – in the context of the company and more specifically in relation to the 'no-speak policy' – as a way to accommodate introverted people and thus as a way of not disturbing them. More extroverted staff can be seen to interpret the word differently, such as Eddie:

> *People like to work together, maybe there is someone that you think laughs too loud or talks too loud, but at the same time it is nothing that is really a problem. If there is a big poster that says "acceptance" and that you should accept everyone no matter what they do or who they are then that is the idea behind that* (Eddie, 2017).

Eddie interprets the word as an opening for more extroverted people to act as themselves. As this interpretation goes against the generally held beliefs; acceptance can be understood as a tension between 'just being oneself' and the assumption of an introverted company with subsequent norms manifested by the 'no-speak policy'.

Dangerous Attitudes

As we saw in the first part, a lot effort is put into the induction process and finding candidates that fit the company. However, sometimes there are tensions and the atmosphere suffers. Sandy, one of the workers at the Swedish office, illustrates how the company tries to cope with issue of maintaining a fun atmosphere while at the same time being a facilitator for individualism and for people to be themselves:

> *You can be yourself. Everyone is accepting that you are as you are, and I am as I am. We have some people that are not that positive and stuff, but we have decided that we are going to take care of those kinds of problems - where we have felt like they had to work on their attitude because people didn't feel like really great in their environment. So, we have to deal with that. I think it is really dangerous, because one negative person can make a big, big impact in a group; just because one is not really positive and stuff like that. So we deal with these kinds of problems as soon as we can now* (Sandy, 2017).

Here, we clearly spot the conflict of 'being yourself', while at the same time being a cultural fit, where the latter must come out on top in a direct confrontation and power struggle (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). People must "work on their attitude" in order for other people to "feel really great" (Sandy, 2017). Not doing anything about this is simply too dangerous according to Sandy, as one person's negativity can have "a big, big impact" on the group. One way of interpreting this is that the culture is quite fragile, in the sense that it is constantly being reproduced by its actors and according to a certain script—breaking this script may also break the culture. Therefore, in order to safeguard the culture and for people to be "really positive", "negative persons" need to be dealt with as soon as possible (Sandy 2017).

4.3. Dealing with Boredom

In this part, we illustrate different ways in which employees cope with boring tasks. This part is divided into five sub-sections. In the first two sections, we see how social interactions are a way of dealing with boredom. In the third and fourth sections, we see how a lack of direct supervision and perceived autonomy instils commitment among staff members. In the final section, we learn how a sense of purpose can be seen to instil happiness.

Not Killing Yourself Because It Is So Boring

The social aspects seem to be an anomaly in an otherwise supposedly introvert environment, where the staff are assumed to be intrinsically motivated and to embrace tasks that call for focus and for not being disturbed. Yet in the next section, we see that the social element is one of the most important aspects of actually coping with boring and repetitive work tasks, as illustrated by Nickie:

> *It is almost all the same tasks. I am doing the same thing every day for every hour. It actually doesn't get boring thanks to the company [and] the people that are working here. If I would be sitting there lonely and doing this thing every day I would kill myself because it is so boring. You just click and click and click and click and nothing happens, you can listen to the music but that is also boring if you do it for eight hours a day. So it would be killing you if you couldn't talk to other people in here. It doesn't feel like you are locked in a cage and you have to do your job* (Nickie, 2017).

While the essence of what Nickie is conveying is clear, there are some parts that are particularly interesting. Apart from the social element rescuing him from an otherwise tragic fate, the fact that he does not feel like he is "locked in a cage" is interesting (Nickie, 2017). At the office, they sit in open landscapes, which tend to be quite noisy. In an introverted culture with work that requires a lot of focus, one could expect the use of office cubicles to fit well with an introvert culture. However, such cubicles would figuratively—and to an extent literally—be like a cage. A similar view is expressed by Bernie:

> *The work is tedious. Sometimes you don't even know that you are creating the same thing over and over again, because you are at the same time writing to different people and just, you know, conversing – chatting* (Bernie, 2017).

The main difference here is that while Nickie sees his work as unbearable without having social interaction coming to his rescue, Bernie hardly notices a problem in the first place thanks to the conversation. Another difference is that Bernie is referring to 'slack', whereas Nickie seems to need more in-person interaction. However, being social can be seen as a key factor in escaping tedious work.

There are exceptions, however, in the Swedish office, where Robin finds little such escape route. Thus, he questions the underpinning assumption of the 'no-speak policy', namely the introvert culture and the reliance on strict intrinsic motivation:

Sometimes you don't feel like working at your job. Sometimes you just feel like chatting for like two minutes, because no one is one hundred percent efficient on their job. It is impossible to be, you have to relax and get some new input and sometimes that is a bit hard here (Robin, 2017).

Here, we see that Robin is not only unable to escape tedious work, but more so, his work suffers as he is unable to receive new input.

A Second Home

While we have been presented with a rather strict social protocol for interacting, an almost diametrically opposite view of the culture appears in many of our interviews and is exemplified by Nickie here:

Interacting with people in here does not really feel like interacting with co-workers, it is more like working with friends. To be honest I don't feel like I am really working in here. It's just a great feeling to talk with people, to laugh with people, it's not like we are attached to our desks – it almost feels like home (Nickie, 2017).

Here, we can see that the social aspects make Nickie feel as if he is not even working; "it almost feels like home" he says. More so, "not being attached to our desks" is of particular interest as the work in Poland, as mentioned earlier, largely consists of repetitive, intense and quantifiable output which typically comes with various performance measurements and control efforts. The view that such control efforts are vague—at least to the co-workers—are expressed by Bernie in the following statement:

I don't feel like my manager is my boss or something like that... my manager is just my colleague, so we are still working for the same purpose. I don't feel [like] they are bossy or something. No, we are like a family (Bernie, 2017).

We interpret Bernie's statement as a lack of direct supervision and control as well as a feeling of having shared purpose, which instils a strong feeling and sense of belonging: "like a family". In the next section, we will go deeper into the perceived lack of supervision. In the last section, we revisit the expressed sense of purpose.

No Time-Keepers

The perceived lack of supervision and control efforts can be seen in many ways (as illustrated above). One way that is consistently mentioned throughout our interviews is the working hours. Charlie, a member of the senior management team, infers:

People work more than 40 hours per week because they are passionate about their work - they want to deliver (Charlie, 2017).

The staff generally express a similar view. Andy, a rather senior co-worker at the office in Sweden, adds his view:

We really love working with this. Those people who work long hours, they do it because they want to. No one said you have to (Andy, 2017).

At this stage, it should be noted that there is a clear underpinning assumption of overtime as demanded or forced labour beyond what is stipulated in a formal contract—the manager orders the employee to work more. This is not the case here; rather, the employee is seen to be intrinsically driven to work more than what is officially demanded. This may be explained by an assumption of mutual trust. Louie explains:

HR and our bosses don't want to be time keepers; if you do what you are supposed to, then they think it is all good (Louie, 2017).

The keywords here are "don't want to be" and "what you are supposed to", which reinforces our interpretation of a rather taken for granted assumption. This means that as long as you do you should do according to your perception, you are free to do it without any direct control interventions. Additionally, in many of our interviews, it is mentioned that tangible results and expectations are typically vague, non-existent or downplayed.

While most interviewees argue that this relieves them of stress and makes them feel less supervised, the insecurity could also leads to putting in extra effort to make sure that they are doing what they are "supposed to" (Louie, 2017). This interpretation is reinforced by our observation that every office has at least one wall (typically in the corridor leading to the canteen) covered with monitors that are measuring every imaginable result for each country in which the company is operating. Thus, the idea of measurement is not without ambiguity since these highly tangible manifestations of measurement cannot go by unnoticed. Instead, it seems reasonable that the staff knows that the work is meticulously monitored in general, though such control is deemed absent on a more day-to-day operational basis.

Being Your Own Boss

The feeling of not being controlled and thus having freedom is illustrated by Vic:

I think everyone is happy because the firm actually cares about us. So that is why we are happy and with this feeling of not having anyone that is controlling you, not on everyday

work you can have this feeling that you are your own boss. Probably this freedom [stems from the] faith in all employees that our managers have. (Vic, 2017).

Here, Vic is able to feel like he can be his "own boss" and having "freedom", due to the perceived lack of more direct control. Here, a central idea is introduced namely to "have this feeling" which suggests that Vic is aware of the company's control efforts in general – although not on "everyday work". Hence, he is able to construct the feeling of being his own boss through the lack of experienced direct control efforts on a day-to-day level. Within its broader context, the feeling of "freedom and faith" can be interpreted as being given responsibilities and autonomy from management. This is also supported by the following statement from Francis in which he alludes to more direct control efforts and managements' attempts not to use them (although the possibility is always there):

I try to not control people at all and not to control their results, to not give them activities but responsibilities – whole responsibilities. I am always certain that someone who is engaged in the company would fill their own value. They will always fill their time with things that they think are meaningful to the company. (Francis, 2017).

Charlie adds:

I don't need to yell at a team like "this is not enough, you need to get your shit together", the teams are like ten times more disappointed than I am if we miss a deadline. Because they are internally super-passionate about what they do (Charlie, 2017).

We interpret "internally super-passionate" as being intrinsically motivated and as coming from, in part, being given responsibility and autonomy. Bobbie provides us with a similar view:

You have free hands and all tools to do your job – no micromanagement. My feeling, here, is that the managers are working for us and we for them. They are here for helping us to make everything smoother – not like in my previous company (Bobbie, 2017).

Apart from ensuring us that there is no micromanagement within the company, there are two important parts of this statement. First is the comparison to other companies. While this could be dismissed as a common discourse, we will show in the next part that this is a salient and characteristic theme within the company. Second, it once again points out the perceived autonomy as having a "free hand" and "all tools" along with a lack of direct control efforts – 'no micromanagement'.

The Bigger Picture

We experience a rather profound sense of belonging among the staff during our interviews. One reason for this seems to be a strong sense of having a shared purpose. Max, a member of the senior management team, elaborates from a managerial perspective:

> *I think that people can feel being part of Biz-R and that they feel that they do something that is not just going to be a job. I mean that they are doing something bigger. Not just the job. I think that they feel that they do this for something bigger than just earning money* (Max, 2017).

While this is a grand endeavour, the effects are consistent throughout the company and are perhaps best captured by the following statement from Bernie:

> *We are having the same goal: we want to be the best comparison site in the world. Sometimes, it is of course a bit tedious, because we are doing the same things over and over. But I really like the things that I am doing. It gives me the feeling that I am doing something important for someone over the world* (Bernie, 2017).

Here, "doing something bigger" can be understood as helping Bernie overcome his repetitive and tedious work. Going forward, Bobbie, another worker from the Polish office, helps us to better understand these feelings and to put them into context:

> *A lot of people from my previous job would, instantly tell you that what they are doing is shit. It is pointless. It is meaningless. What we are doing is not rocket science, it is just an office job, but when you put a little sense into it – you have the feeling that this is important. In Poland, many people have this feeling that work is just work – of course, it is just work – but you can put a little sense to it and you are a happier person* (Bobbie, 2017).

There are two particularly interesting aspects in Bobbies' statement, apart from reiteration of the importance of having purpose. First, the comparison with people from previous jobs should once again be noted. Second, that if you apply yourself and buy into the vision, you will be a happier person because of it.

4.4. The Opposite

The company can be seen to portray itself in a rather unique and untraditional manner. In this part, we see how employees are painting a distinctive picture of the company by depicting what they argue to be the opposite of what the company is about. Going forward, we will present multiple views on how the staff portrays the company as different from other firms by providing an illustration of the most salient statements, divided into four sub-sections.

Not only about Money

At the end of the previous part, we illustrated how the strong sense of purpose is experienced within the company and in the forthcoming, we see how this is reinforced by contrasting it to an opposite view:

> *If the people at other companies got money for free, they wouldn't go to work. They wouldn't because they don't give a shit about their work. Here, we are creating something, we are creating a service and this service helps people make choice – we really want to help people make their best choice* (Jess, 2017).

As illustrated by Jess, the company can be seen as being progressive and almost philanthropic by contrasting it to its opposite—one that has no vision and a purely financial rationale. However, simply having a vision is not enough, as she elaborates:

> *Other companies do not understand that they need to make people feel fine – feel that they matter. They earn money and then [their managers] think that they will work effectively. The company does not care how they feel, they have to work to earn their money – just work and that is all – this is what we are trying to change in here. The people are first, their opinions and their feelings are first and then they work, they are not pushed to work, they are not forced to work. They just want to because they know they matter* (Jess, 2017).

Jess's elaboration tells us three things. First, peoples' feelings need to be targeted. They need to "feel fine" and "feel that they matter", that they come "first", suggesting that, in this context, money is second. Second, by targeting the thoughts and feelings of staff, more direct control efforts are not needed – staff will work because they want to, not because they have to. Lastly, we are told that the company is on a quest to change this – to make a difference.

Not a Chinese Factory

The work is quite tedious and repetitive and various techniques have been presented as ways of overcoming this. Moreover, the staff in Poland engage in a lot of work tasks that were previously performed in Sweden but relocated to Poland as the company grew. Alex, a recently hired co-worker at the Polish office, presents his view on the work and its supervision by contrasting it with other polish companies:

> *Normally, your boss tells you what to do. You need to work eight hours. You need to work like in a Chinese factory. Here it is not like that, it is totally different. No one is observing you. You just need to do your work without any problems and without stress. I have seen a lot of other jobs and hear a lot of my friends like: "stress, stress, boss, boss, more, more, you need to do more". This culture is more about quality* (Alex, 2017).

In our view, the focal point here is that the illustration of strong control in 'Chinese factory' facilitates a reinforced view of the company as not being controlling—as "totally different". We are told that "no one is observing you", which we interpret as a perceived lack of direct control, which once again gives a more distinctive sense of freedom. While the statement can be understood as a way of differentiating the company from others it also serves to reinforce and justify the view that the office in Poland is not an offshoring effort from the head office in Sweden with a strict focus on quantity. Rather, it is about quality, as is strongly conveyed by Jess:

> *We matter here, we are not only clicking data base for someone in Sweden but we are responsible for what the user at our site actually sees* (Jess, 2017).

Not Nasty Guys Who Punishes People

Earlier, the relationships between managers and staff are portrayed as a friendly. Here, we this view being reinforced by depicting managers in other companies as nasty guys and cops:

> *There is another office in this building and when I walk there I can see computers and cubicles and people are sitting in them, and there is a manager walking like some nasty guy who punishes them for talking or you know turning their head around or something like that... I really didn't want to work at such a place, I hate this company thing – so, it was very different in here* (Jess, 2017).

The friendly, welcoming, and family-like atmosphere is reinforced by the villainous portrait of the other companies—the absence of a nasty guy who punishes people makes the company look better in comparison to—or "very different" from—the other companies. This is also rather

similar to Nickie's feeling of 'not being locked in a cage', which we saw earlier. A similar view is expressed by Shellie:

The relationship is more friends than boss. That is a very big difference form other Polish firms where the boss is something like a cop. He says that and you must do that and he can be mean to you, but I have never seen something like that here (Shellie, 2017).

Both statements can be seen to represent an opposite view of what is consistently described as typical for the culture and management within the company. While we see no reason to doubt these experiences per se, what is interesting to us is how these narratives act as a way of reinforcing the image of the company as distinctively better in comparison.

Hated Going to Work Every Morning

At a broad level, Sandy depicts what the company, according to her, is not, by contrasting it to her former job:

We pretty much didn't know each other's names. They were clocking in every second. It was a sell company and I think everyone was really focused: goals, goals, goals; sell, sell, sell. I hated going to work every morning. There was a dress code - you couldn't wear that, you should wear that. You felt really strict. That is why it is so different here (Sandy, 2017).

Here, we see Sandy refer back to her previous employment as a distinct example of what a job should not be like, accentuated by her saying that she "hated going to work". This is a rather characteristic depiction. What is particularly interesting here is that rather than talking about how the company is actually different, we are provided only with a distinctive image of what it is not—which reflects the company in a more positive light. Put into context, the company appears to be informal, friendly, and without strict control efforts.

4.5. Chapter Summary

This last part aims at providing the reader with a brief overview of what has been presented in this chapter, in order to smoothen the transition to the next chapter.

Throughout this chapter, we illustrate how the intentions behind the *corporate culture* along with its control efforts is experienced by staff through their sense-making. Upon doing so, we are presented with a view of the company as having a friendly and helpful environment – a

family. Responsibility combined with a perceived lack of more direct control efforts, has been equated to 'becoming one's own boss'. Boring and repetitive work tasks are dealt with through social interaction and a sense of purpose. A feeling of togetherness and a distinctiveness are instilled by the comparison with other firms, where the company and the staff ultimately come out on top.

All this, let us view the company as an "[…] culture-producing [phenomenon]" (Louis, 1980; Siehl & Martin, 1981; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Tichy, 1982; Martin & Powers, 1983 cited in Smircich, 1983, p. 344). As Francis (2017) said earlier: "That is our philosophy. That we are in control of the employee experience and that we need to take responsibility and to design it in all ways we can. […]". To illustrate that statement even more, we refer to the 'Cultural Dynamics Model' of
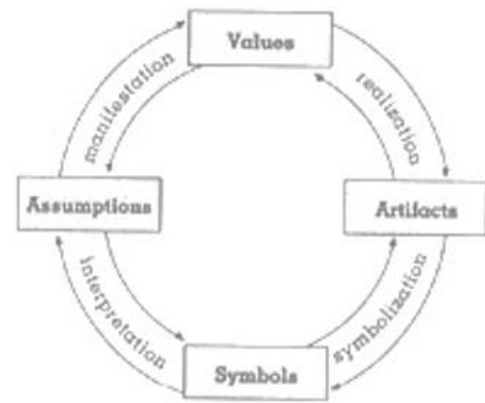
Figure 3: The Cultural Dynamics Mode (Hatch, 1993, p. 660)

Hatch (1993), shown on the right. In this chapter, we have illustrated how assumptions, such as "having to fight the idea of hierarchy and status" (Francis, 2017) has been manifested as a value through the 'no shoe policy' realized through its enforcement and turned into a physical artefact – not wearing shoes. More specifically, as quirky slippers are used instead of shoes, they act as a strong symbolic act of a flat, fun and informal organization. Thus, it acts as "a way to take everything down" (Francis, 2017). This interpretation and processual loop is reinforced by the statement from Louie in which he draws upon an experience in which his manager who "loves wearing shoes" is forced to take them off – thus, quite literally taking hierarchy and status down (Louie, 2017).

Yet, the aforementioned is just an example of many - colourful walls, funny posters and not having a dress code help to facilitate for an atmosphere in line with the aim of the 'employee experience' and thus, serves the purpose to produce a distinct culture. This distinctiveness is many times reinforced by viewing it in light of its opposite. Furthermore, we have pointed at the tension and contradictory element of 'just being yourself', to maintain a strong culture and how *normative control* efforts can be seen to come out on top in a direct confrontation and power struggle (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Hence, we will go deeper into the process of *normative control* in the next chapter.

5. A Processual View on Normative Control

In this chapter, we illustrate the *normative control* efforts that we see throughout Biz-R along with the staff's sense-making efforts and role enactments. We will dig deeper into our empirical material and illustrate the effects, limitations and unforeseen consequences of the company's management of the *corporate culture* in its *normative control* efforts.

    In the first part, we explain our reasoning for the overall approach of this chapter. In the second part, we illustrate how the company provides the staff with a stage through the *corporate culture* and socialization efforts. The third part illustrates how the staff try to make sense of the script despite tensions, contradictions and ambiguity. In the fourth part, we show how an *organizational anti-identity* is constructed to justify and legitimize such contradictions and in the final part, we argue that this construction facilitates for the company to emerge as a saviour. Lastly, we summarize the chapter.

- 5.1. • A Dramaturgical Approach
- 5.2. • Setting the Stage
- 5.3. • Enacting the Script
- 5.4. • The Antagonist is Introduced
- 5.5. • A Saviour Emerges
- 5.6. • Chapter Summary
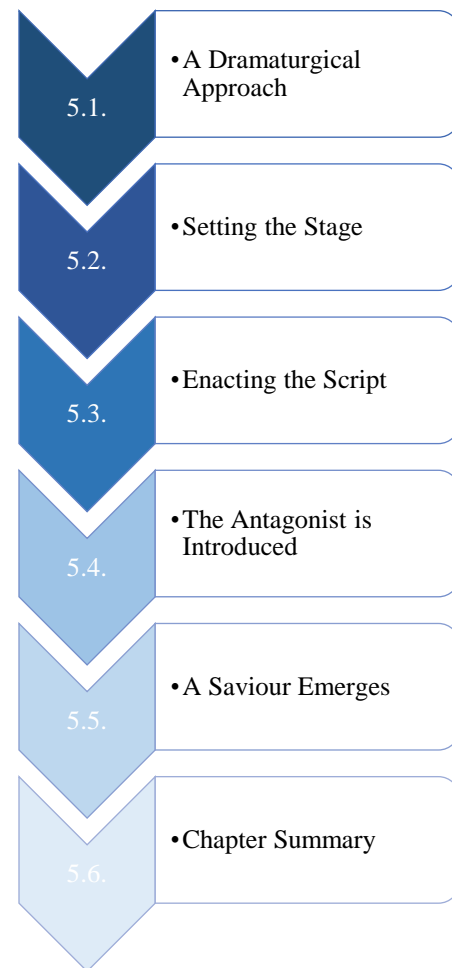
5.1. A Dramaturgical Approach

In the forthcoming, we present our over-arching interpretations about the underlying assumptions of how the *corporate culture* and its subsequent control. By utilizing an allegorical dramaturgy as a framing device, we address the 'frontstage' and 'backstage' of the company's efforts of running the show (Goffman, 1959). We illustrate this along with how the staff engage in sense-making efforts and *organizational identity work*. Thus, we aim to provide for a deeper understanding and subsequently, facilitate for additional insights on *normative control*.

First of all, let us recall the definition of *normative control* that is used throughout our thesis as "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions" (Kunda, 1992, p. 11). Throughout the previous chapter, we illustrate such efforts by the company; the reader may recall how

Francis (2017) conveys that: "we are in control of the employee experience and that we need to take responsibility and to design it in all ways we can". We argue that these efforts of controlling the 'employee experience' have been rather efficacious as the staff generally express their statements in ways that match the target culture – the 'employee experience'. We, therefore, believe that it is important to go deeper into our interpretations to facilitate for a more profound insight than those which are provided at face value or to describe individual parts rather than the whole.

For this purpose, we will view the company by drawing on an allegory of seeing the *corporate culture* and the *normative control* efforts as a movie production. In this framing device the company can be seen as creating a movie. Thus, parallels are made, such as with the company creating a set, providing a script and casting actors. The staff on the other hand, can be seen to enact these scripts as they engage in various roles. Thus, in these roles, the staff construct their reality, and in turn, reality constructs them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Hence, while they perceive themselves to be in control as they enact their roles, they may also be seen as actors following a script (c.f. Wilmott, 1993). This idea which is well supported by the company itself as it, according to Francis, expresses its vision for the culture:

> *In a good science-fiction movie you don't sit there and think about how they made the décor or how they have made certain effects, you just accept it, you accept the story as it is without trying to see the story behind it and how it is actually mechanically being done. That is what we strive for, something that feels like there is an atmosphere and everything ties it together; that everything fits in a logical pattern* (Francis, 2017).

As we go further, we portray our interpretation of the story and address the enactments of the corporate culture — how it ties together and how it is "mechanically being done" (Francis, 2017). Thus, while we use individual roles and scenes in this allegorical movie production, our main focus and aim are to address the underlying script and the story as a whole.

5.2. Setting the Stage

In this section, we illustrate how the company engages in socialization efforts in the creation of the physical working environment, hiring and induction process, and the *corporate culture* itself. We do this through the allegorical use of drawing parallels to setting the stage, casting the actors and providing a script.

Setting the Stage

In the previous chapter, we illustrated various ways in which the company sets out to create a coherent narrative in what it calls the 'employee experience'. The company can be seen as setting the stage through the construction of the workplace as a cultural artefact, in which the enactment of the *corporate culture* is to be played out. Colourful walls, funny posters, casual clothing and quirky slippers serve to instil an atmosphere of an accepting and friendly work place. The corporate culture is thus, initially, best understood as something that Biz-R has, rather than as something they are (c.f. Smircich, 1983).

Casting

Starting from the beginning – pre-production – Ouchi (1980) argues that some companies are especially focused on hiring young, inexperienced workers to socialize them towards the organizations objectives. This is something we see clearly at Biz-R. Candidates conduct a work test as a first step in the recruitment process in order for the company to assess their ability to adequately perform the work tasks. Having managed this test successfully, candidates engage in a selection process (interview) to convey their personal fit to the company. If successful, they take part in a two-week high-intensity socialization process (the induction).

Providing the Script

Here, the normative framework – the script – is presented through the culture book in which the corporate values and explanations as to how things are done at the company are provided. It explains and illustrates how to adopt and enact the *corporate culture* and as such provides the staff with a script for how to act. Additionally, purpose is drilled into the candidates as they are expected to develop a passion for the product and for customer satisfaction (c.f. Wilmott, 1993). After this process, new employees receive a mentor (in addition to their manager). The mentors' task is (a) to make sure that the new employee does things correctly[12] and (b) to show him or her how things are done at the company. This is largely interpreted by us as how to behave and act. If new employees show that they can do the work and act in accordance to the corporate culture, they may become regular employees after the initial three-month probationary period. The employees may then progressively gain more *practical autonomy,* herein referred to as self-direction, within a predefined scope and course of actions (Willmott, 1993).[13]

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[12] The system that the staff are operating on has various levels of administrator rights. New employees are at the first level, which means that anything they enter into the system has to be approved by their mentor.

[13] The final step without moving vertically within the organization is full administrator rights within the system and becoming a mentor to others.

In addition, it is interesting to point out that the work itself would not inherently need *normative control* efforts, as neither it is highly ambiguous nor is the work context particularly complex, wherefore a direct from of control such as output control perhaps would perhaps be more appropriate (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Barker, 1993). However, through the creation of a seemingly higher purpose and provision of seemingly unique employee benefits, the staff can be seen to express feelings of being part of something bigger and being valued.

Just Being Yourself

From our perspective – given how the stage is set, notably, the hiring of young staff and how company values are literally on almost every wall along with a thorough induction process and mentorship – the social milieu and the ability to critically explore competing values and alternative standpoints is limited (Wilmott, 1993). Having a strong set of core values when exercising *normative control* is crucial, yet when combined with the idea of 'just being yourself' or rather 'not inventing a work version of yourself' it creates ambiguity (Biz-R, 2016; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). While Fleming & Sturdy (2009) argue that the latter, referred to as *neo-normative control,* should come out on top in a confrontation with the core values, our research suggests that the self is rather suppressed in order to accommodate for the core values in a direct power struggle. The authentic self is, thus, rather a reflection of identity work than an expression of neither authenticity, 'micro-emancipation' (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) nor 'existential empowerment' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Rather, the combination of *normative control* and *neo-normative control* can be seem to instead take an even firmer grip of the individual and the identity. This may set limitations for the company, as it may result in a diversity of thought (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009).

5.3.   Enacting the Script

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) concept of a 'frontstage' and 'backstage'; the discourse around the corporate culture can be seen here in all its glory as a frontstage performance, whereas we are often presented with contradictions, tensions and ambiguity backstage. Thus, we now turn to our view of the process that goes on behind the curtains and staff sense-making of conflicting views.

Getting into Character

In Chapter 4, we looked at some of the underpinning assumptions of Biz-R, such as having an introverted culture with subsequent assumptions of a quietness being preferred by the staff. This assumption is manifested in the 'no-speak policy' and turned into a norm. However, as illustrated, the underpinning assumption is not always shared by the staff. Additionally, the underpinning assumptions of hierarchy and status as an enemy in a war fought by the strict application of the 'no-shoe policy' can be seen to lead to suppressions of one's self-expressions. These rather strong assumptions and manifestation are a cause for ambiguity, as the staff enact their roles, while the strength of the *corporate culture* simultaneously goes against the idea of 'just being yourself' (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Thus, as the provided script takes precedence over being oneself, identity work may be needed as the individual is faced with the conflict of being him- or herself while simultaneously having to adopt to and enact the script of *corporate culture*. As wearing a mask, or faking, is highly frowned upon, the performance must be genuine at least be perceived as such.

Contradictions

There are two rather contradictory parts of the *corporate culture* that acts as a breeding ground for ambiguity and tension. The first being the core value of 'acceptance' and the second being the company's core principle of 'not inventing a work version of themselves' (Biz-R, 2016). We have previously illustrated how the *corporate culture* comes out on top in a direct power struggle between the core values and the idea of 'just being yourself' (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Yet, what is of particular interest is staff's sense-making efforts around these contradictions. One explanation is that the self becomes tied to the *corporate culture* through socialization efforts. However, the ambiguity around acceptance sometimes makes it difficult to know how one should act as many principles and values have a variety of connotations and meanings that seem to differ between the company and its staff. The 'no-speak policy', for instance, is built around the assumption of introverted staff members and thus, 'acceptance' should be understood as being accepting of introverts and their need for quietness and focus. Yet, for extraverted staff who want to express themselves and who like it 'a bit louder' acceptance is interpreted the opposite way.

Tensions

Thus, while strong value statements and principles can be seen to facilitate for a distinctive *corporate culture*, they simultaneously present us with certain limitations—namely that their strength and distinctiveness combined with the ambiguity in their meaning and connotations

may facilitate for rebellious acts - tensions. Thus, possibly producing sub-cultures within the company. However, the ambiguity around them – while possibly being problematic – may also be helpful in this sense. Values such as 'Credibility', 'Acceptance' and 'Competence' can also be seen to facilitate the cynical expressions of rebellious acts, which—contrary to its purpose of distance one from the *corporate culture*—rather serves to strengthen the culture through the idea of 'being yourself' while one is de facto enacting the values (Biz-R, 2016; c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). The social milieu and opposing values are repressed through the strength of the culture and socialization, Louie (2017), for instance, claims that he is not a nerd and that he and his colleagues sometimes joke about the company labelling them as such. While this can be seen as an act of rebellion and emancipation, it could also be seen as strengthening the *corporate culture* as it shows the 'acceptance' within the company (c.f. Kunda, 2006).

The Director Steps In

While there is room for interpretation and acceptance, there are also various control efforts in place. Apart from more subtle hints at control, one may recall Sandy (2017) arguing that dangerous attitudes need to be dealt with promptly. At a broader level, these 'dangerous attitudes' can be understood as acts of rebellion, or other acts, that go outside of the scope and framework of the *corporate culture*. Thus, as long as one stays within these confines, there is acceptance and one can 'be oneself'. However, if one goes too far outside of the script, the entire performance – the *corporate culture* – risks falling apart as it is rather fragile. This makes it too dangerous to allow for dissent outside of the scope of the cultural framework.

However, as one becomes subjected to various regulation, while simultaneously told that one 'has to be oneself', *identity work* is needed as it is reasonable to believe that some 'cognitive dissonance' is being caused by these contradictory messages (Biz-R, 2016). Thus, in many of our interviews, the staff present rather conflicting views as they express concerns about certain elements within the company. For instance, work tasks and the quiet atmosphere are brought up as concerns, though feelings of gratitude are expressed in close connection to such concerns, such as pointing out that it feels 'like home', 'being part of a family', and 'doing something meaningful'. While these constructions can be seen only as a discourse in the frontstage performance, we believe they also represent deeper identity work 'backstage'.

Ambiguity and Plot Holes

Such backstage work can be understood as sense-making efforts in relation to various 'plot holes'—i.e. gaps or contradictions relating to the frontstage performance (Goffman, 1959). These need scrutiny, as we are presented with rather unpleasant stories about the work itself,

while simultaneously being presented with contradicting views of gratitude and happiness. The reader may, for instance, recall Nickie's (2017) recount of almost 'killing himself' because of the boring work if it had not have been for the social interaction. This interaction makes Nickie (2017) express that it 'almost feels like home'; he expresses this gratitude to the company. This illustrates a rather peculiar paradox since the social interaction that helps the staff perform their jobs without 'killing themselves' is simultaneously forbidden by the culture through the 'no-speak policy'. Thus, these tensions and contradictions around strong *normative control* along with the idea of 'not inventing a work version of oneself' can be interpreted as a source for 'cognitive dissonance'.

5.4.   An Antagonist Is Introduced

In this part, we draw upon the 'cognitive dissonance' and argue that the staff, by holding up a *negative mirror* and creating an *organizational anti-identity,* are able to justify the identity work that is exercised to maintain a congruent view of the self and one's place in the company (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Additionally, the *organizational anti-identity* enables the *corporate culture* to be seen as more distinct and positive in comparison which instils gratitude among the staff. Hence, this part is divided into three sections—*the negative mirror*, *the antagonist emerges,* and *the organizational anti-identity.*

The Negative Mirror

As mentioned in Chapter 3, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how social reality is being constructed. Thus, through the staff's sense-making efforts, we see them as being engaged in 'typification' (and 'objectification') efforts where they construct different roles for themselves and others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966 in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). As we have illustrated, everyday experiences are given meaning through typification. We see this in objects such as the lack of shoes in favour of slippers, which becomes constructed as a powerful artefact, but more so in the typification of others—within and outside of the company. Thus, the staff can be seen to typify their everyday experiences in a way that shines a positive light onto the company, most notably by depicting relationships with managers and colleagues and the atmosphere as 'more friends than boss', 'like a family' and 'just like home' respectively. Moreover, other companies, managers, and former colleagues are typified and depicted in a way that aims to represent an opposing picture. Hence, we are presented with unpleasant stories

and unflattering examples in the staff's portrayal of 'the opposite', which typically consists of rather intrusive control efforts, which in turn reaffirm the idea of the company's lack of such direct control efforts in the present company.

Through the *negative mirror,* an *organizational anti-identity or* an antagonist is constructed and the view of oneself and one's social reality is positively reinforced in comparison (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Thus, we define *organizational anti-identity* as a sense-making effort through which the staff construct an organizational 'out-group' making the own organization, in contrast, appear as an 'in-group' and hence, as superior and distinct (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011; Ashforth & Mael, 1989)[14]. Ordinary norms such as the lack of a dress code and not wearing shoes are infused with meaning by viewing them in light of strict applications of the opposite at other companies. Additionally, for most of the staff, 'being yourself' is about 'not wearing a mask'. By not wearing a suit to work, but rather one's regular clothes, one is able to truly act as him- or herself through a feeling of being genuine and honest by holding up a mirror of the opposite as fake and dishonest (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011).

The *negative mirror*, thus, facilitates a distinctive comparison through which a sense of freedom, happiness and 'being oneself' is instilled. The norm of not having a dress-code—which is arguably a non-issue in most companies—is reconstructed as a powerful cathartic symbol. Similarly, the norm of not wearing shoes, is reconstructed as a powerful symbolic act in the war against hierarchy, status, and being formality. As this is heavily implied and occasionally expressed as being 'fake' and 'dishonest', through these rather mundane efforts, the staff are able to 'be themselves'. Catharsis is thus offered, as there is no need to pretend or fake, i.e. to wear a mask. Thus, by not pretending to be something different, it may be argued that one is able to 'be oneself'.

The Antagonist Emerges

However, there are control efforts in place and there are occasions when one cannot be oneself; instead one should rather actively try to present oneself as enacting the core values to the greatest extent possible (as ultimately illustrated by the award ceremony where staff is priced for their embodiment of the core values). Thus, sense-making efforts and justification are needed as the sensation of being controlled while simultaneously 'just being oneself' may create conflict and 'cognitive dissonance'. Hence, to legitimize control efforts, the staff construct an *organizational anti-identity* through the *negative mirror* to maintain a congruent experience

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[14] This differs from corporate efforts where companies systematically try to instil a counter image through various sense-giving or sense-breaking efforts (c.f. Pratt, 2000).

(c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Here, other companies and their presumed management techniques and control efforts are illustrated in some cases as evil and far-reaching. Thus, an antagonist is created in order for staff to make sense of the script.

The imagery of evil managers who engage in bullying and micro-management legitimizes the rather subtle control efforts exercised at the company in comparison. Control efforts are, thus, justified by viewing them considering more exhaustive control efforts, notably, direct control efforts. This is particularly salient in the allusion of 'not being locked in a cage' (Nickie, 2017) and the manager as 'a cop' (Shellie, 2017). The company's purpose is also reinforced by the recollection of other people who are 'only working for money', as they lack purpose. In all these recurring themes, the company is able to come out on top. Its actions are justified and legitimized when presented alongside the *negative mirror*.[15] Thus, as stated previously, the company can emerge as distinct, valued, and superior in comparison; doubts about the culture's legitimacy, thus, become repressed or even eliminated (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011).

Furthermore, a sense of freedom is instilled by the sensation of 'not being controlled', though the actual freedom consists of rather *practical autonomy* within a limited, narrow scope and more importantly, in the context of doing tedious and repetitive work.

The Organizational Anti-identity

As mentioned, the *negative mirror* helps staff to engage in the purpose of the company and as the work is often tedious and mundane, having a strong and engaging purpose becomes important. Something that was strongly conveyed by Jess (2017): "If the people at other companies got money for free they wouldn't go to work. They wouldn't because they don't give a shit about their work". The *organizational anti-identity* acts as a reinforcement and justification as she continues: "Here, we are creating something. We are creating a service and this service helps people make choices. We really want to help people make their best choices" (Jess, 2017).

The construction of the *organizational anti-identity* through the negative mirror is essential as the purpose is not inherently that convincing; rather, one must engage in making it convincing. The *organizational anti-identity* helps as the thought of not having a purpose becomes frightening—who am I and why am I doing this job if not for the purpose? This suggest that the staff must, to some extent, engage in what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) termed

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[15] It is difficult for us to ascertain whether this image is fictional or reality, but based on how often it is brought up in Poland, it seems reasonable to assume that there is at least some evidence to support it. Regardless, this is beyond the scope of this illustration as we are here concerning ourselves with the construction as such and what it entails on a broader level.

'Functional Stupidity', namely to engage in unreflexively thinking how to not get into trouble. As Bobbie (2017) puts it: "you can put a little sense to it and you are a happier person". However, strong cultural claims and value-laden symbols and manifestations—along with a discourse of gratitude—could make it hard to question some aspect of the culture and control efforts. Here, the *organizational anti-identity* provides comfort as the company wins in comparison to the image portrayed in the *negative mirror* (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011).

5.5. A Saviour Emerges

In this final part, we show how *normative control* efforts become justified and legitimized. The part is divided into two sections. First, we illustrate how the company can emerge as a saviour through the *organizational anti-identity,* which in itself is turned into myth and becomes institutionalized. In the second part, we demonstrate how this socially constructed reality can be seen to also construct the individual as a continuous loop. This is instilled through socialization efforts as the show and the saviour are presented to an audience.

A Saviour Emerges

As the outside world—through the construction of the *negative mirror*—becomes filled with dangers and difficulties, the company emerges as a as a distinctive opposite—a 'saviour'— defined as one that rescues others "from danger or difficulty" (Oxford University Press, 2017b, para. 1). Thus, the company's *normative control* efforts gain justification and are legitimized by the creation of the *organizational anti-identity,* which turns into myth and subsequently, becomes institutionalized. The staff can reach salvation through identity work, where the self is regulated to comply with, or conform to, the *corporate culture*. As such, through this backstage work, the frontstage performance is ensured. Thus, by accepting the premise, one can feel fulfilled by the purpose. One gains freedom by *practical autonomy* and by accepting *normative control* in the form of direct control efforts, as no control. One may gain happiness through a sense of belonging—becoming 'like a family' and feeling 'like being at home'. This calls for a friendly, helpful and welcoming attitude along with suppression of doubt, conflicting views and negative expressions because if one accepts the story as it is – one can reach salvation. If the premise is rejected, one is likely to feel a lack of engagement and belongingness. Such non-conformist behaviour is likely to result in additional *normative control* and socialization efforts, and ultimately to an exit from the company.

All Is Well That Ends Well

The premise is that there are dangers out there and the company provides escape, catharsis, and ultimately salvation. Georgie's story, for instance, is interesting. Georgie (2017) told us that he had previously been working at a company which he despised and was looking for new opportunities to be himself (a story that is rather representative at large). He found the company and actively put in effort to become a part of it for this reason. Later, when reflecting on the values he concluded by stating: "I feel like the values of Biz-R are my values*"* (Georgie, 2017). Georgie had finally found salvation. However, as we learnt in the beginning of the chapter, the trick is to not have to think about the story behind or how it is mechanically being done, but rather just to accept the story as it is. Thus, if one submits to the values and the culture one may reach salvation.

One can also offer salvation to others through mentoring and referring efforts. The reader may here recall what we refer to in the previous chapter as 'the accident', where Jess recalls how she started at the company by being referred by a friend: "I was in a moment of my life when I was delivering food and that job was terrible and I said yeah "I'll give it a try" and it worked out – so a total accident" (Jess, 2017*)*. Thus, while the act of creating the *organizational anti-identity* facilitates for a legitimization of the control efforts, the company's emergence as a saviour helps institutionalize them.

A rather unforeseen consequence that strikes us is the strongly held and conveyed belief that being yourself is about not wearing a mask, i.e. not being fake. More specifically, it is held that formal identities and conveyed status are inherently bad and dishonest. Thus, not being formal or wearing a mask facilitates a flatter hierarchy and less status within the company – at least so it can be seen to be argued. However, we argue that there is an additional aspect of this kind of *identity work* that must be taken seriously, namely the mask as a protective coating for oneself (c.f. Goffman, 1959). As the company's efforts can be seen to remove such a protective coating, one can, for instance, draw upon Kaulingfreks (2005) or Wilmott (1993) and argue whether it is even moral to engage in such pursuits. However, we do not engage in such emancipatory efforts per se; rather, we see the company's efforts to combine business with private life rather than as a cynical effort to commoditize identity. However, a risk is that while the company may emerge as a saviour, it may also surface as an executioner if such measures are implemented, in case of redundancy, for instance. In such a scenario, the staff may risk severe identity crashes if they are found to have invested too much of themselves or merged their identity with the company in other ways (c.f. Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

5.6. Chapter Summary

In this last part, we summarize the chapter, end the discussion, and present our concluding remarks.

In this chapter, we discuss the company's *normative control* efforts and how these are experienced by the staff through their sense-making efforts. We have done so by utilizing an allegorical dramaturgy as a framing device – namely, by broadly viewing these efforts as similar to a movie production. Thus, we have illustrated how the stage is set by efforts of turning the *corporate culture* into a tangible artefact in a number of ways.

Additionally, we illustrated the company's hiring- and induction process and alluded it to the casting of actors as well as the provision of scripts. These scripts, as we argue, are, however, breeding pools for ambiguity, tension, and contradictions, which call for *identity work* to maintain a congruent experience. We illustrate how the staff hold up a *negative mirror* backstage, through which an *organizational anti-identity* can emerge frontstage. The *organizational anti-identity* helps justify and legitimize the conflicting views and more so it enables the company to emerge as a saviour, which provides insight to one of the most salient mysteries that has continued to elude us—namely, how we can understand the happiness that is being expressed by employees while simultaneously expressing unpleasant stories about their actual work tasks.

In summary, we illustrate how the company engages in *normative control* efforts and how these are experienced by the staff and argue around the effects, limitations and unforeseen consequences of these efforts.

6. Conclusion

In this final chapter, we conclude our research findings and answer our overarching research question. We do this by referring to our research objective. We then conclude our research contribution and finally, provide implications for future research and an epilogue.

6.1.	• Research Objective
6.2.	• Research Contribution
6.3.	• Future Research
6.4.	• Epilogue

6.1. Research Objective

In this part, our research question is reintroduced and our purpose is reiterated.

The objective of this thesis is to provide both the business- and academic spheres with new insights into *normative control* in practice; more specifically, by viewing it as an ongoing process. This is being done through an ethnographic case study at an – until now – unstudied company with claims of a distinctive *corporate culture*. Additionally, we pay attention to the staff's sense-making efforts within the context of *normative control*. Moreover, it is our ambition to facilitate a greater understanding of *normative control* considering its effects, limitations and unforeseen consequences it may entail. Thus, we have formulated the following research question(s):

I.   How can *normative control* be understood as an ongoing process consisting of corporate intentions, practical control efforts, and subsequent sense-making?

    a.   What broader insights can we provide in terms of effects, limitations, and unforeseen consequences of *normative control*?

6.2. Research Contribution

In this part, our research question is concluded and broad insights are outlined by illustrating *normative control* as an ongoing process and by drawing upon plausible effects, limitations and unforeseen consequences of *normative control* in practice.

The Ongoing Process of Normative Control

In our thesis, we define *normative control* as "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions" (Kunda, 1992, p. 11). The company's attempts to exercise such control are clearly expressed by Francis (2017), both in reference to the 'employee experience' and additionally, in his analogy of the *corporate culture* as a good 'science-fiction movie'. While the former can be understood as attempting to control all aspects of the 'employment experience'—understood in part as turning the physical workplace into a tangible artefact of the *corporate culture* that appeals to the thoughts and feelings of the staff. The latter, can be understood as making it subtle and making all individual parts of the *corporate culture* fit together in a logical and coherent way. Thus, the greatest trick the company has pulled of through its *normative control* efforts is to convince staff that it does not exist.

Hence, through socialization efforts—mainly through an intricate recruitment and induction process and mentorship—the staff is socialized into the *corporate culture*. By holding up a *negative mirror*, contradictions, tensions and ambiguity are justified. This also serves to establish an *organizational anti-identity,* by which *normative control* efforts are legitimatized, as the company ultimately comes out on top in a comparison and thus, emerges as a saviour which results in institutionalization of the *corporate culture*.

While we would argue that this construct is initially a social construct by the staff; as it is institutionalized, it becomes a social reality which in turn constructs staff as the process of socialization continues in the repeated loop that is created (see figure 4). Therefore, although the company sets the stage, selects the actors and provides the script; it is ultimately the employees' performance and ability to make sense of it that determines its success. Thus, this joint processual

Figure 4: A continuous loop of Normative Control (c.f. Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

view calls for the employee perspective to be taken seriously.

The Effects of Normative Control

In our opinion, the most salient effect related to the exercise of *normative control* at Biz-R is the happiness, gratefulness and engagement that the staff express despite performing tedious and repetitive work tasks. We argue that this contributes to the *corporate culture* along with instilling staff with a sense of purpose and the idea of 'being yourself' (Fleming & Sturdy,

2009). However, the contradictory elements of *normative control* and *neo-normative control* can be seen to cause 'cognitive dissonance' and call for *identity work*. Thus, through the employees' construction of an *organizational anti-identity,* the company's control efforts along with contradictions and inconsistencies are legitimized. Through the image depicted from the *negative mirror,* the outside world appears to be filled with danger and difficulties. Thus, the company is able to emerge as a saviour and as distinctively good in comparison, which seems to result in loyal and grateful employees (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). An interpretation that is additionally supported by low staff turnover and awards for being a 'good employer' despite of paying average salaries.

The attempt to exercise *neo-normative control* in combination with *normative control* and a distinctive *corporate culture* can be seen to have two salient effects. Firstly, it can be seen to make it possible for staff to experience autonomy, 'freedom' and 'being themselves' as well as to rebel against parts of the culture while however, de facto acting within the confines of the cultural framework (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Secondly, the idea of 'just being oneself' simultaneously can be seen to cause ambiguity and occasionally makes values and principles appear contradictory and thus facilitates for tensions. While staff copes with such tensions through the *organizational anti-identity*, we argue, that actual freedom and 'being oneself' is illusionary as it is strongly dictated by the *corporate culture* and various control efforts. It does however, through the creation of an organizational anti-identity, seem to strengthen the *normative control* efforts as such. Thus, positive expressions remain salient and characteristic among the staff, which is a powerful effect of the *normative control* efforts.

The Limitations of Normative Control

A limitation of the *normative control* efforts is that the distinctiveness of the *corporate culture* may lead to resistance and the creation of organizational sub-cultures. Use of terms such as 'nerds', which are rather distinct, value-laden and ambiguous in their connotations may result in the staff refuting them. Hence, while a small company such as Biz-R may be able to cope with these issues, if they continue to grow, its efforts at preserving the *corporate culture* may not suffice, potentially resulting in cultural fragmentation. As this might call for reinforced *normative control* efforts, the organization may risk the delicate balance and subtlety that seems to be called for in order to institutionalize *corporate culture* and *normative control* efforts.

Additionally, even though Biz-R argues that staff do not need to 'invent a work version of themselves', which in theory would imply the practice of *neo-normative control* (Biz-R, 2016; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). This would involve enacting values and expressing themselves in any ways they prefer, including ways that goes against the *corporate culture*. Nevertheless,

employees acclimatized to the company's core values and even get rewarded for behaving according to them. We argue that *neo-normative control* is not practiced, nor possible in this context, as the ideal employee would be someone whose personal interest overlaps with the company's interest (Kunda, 1992). More so, there are *normative control* efforts that aim at enforcing these values and principles. Thus, in practice this means that the corporate values dominate the personal values. So, we see a limitation that people cannot simply themselves as they need to behave according to the corporate values. While Biz-R may be able to overcome this, other companies may not be.

The Unforeseen Consequences of Normative Control

While *neo-normative control* supposedly facilitates for 'existential empowerment'; the illusion of 'just being yourself' at Biz-R, rather ties the individuals' identity to the *corporate culture* (c.f. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). While this may not be an unforeseen consequence per se, we see two such consequences in theory. First, the illusion of 'being oneself' and strong identification with the *corporate culture* may result in a decrease in diversity of thoughts. As it is reasonable to assume that staff will express themselves in ways that is aligned with the *corporate culture* as this is rewarded by the company. This is more likely as staff may find themselves to have invested too much of themselves or merged their identity in other ways with the company, and hence risk severe identity crashes if they should depart from the company.

6.3. Future Research

In this part, we bring forth ideas and possibilities for future research.

We see future research possibilities mainly in four fields:

I. First, we argue that researchers in general should take seriously the employee perspective and thus, investigate other areas within organizational life as a process in which the employees' experiences and sense-making are seen as jointly influential along with corporate intentions and efforts.

II. Second, we think that the field of *anti-identity* can be further studied (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Especially, regarding empirical examples of *normative control* and how these interplay with the concept of *anti-identity*. It is also of interest to further investigate how an *organizational anti-identity* can affect the *corporate-* and *organizational culture*.

III. Third, we have illustrated that the concept of 'just being yourself'—as argued in the application of *neo-normative control*—seems unrealistic within the confines of *normative control* (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Thus, as its practical application calls for a non-existing or disparate *corporate culture,* we think it would be of value to further investigate the concept and empirical examples of how organizational control may be maintained through its application.

IV. Fourth, the utilization of purpose and *normative control* efforts at Biz-R seems to make the need for leadership less distinctive; thus, it would be interesting to investigate how leadership efforts are exerted and experienced within similar organizations.

6.4. Epilogue

The epilogue serves the purpose to provide our concluding remarks.

Biz-R emerges as a saviour. The mystery of staff's expressions of gratitude, freedom and happiness – despite control efforts and tedious work tasks – is unravelled. Yet, throughout our study at Biz-R, we have been presented with multiple ambiguous and contradictory stories. We have taken these seriously by providing a thick description of staff's everyday experiences, along with our own interpretations. Hence, we have provided a plausible explanation to the Biz-R mystery. However, as other explanations are conceivable, we encourage the reader to come up with further interpretations and explanations through the insights into Biz-R that our study facilitates for.

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Anti-Identity	A form of identity work, where "the deficit other is constructed to present a counter-picture to oneself" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011, p. 171).
Corporate Culture	"How individuals within a particular group think about and value their reality in similar ways and how this thinking and valuing is different from that of people in different groups […]" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p. 41).
Direct Control	A group term for control efforts that are easily perceptible to the individual; typically, behavioural- and output control.
Identity Work	"A formal conceptualization of the ways in which human beings are continuously 'engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness'" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003, p. 1165 cited in Watson, 2008, pp. 126 – 127).
Negative Mirror	A construction "through which the self emerges as distinct, superior and valued" when reflected through the negative mirror facilitating for an anti-identity to emerge (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011, p. 171).
Neo-Normative Control	Draws on the basic idea of 'just being yourself' and is based on the assumption that employees should not be expected to confirm with organizational values or norms, but rather oppose them (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Presumed to facilitate for employees to "express more of their true selves […]" (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2).
Normative Control	"The attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions" (Kunda, 1992, p. 11).
Organizational Anti-Identity	A sense-making effort where staffs constructs an organizational 'out-group' through which the own organization, in contrast, appears as an 'in-group' and thus as superior and distinct (c.f. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011; Ashforth & Mael, 1989).
Organizational Identity	The individuals' knowledge about shared meanings and the feeling of belongingness of to an organizational group (Cornelissen, et al., 2007).
Practical Autonomy	Self-direction within a predefined scope and course of actions (Willmott, 1993).

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Appendix

Overview of Interviewees

Name (Fictive)	Gender (randomized)	Site	Position (Generic)	Period of employment at Biz-R
Alex	Female	Poland	Co-worker	≤ 6 months
Andy	Male	Sweden	Co-worker	≈ 7 years
Bernie	Female	Poland	Co-worker	≈ 2 years
Bobbie	Male	Poland	Co-worker	≈ 1 year
Charlie	Male	Sweden	Senior Management	≈ 1 1/2 years
Dale	Male	Poland	Co-worker	≤ 6 months
Eddie	Female	Poland	Team Manager	≈ 4 years
Francis	Male	Sweden	Senior Management	≈ 4 years
Georgie	Male	Sweden	Co-worker	≈ 2 years
Harper	Male	Poland	Team Manager	≈ 2 years
James	Male	Poland	Manager	≈ 4 1/2 years
Jess	Female	Poland	Team Manager	≈ 2 years
Louie	Male	Sweden	Co-worker	≈ 7 years
Max	Male	Sweden	Senior Management	≈ 4 1/2 years
Nickie	Male	Poland	Co-worker	≤ 6 months
Robin	Male	Sweden	Manager	≈ 2 years
Sandy	Female	Sweden	Co-worker	≈ 2 years
Shellie	Female	Poland	Co-worker	≈ 1 year
Vic	Male	Poland	Co-worker	≈ 1 year

Table 3 Interview Summary