THESIS SUMMARY

Anna Laura Hidegh

Critical Human Resource Management
The Reproduction of Symbolic Structures in the Organizational Lifeworld through the Case of the Colonization of Corporate Christmas

Supervisors:

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Institute of Management

Department of Organizational Behavior

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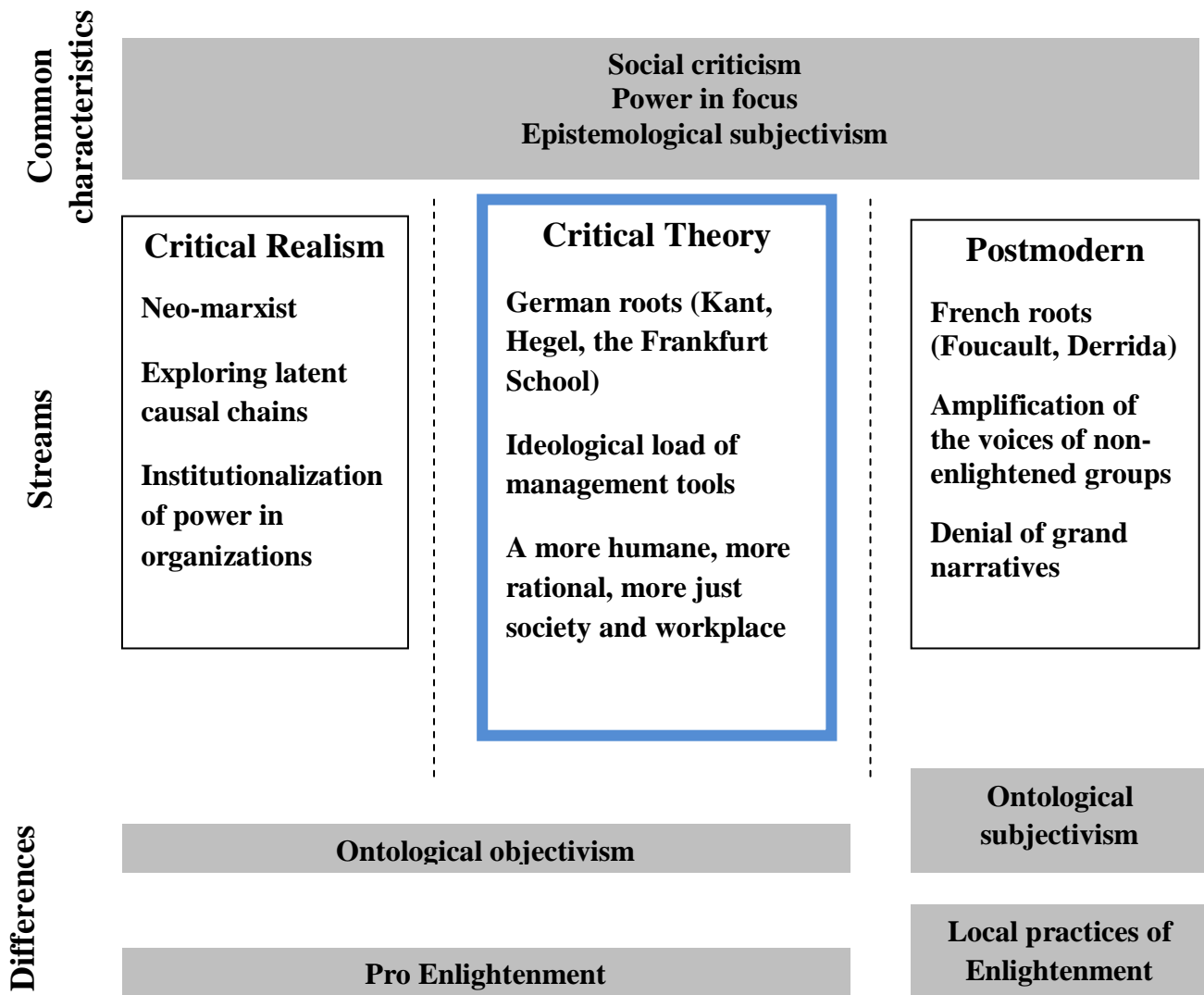
I.1. Critical Management Studies

My dissertation aims at the critical analysis of the so-called soft practices in human resource management, building upon the ideas of critical management studies - a school less popular among Hungarian professionals. Though a relatively new topic in Hungarian management sciences, critical management studies have undergone an impressive evolution during the last twenty years of international business studies.

The appearance of CMS as an academic discipline (that is: its institutionalization) is usually associated with the publication of the book Critical Management Studies by Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott in (1992), even though it was actually preceded by a large number of publications and research activities relevant to the topic (see (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009; Hancock 2008). Critical management studies (hereinafter CMS) is an umbrella concept encompassing all the critical realist, feminist, post-modernist, post-structuralist and post-colonialist trends, labor process theory, deconstructionism, environmentalism and, of course, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Alvesson and Willmott 2003; Duberley and Johnson 2009; Fournier and Grey 2000). Their common starting point is that there is something wrong with management (Fournier and Grey 2000).

The purpose of CMS is to substantiate the critical reflection on the socio-philosophical foundations and the key topics of management theories, and to also contribute to the re-thinking, to the development of management theories and practices (Alvesson and Willmott 2003). The critique is directed against, on the one hand, the practice of management and organizations – that is: managerialism – which has the ability to totalize social life. On the other hand, it is also aimed at management studies, which are becoming the potential servants of management, are built upon positivist philosophy of science principles, and surmise the existence of objective knowledge. There are three major socio-philosophical theoretical streams within CMS that I deem worthy of reviewing here: critical theory, post-modernism and critical realism. The main similarities and differences are presented on Figure 1. **The dissertation relies on critical theory**, and particularly on the social theory of Jürgen Habermas within.

The **essence of the dichotomous social theory** of Habermas (1981) is that **society may be regarded in two ways**: from an internal, participant point of view, from which society appears as a **lifeworld**; and from an external, observant point of view, from which society can be described as a **system** of actions. Habermas (1981) argues that in order to be able to understand and analyze modern social processes, we need to picture them as the union of system and lifeworld. System and lifeworld represent the differing coordination mechanisms present in society: the system uses impersonal and non-normative methods, while the lifeworld applies normative controls and builds upon public consensus to achieve the coordination of individuals' actions. Therefore social sciences need to do their analyses from both viewpoints: the tools of systems theory (system) and those of interpretive sociology are equally needed.

Figure 1: Streams of Critical Management Studies

Common characteristics

> Social criticism
> Power in focus
> Epistemological subjectivism

Streams

Critical Realism

Neo-marxist

Exploring latent causal chains

Institutionalization of power in organizations

Critical Theory

German roots (Kant, Hegel, the Frankfurt School)

Ideological load of management tools

A more humane, more rational, more just society and workplace

Postmodern

French roots (Foucault, Derrida)

Amplification of the voices of non-enlightened groups

Denial of grand narratives

Differences

Ontological objectivism

Ontological subjectivism

Pro Enlightenment

Local practices of Enlightenment

The **system** is responsible for the material reproduction of society, and includes the economic, political and administrative processes that serve the coordination of unintentional actions by non-normative controls. The operation of systemic coordination follows the logic of the purposive-rational action structure, which does not necessarily require the actors to communicate (Habermas 1981). „By work or purposive-rational action I understand either instrumental action or rational choice or their conjunction." (Habermas 1994a, 23) Instead of rational choice, later he talks about *strategic action*, which is distinguished from instrumental action by its social orientation: the measure of success is the efficiency of influencing the other participant in the communication, which can be evaluated based on the decisions made by the "rational counterplayer" (Habermas 1981). CT regards the concept of instrumental rationality, as the sole criterion of rationality, as far too narrow in scope, and, what is more, as expressly dangerous. On the one hand, it only interprets action in its relation to individuality, and, on the

other hand, it places action into a morally neutral domain. That is why it is necessary to introduce the notion of the concept of lifeworld and communicative rationality.

„We can think of the lifeworld as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns." (Habermas 1981, 364). When, however, social action comes to a halt because of differences in participants' definitions of the problem, and unquestioned background beliefs become problematic, a reconciliation of opinions is necessary. In such a case, the coordination of actions is accomplished by **communicative action** – that is: symbolically transmitted interaction. Its validity depends on mutual agreement, thus its rationality potential resides in the creation of consensus between participants (Habermas 1981). **In their communicative actions, the individual does not only renew their cultural knowledge, but they also consolidate their personal identity and social memberships** (Habermas 1981).

In modern capitalist societies, the system colonizes the lifeworld by purposive-rational action taking over the functions of communicative action in the reproduction of the lifeworld. Systemic integration interferes with social integration, and becomes dominant even in areas where the type of coordination that is based on mutual understanding and consensus is non-substitutable. The reason why **colonization** is a problem is that, in the end, it **leads to pathologies in the processes of the lifeworld**, the symptoms of which are various manifestations of crisis in society: anomie, alienation, loss of meaning. However, as a consequence of the disruption of social integration, problems arise not only in the lifeworld, but in the system, as well: its colonization of the lifeworld also hits back upon the system itself, insofar as participants will be neither able, nor willing to contribute to material reproduction (Habermas 1981). **The task of the critical social scientist** is to uncover the uncertain foundations and the oppressive force of technical rationality; to open up a space where the further rationalization of the lifeworld, instead of technicization, and the evolution of democratic movements following the values of autonomy and social responsibility become possible (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

I will use the framework provided by the theory of communicative action to shed new light upon certain processes related to organizations and to their interaction with society. Along with the structural differentiation – that is: evolution – of the lifeworld, management, as a manifestation of systemic coordination, has also continuously gained in influence (Hancock and Tyler 2008). Hancock and Tyler (2008) extended the analogy and asserted that modern management – including all management functions – takes the role of the governing medium and constitutively shapes the structure of the lifeworld. **Management acts to substitute communicative practice with structures of conscience, language and action that align to the rules of instrumentality and utility** (Hancock and Tyler 2008).

In the present dissertation, management as an institutional arrangement remains the unit of analysis, but it is narrowed down to one of its specializations, human resource management. According to my approach, HRM operates in the field of managing everyday life at the workplace, within the boundaries of the corporation. By everyday life I mean the Habermasian lifeworld concept, thus HRM practices – and especially its "soft" areas – serve the constitutive (rather than the regulative) control of the reproduction of intra-company symbolic resources, cultural knowledge, interpersonal relationships and personal identities. In the next part, therefore, I will switch to the discussion of the critical approach to human resource management, and to the analysis of its colonizing power.

I.2. Critical Human Resource Management

First, I define soft HRM based on Legge (2006) which stands in the core of the critique. The *soft* **model (Harvard School)** does not regard the employee as a mere cost factor, but rather as a *valued asset*, which is capable of shaping the company's value creation processes in a proactive manner, and is hence a potential source of competitive advantage through the employee's commitment, adaptability and performance. The model, in line with the principles of developmental humanism, attaches importance to investing into the employee as a key factor of value creation. The two schools share the view that business goals and HRM goals need to be integrated (Legge 2005; Legge 2006).

The soft model of HRM incorporates the following policies: competence-based recruitment and selection, the extended use of communication channels, teamwork, personnel development, knowledge management, involvement in decision making and empowerment, creating a link between performance evaluation and the compensation scheme, etc. (Gelei 1999; Legge 2006). The model and its practices are based on the theory of high commitment / high performance work systems (Legge 2006), which considers the motivation and commitment of employees to be of key importance, and which builds upon employees' self-governing ability, their willingness to assume responsibilities and their internal motivation. In the Hungarian literature, s*oft* HRM solutions tend to be presented as "advanced" practices, "new tendencies", as the paradigm of the future (Bakacsi et al. 1999). By opening a new, critical front in my thesis, I would like to contribute to drawing a more comprehensive picture of *soft* HRM for the Hungarian audience.

Willmott (1993) identified two major avenues for critical corporate culture research, which, I believe, can be extended to the entire field of critical HRM research, and which I will use as a guide in my Habermasian analysis of HRM. Willmott's **first major dimension** is the analysis of the historical conditions of the organizational phenomenon in question – now, the *soft* model of HRM. I will scrutinize the conditions of emergence and the history of HRM in order to uncover its role in operating the capitalist system and in correcting its crisis tendencies. The **other major dimension** is concerned with the contents and the practical applications of the organizational phenomenon; Willmott (1993) also defined two subgoals here. *One of the subgoals* is to illuminate and assess the concerned theory from a critical perspective. I will look into how HRM practices – at least as far as their theoretical objectives are concerned – contribute to the reproduction of the symbolic structures of the lifeworld. The theoretical insights so gained will be applied to corporate Christmas subsequently. The *other subgoal* is to empirically examine the real-world applications of the concerned phenomenon, which requirement will be fulfilled by the empirical research.

The historical analysis of HRM highlights that, **instead of actually working to reconcile these interests, human resource management rather acts to keep existing conflicts of interest latent**. Relying upon the historical reports on HRM, I put forward the theoretical proposition that the development of human resource management is a reaction to the crisis tendencies of capitalism. Primarily, it offers a solution for the motivation crisis threatening to disrupt work organizations' performance, yet it has been active in restoring the social legitimation of corporations, as well (the corporate social responsibility movement has a more significant role in the latter).

HR topics' coming to the fore being a sign of the motivation crisis, and partly also the legitimation crisis, turning acute. HRM *either* tries to make up for the lack of extrinsic motivation through performance related pay, motivation schemes and disciplinary mechanisms (see analyses on panopticism, e.g. (Townley 1993; Townley 1994), *or* strives to restore missing/instrumentalized intrinsic motivation (that what originates in work itself) via its humanistic-developmental programme. In this latter case, HRM's effort actually serves to eliminate the lifeworld pathologies caused by its colonization by the system.

Habermas, seemingly in contradiction with the above statement, believes that "organizations gain autonomy through a neutralizing demarcation from the symbolic structures of the lifeworld; they become peculiarly indifferent to culture, society, and personality." (Habermas 1981, 403) Thus in organizations, systemic coordination is dominant, the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is secondary, in fact, it happens outside the walls of the company. That is, Habermas relies on Weber's model of bureaucracy, which underlines: the world of work is strictly separated from people's private spheres, the rational organization eliminates all kinds of personal, emotional and irrational elements (Weber 1948 in Fleming 2005).

Both corporate literature and practice have, however, changed since the birth of the theory of communicative action: ever since they realized the importance of the „human factor" in the eighties, corporations have by no means remained indifferent towards the symbolic structures of the lifeworld. What is more, it was exactly the exploration and the shaping of organizational culture, human relations and personalities – that is, the symbolic structures of the lifeworld – that *soft* HRM practices set out to accomplish. The literature of motivation, leadership, group dynamics, organizational culture and socialization all call our attention to the enormous significance of these factors in corporations' lives. It is however questionable whether *high commitment models are capable of restoring intrinsic motivation, of creating efficient normative structures, and hence laying the foundations for the legitimation of the HR profession. Which one of the two will emerge as the victor in the course of the organizational reproduction of the lifeworld: the orientation of communicative action towards mutual understanding or the instrumental attitude of purposive-rational action?* For it is only in the first case that the meaning born by our traditions can be preserved. The second case represents a fresh wave in the colonization of the lifeworld, during which the functions of communicative action will be quietly surrendered to purposive-rational action.

Even though Habermas treated the organization as a black box, the theoretical framework he developed is still well-suited for the analysis of the reproduction processes of the organizational lifeworld. The task of HRM is to establish a repository of knowledge, a system of norms and a self-identity that are valid within the framework of the corporation, that is, to create the specific contents of the structural components of the organizational lifeworld through corporate socialization processes, team building and culture building. By **the Habermasian analysis of human resource management**, I would like to call attention to the point that the solutions offered by soft HRM for the motivation and legitimation crises that modern societies suffer from are dangerous instruments, and potentially have a colonizing effect on the organizational lifeworld
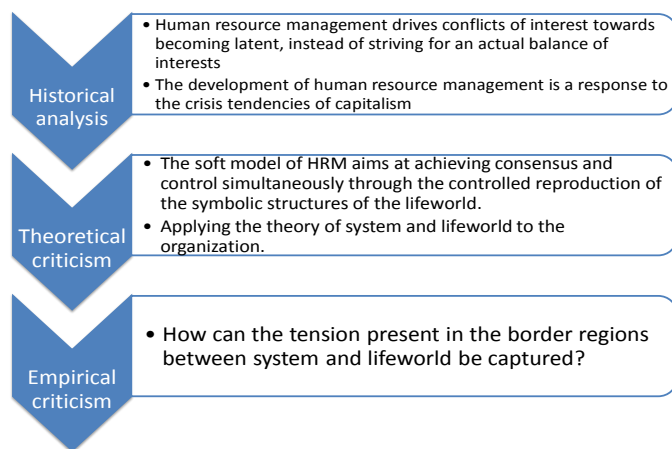
The efforts of the *soft* model of HRM all pursue the central purpose of organizational efficiency and effectiveness, that is, they actually aim at establishing the systemic coordination of the organizational lifeworld. While the

reproduction of the lifeworld ideally takes place spontaneously, through communicative action between equal partners, the sole purpose of which is mutual understanding, the HR processes of the organization are driven by the objectives set forth in its business strategy, and the legitimation basis of mutual understanding (that is: consensus) is the contribution to organizational efficiency. Furthermore, the equality of those participating in the communication is questionable, as organizational values, for example, can hardly ever be reflexive. This means that HR practices generate processes in the organization that resemble the reproduction processes of the lifeworld, and make them appear as undistorted communicative action. These processes take over the reproductive functions of communicative action, but they do so in behalf of the system's interests, thus it is reproduction itself that comes to bear a functional value: the various forms of purposive-rational action are draped in the guise of communicative action, and hence what is 'given' appears as 'possible', a 'compromise' appears as a 'consensus', and 'necessity' as 'freedom'. The organizational lifeworld that has been colonized will not be reproduced spontaneously, by communicative action, but rather in a governed fashion, by strategic action – that is, by the means of human resource management techniques.

The figure below provides a summary of the historical and theoretical analysis of HRM. The next level is, in line with Willmott's ideas, the empirical analysis of corporate Christmas parties organized by HR.

Figure 2: The Habermasian analysis of HRM

Historical analysis
- Human resource management drives conflicts of interest towards becoming latent, instead of striving for an actual balance of interests
- The development of human resource management is a response to the crisis tendencies of capitalism

Theoretical criticism
- The soft model of HRM aims at achieving consensus and control simultaneously through the controlled reproduction of the symbolic structures of the lifeworld.
- Applying the theory of system and lifeworld to the organization.

Empirical criticism
- How can the tension present in the border regions between system and lifeworld be captured?

I.3. The Critical Analysis of Corporate Christmas

The hardest and most frustrating one of a researcher's tasks is to define an exact and well-focused research topic (Thomas 1993). The job of the critical researcher is particularly difficult, as they concentrate on phenomena that are hidden beneath the surface (Thomas 1993). In the present case, the job is to operationalize the colonizing effect of HRM on the lifeworld. In order to do so, it is advisable to first find a well-delimited HR function or HR activity, the effects of which then I will be able to analyze within the framework of Habermasian social theory. My choice fell upon the analysis of the corporate Christmas parties organized by the HR department. The primary

reason to do so was the re-interpretation of the meaning of Christmas in modern capitalist and consumerist societies, which alone turns Christmas into an exciting research topic.

I am interested in the question how the traditions and the symbolic system of Christmas change if and when they are brought into a corporate setting by human resource management. For the use of Christmas as a strategic tool violates the conditions for reproduction of its world of meaning, and turns it into an empty phrase (see (Habermas 1994b).

In spite of the above, Christmas has not been particularly popular with organizational scientists as a research topic, even though its economic significance could hardly be questioned, as concluded by Hancock and Rehn (2011) in their introductory study in Organization's special issue on Christmas. Social sciences, in a broad sense, treat Christmas as a serious and important area of research, yet with respect to organizational sciences – much like natural sciences –, it tends to appear as a source of humor only. The authors, however, fail to find a scientific justification for this lack of attention. They arrive at the conclusion that it is the lack vs. presence of support from the power structure of the branch of science in question that decides whether Christmas is considered a valid topic or not. **Christmas is, nonetheless, a research area that might provide insight into the process of how the domains of commerce, corporations and everyday life get intertwined, and create and reproduce each other** (Hancock and Rehn 2011).

Why are Christmas and related rituals so important in maintaining the company's power? – one might ask, drawing from Rippin (2011). Rippin (2011) referred to the Christmas party as a period of sanctioned misbehavior: the company funds it in order to allow its employees to let off steam under controlled conditions. The re-discovered rituals of Christmas serve the purpose of creating meaning in an alienated workplace, which is why they are important to the legitimation of existing institutions (Rippin 2011). **Corporate Christmas** can be considered an **invented tradition** (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) created in response to the meaning of work having become lost in modern corporations. That is, **the purpose of corporate Christmas parties is to lend meaning to the present corporate existence by borrowing the symbols and the world of meaning of past traditions.** Corporate Christmas acts as a cultural drug (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) and leads to the devaluation of the lifeworld by promoting mechanisms of lifeworld reproduction that would otherwise be characteristic for lower degrees of social development, and which rely on unquestioned, subconscious patterns that hinder the activation of the rationality potential of communicative action.

II. Research questions and methodology

The purpose of my research is to explore the relationships between system and lifeworld within the organization, and the tensions and the manifestations of crisis emerging at their "interfaces" (Kemmis 2001). Corporate Christmas as a cultural phenomenon is one such node situated at the boundary between system and lifeworld. On the one hand, those organizational actors that are in a position of power strive to consciously manage corporate Christmas, while on the other hand, it is a phenomenon spontaneously shaped by community interactions. Concerning critical research, Thomas (1993) underlines that proving anything is beside the point, as the point is

to examine if the given phenomenon – the colonization of the lifeworld through corporate Christmas, in our case – exists at all, and if yes, then to determine how it appears and manifests itself in the culture at hand.

The research questions I formulated concern the reproduction of the organizational lifeworld's symbolic structures, and the manifestations of crisis in the lifeworld:

- How are cultural meanings and norms, interpersonal relationships and personal identities reproduced in a corporation during Christmas time?
- How does power (organizational hierarchy and control) and money (profit imperative) affect these reproductive processes?
- Which crisis phenomena in the lifeworld can be associated with corporate Christmas?
- What kind of strategies and tactics do employees use to resist lifeworld colonization through corporate Christmas?

There are two major trends in CT-inspired qualitative research: critical ethnography and critical-emancipatory action research (Duberley and Johnson 2009). The former one corresponds to the debunking / revealing purpose of CT, while the latter one is rather associated with transformative research. The purpose of the present dissertation is to unveil and unravel; namely, to provide an in-depth analysis of the colonization of Christmas by human resource management. Thus it is **critical ethnography** that better suits my analysis of the lifeworld's reproduction processes.

Based on Thomas (1993), Alvesson and Deetz (2000) gave the following summary on the critical ethnography approach. Researchers…

- focus their attention on the repressive aspects of cultural phenomena, that is, their choice of topic puts injustice, control and power (e.g. colonization) into the foreground;
- regard language itself as a vehicle for power, and they are skeptical to data;
- follow the principles of defamiliarization in interpreting the data, that is, they make the known appear unknown in order to facilitate outside-the-box thinking;
- reflect on the research process itself, as well;
- also pay attention to the wider relevance of the research, and strive to answer the question what kind of change (in emancipatory terms) the research induced in the world.

Ethnography in its critical form poses significant challenges for the researcher, for getting close to the natives is not the only important aspect, but they also need to take the time, both during and after data collection, to distance themselves from, and hence critically evaluate the data and their experiences (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). Therefore, the authors agree that instead of or in addition to the classic approach of ethnography – according to which one should spend at least one year in the field –, **partial ethnography** is an acceptable method, as well. Partial ethnography means that the researcher focuses on one given situation, which they explore to the greatest possible depth and detail (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). Another example for such a well-delimited situation is corporate Christmas, the analysis of which, in my view, partial ethnography is perfectly suitable for.

Before conducting the actual research, I performed a **test-research** in multiple phases. (1) During the first phase, I participated in the corporate Christmas parties (and nothing else) of two multinational corporations. (2) The

second phase comprised a more extensive data collection effort during the winter of 2010/11 at the Hungarian subsidiary of a multinational in French/Dutch shared ownership. I participated in both the meeting of the committee organizing the Christmas party and the Christmas event itself. I conducted 11 interviews in total. The project yielded valuable results, yet also made it evident that in-depth understanding necessitates a more intense presence in the organization's everyday life. It was during the test-research, too, that I clarified for myself: critical ethnography would be the methodology, and a case study would be the end result of my research. My interpretation of a **case study** follows that of Stake (1994), i.e. the case study is regarded as the examination of a bounded system rather than an independent methodology.

It was in the winter of 2012/13 that, equipped with this knowledge, I set out to undertake the **actual research** at the Hungarian subsidiary of a Hungarian-owned group of companies (which also has several foreign sister companies). Data was collected by two main methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis and photography were used as supplementary data collection methods.

As regards **participant observation**, I opted for the open observer role and the method of interrupted involvement (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991). In line with the recommendation of Alvesson and Deetz (2000), I spent relatively little time at the company, limiting data collection to the Christmas season, namely the period between early December 2012 and mid-February 2013. On average, I spent 2-2.5 working days per week at the company's office. I recorded my observations in a diary. In addition, 19 **semi-structured interviews** were also conducted, with an average duration of 1 hour and 10 minutes. I made audio recordings of the interviews, which were then transcribed word for word. I also made notes during the conversations. Interviewees were chosen partly by pre-determined criteria, and partly based on recommendations and willingness to participate.

By way of reduction, the **analysis of data** begins as early as during or even before its collection (Miles and Huberman 1994), when the researcher makes their decisions related to the research questions and data collection, and then converts their observations into a field diary. I opted for **coding** as the means of organizing the resulting textual information, which was then performed using an application for qualitative data analysis (Nvivo 8)[1]. Subsequently, I re-read the texts assigned to each of the codes and tried to capture the various interpretations, layers of meaning, official and concealed messages they carried. The method that this process resembles most is **meaning interpretation** as described by Kvale (2005), which entails the exploration of the deeper, non-evident meanings of the text and its being put in a new context, guided by the research question and the relevant theoretical background (Gelei 2002). Furthermore, in interpreting the text, I followed the so-called **principle of „defamiliarization"** (Thomas 1993). When performing the analysis, the critical researcher re-evaluates what they have seen, distances themselves from the obvious angles and creates new interpretations.

Instead of discussing validity and reliability at length, the books and studies on critical research methodology (Alvesson 2011; Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Madison 2005; Thomas 1993; Wainwright 1997) focus on **reflexivity** instead. This is why it is very important to uncover and make ourselves aware of any preconceptions and to continuously self-reflect throughout the research project. As regards the

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[1] About the advantages of relying on computer programs see (Bokor and Radácsi 2006).

present research, this was warranted by my keeping a research diary from the very moment I started working on the theoretical part. I am the opinion that my results allow for naturalistic and theoretical generalization.

III. Results of the Dissertation

III.1. About the Organization in Question

The Engineer Group was founded in 2001 as a small enterprise, and the majority owner has been Peter ever since, who takes an active part in governing the group. With time the company has evolved from a small business of 10 employees into a large corporation with about 1,000 people on their payroll, having several locations in Hungary and operating in four other countries, as well. They often work on projects in other foreign countries, as well. Officially, they are still considered a medium enterprise, as the corporation was divided into several smaller entities, coordinated under a single **holding company**. The research project was performed at the headquarters of the group in Budapest, where the vast majority of their Hungarian employees – about 300 to 400 people – worked. The main business of the company is the delivery of engineering and information technology services.

Based on the interviews, the main characteristics of the organizational culture could be outlined as follows.

- Family friendliness: family as a value permeates corporate life on multiple levels. Celebrating the corporate Christmas together is associated with this value by almost everyone.

- Secure jobs: in exchange for employees' loyalty, the company offers job security.

- Conservative values: the company culture is palpably permeated by a certain value system and ideology, which interviewees characterize by the word „conservative".

- Becoming multinational: interviewees report the weakening of cultural elements in relation to the group's rapid growth, typically in a negative context.

- Engineer-elitism closely related to the gender topic: it is the women who are not engineers and thus the work they do and the knowledge they have is inferior (horizontal segregation).

III.2. Script Elements of the 'Engineer Christmas'

In Thomas's (1993) wording, the phenomenon or event the researcher subjects to examination opens a window to a broader view. I had a similar experience while exploring corporate Christmas: Christmas is a window to the cultural specialities, contradictions and conflicts of the organizational lifeworld. My analysis also covered the Christmas season and St Nicholas Day, but was mainly focused on the corporate Christmas party, thus detailed results will be presented for the latter one only. Engineer Co. has had a Christmas event each year ever since it was founded. Even though organizing it is HR's task – at least since the HR role / department was established –, the coordination with Peter has always been very close in this respect. The Christmas party usually takes place on one of the last workdays, which is a conscious decision from the owner's side. It begins around 7 PM and lasts until dawn. The script is more or less the same each year: the management greet the participants, the first item on the agenda is managers' speeches, followed by the handing out of awards and presents, dinner, music and dancing,

interrupted by the lottery, and then further music and dancing. Every employee is allowed to bring a plus one to the Christmas party, who tends to be their current partner, but sometimes it is a sibling, a friend, an adult child or an ex. Guests numbered around 630 at the event in 2012.

The table below summarizes the specific manifestations at the Engineer Christmas party of the individual script elements of corporate Christmas as a ritual, and the messages they carry.

Table 9. Script elements of the corporate Christmas party

Script elements	How does it manifest itself at the Engineer Christmas party?	What message does it carry?
Venue, dress code, decoration	elegance, luxury, professionalism lack of Christmas decoration	employer branding, Engineer-identity the venue cannot become a sacred space
Greeting	male managers, as hosts, greet the guests	the employee is the guest, they are at the center
Managers' speeches	topics: company's successes, saying thank you to the families, charity work	overtime is normal reinforcing male/female roles
Giving out awards	greeting newlyweds, newborns and those retiring	rite of acceptance strengthening emotional commitment
Dinner	gastronomic delight Christmas dishes on the menu buffet dinner	Engineer-identity continuity of tradition depersonalization
Lottery	managers' business gifts as prizes charity donation	employees become part of the gesture of giving presents
Music, dance, alcohol	couples' party releasing tension	exclusion of singles doing away with hierarchy and rules
Christmas present	impersonal, meant for the employee, not the person	strengthening the belonging to the organization, image of the uniformized individual

III.3. Layers of Meaning of Corporate Christmas

Three main layers of meaning of corporate Christmas could be identified: the family metaphor, the present metaphor and the carnival metaphor. I will strive to present both the literal and the critical interpretations of these meanings, and to also point out how the various management tools interfere in the reproduction of the organizational lifeworld through the system of distorted communication. That is, I would like to reveal both the explicit and the latent functions (Rosen 1988) of corporate Christmas ceremonies and rituals.

III.3.1. Family-friendly workplace and work-friendly family

The root metaphor[2] of the Engineer Group is the family, comprising multiple layers of meaning. The family metaphor pertains, on the one hand, to the **intra-company community.** This is the meaning they imply when referring to the Engineer Christmas party as a get-together with your colleagues, as a team building event. It is this facet of the Engineer Christmas which reflects the latent function described by Rosen (1988) most: the ideology that **the intra-company community is a moral community, as well**. The Christmas party does not

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[2] The root metaphor is a metaphor that pervades the entire discourse, and largely shapes our preliminary understanding of any particular situation (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000).

reinforce one's membership of the organization in the Weberian or Taylorian sense any more, but suggests that this is friends celebrating together, who love each other (Rosen 1988). In reality (i.e. everyday life), however, organization membership is not just about moral relationships, but at the same time, it is also a legally regulated instrumental relationship pervaded by interests. Nonetheless, the 'team building' reading does also challenge the family metaphor, as it implies Christmas becoming a tool, accompanied by a consciously managed form of community building instead of spontaneous self-organization. According to their own account, employees' relation to their employer and colleagues is way more superficial than the management ideology would suggest. Which clearly is a refusal of the family metaphor and an expression of their opposition to the colonization of Christmas.

The management extends the family metaphor – and hence the boundaries of the organization (see (Deetz 1992) – to the family and relatives of the employees, as well. In a sense, the company becomes part of one's **broadly interpreted family**. The way the company applies the family metaphor at the corporate Christmas party, and the related practices and value messages implicitly reinforce **traditional gender roles**. The **company's gender-practice is contradictory**: in line with the current trends, they strive to support women's carreers, the management has been taking expressly progressive measures in this respect, yet at the same time the conservative values that dominate the corporate culture severely limit the potential liberating effect these might have. Managers and employees both relate to gender roles in an ambivalent way, and mostly they are not even aware of that.

A concealed message of the family metaphor is, furthermore, that it **equates the ideal and normal way of life to living in a marriage and with a family**. Corporate communication and events are addressed to those having a family or living in a heterosexual relationship, and push everyone else to the periphery. They are not meant for the singles, the divorced or LGBTQI people. **As a result of this duality, the family metaphor**, which is at the very heart of the corporate Christmas party, **transforms into a productivity metaphor:** it is addressed to those who work in productive areas and have been productive (fertile) at home, as well; and the message is to become even more productive both at work and at home.

III.3.2. Christmas Presents

The rite of exchanging presents is closely associated with Christmas, and is an integral part of corporate Christmas, as well. The giving of a present creates a social bond between the person giving and the one receiving it through the symbolic significance of the object given, suggests Mauss (1954) in his famous study. **The present is a reflection of the giver's social status and the importance of the relationship, and originates an obligation of reciprocity**. In the business world, exchanging gifts carries a utility value, but also has social and cultural significance (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). The gifts we give also define who we ourselves are and what our relationships mean for us (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011).

Employees regarded the Christmas party itself as a present – or, if less spiritually loaded, as a benefit. On the one hand, the gift is **one-sided**, as the employees do not directly return the invitation to the party (nor any material gifts they receive there). Which makes it similar to the potlatch situation described by Mauss (1954), where gifts are given by the „chieftain" , that is, those with more power are expected to give away presents, but reciprocation

is not a requirement. Christmas traditions reflect another facet of **asymmetric reciprocity**, as well: it is usually children who get presents from the adults, and a reciprocation of equivalent value becomes due only when they reach adulthood. By adopting the family as a root metaphor, the Christmas party turns into a present from Peter, „everyone's dad" and the HR employee organizing the event, „everyone's mom", which the underage (sic!) employee does not have to reciprocate. This **asymmetric power relation is eased by interpreting** the Christmas party as a reward or **benefit**, since rewards come in exchange for something: for the work delivered and the sacrifices made, as regards the employees and their partners, respectively.

Charity, as another form of gift-giving, is pushed to the forefront during the Christmas season. The making of donations within the framework established by the company **raises employees, as well, to a higher position**, makes them „chieftains" (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). This becomes part of the temporary identity offered by the company that the elegance of the Christmas party is also meant to nourish: the company offers the illusion of belonging to an upper layer of society. At the end of the Christmas party, each employee receives a gift pack from the company. Asymmetric reciprocity applies to these material gifts, as well. In comparison to the presents exchanged on Christmas Eve, employees found the company's gifts to have been **impersonal**.

III.3.3. Christmas Carnival

Employees described the carnival-like nature of the corporate Christmas party by the following expressions: „let off steam", „fete", „end-of-year". This element of corporate Christmas exhibits the characteristics of carnivals and indulgences: it is an occasion of **breaching norms under controlled circumstances** (Rippin 2011). Engineer employees – in comparison to the other Christmas parties visited during the test-research phase – are stricter about keeping to the rules. The venue, the dress code, the displayed elegance call for a more „refined" behavior, and the presence of people's partners also imposes certain limits. Moreover, employees are quite clear about the party being a company event after all, and do not have absolute faith in there being no consequences. All in all, the carnival-like nature of the event cannot unfold to the full.

III.3.4. The System of Relationships Between the Layers of Meaning of Corporate Christmas

The family and present metaphors have most of their roots in Christian culture, and it is these two layers of meaning that are dominant, in accordance with the organizational culture. The carnival-like nature, on the other hand, rather recalls the pagan origins of Christmas traditions. The consequence being that while the familial and the gift-like nature reinforce and support each other, the carnival-like and the familial functions rather tend to weaken each other: that is, the protection and cultivation of Christian traditions keep pagan elements from coming to the surface.

First we will take a look at the interaction between **gift and family**. Both the gift-like nature and the family metaphor (especially its broader family aspect) promote the emergence of a certain parent-child relationship between the management and the employees. Pushing the employees into the child's status solidifies the power status quo and makes it appear natural. At the same time, it also eases its official and impersonal nature, thereby resembling the „tough love" concept criticized by Legge. My interviewees' expression of their ambivalent feelings and doubts about the community and the love-relationship being real are a reflection of the internal tension of
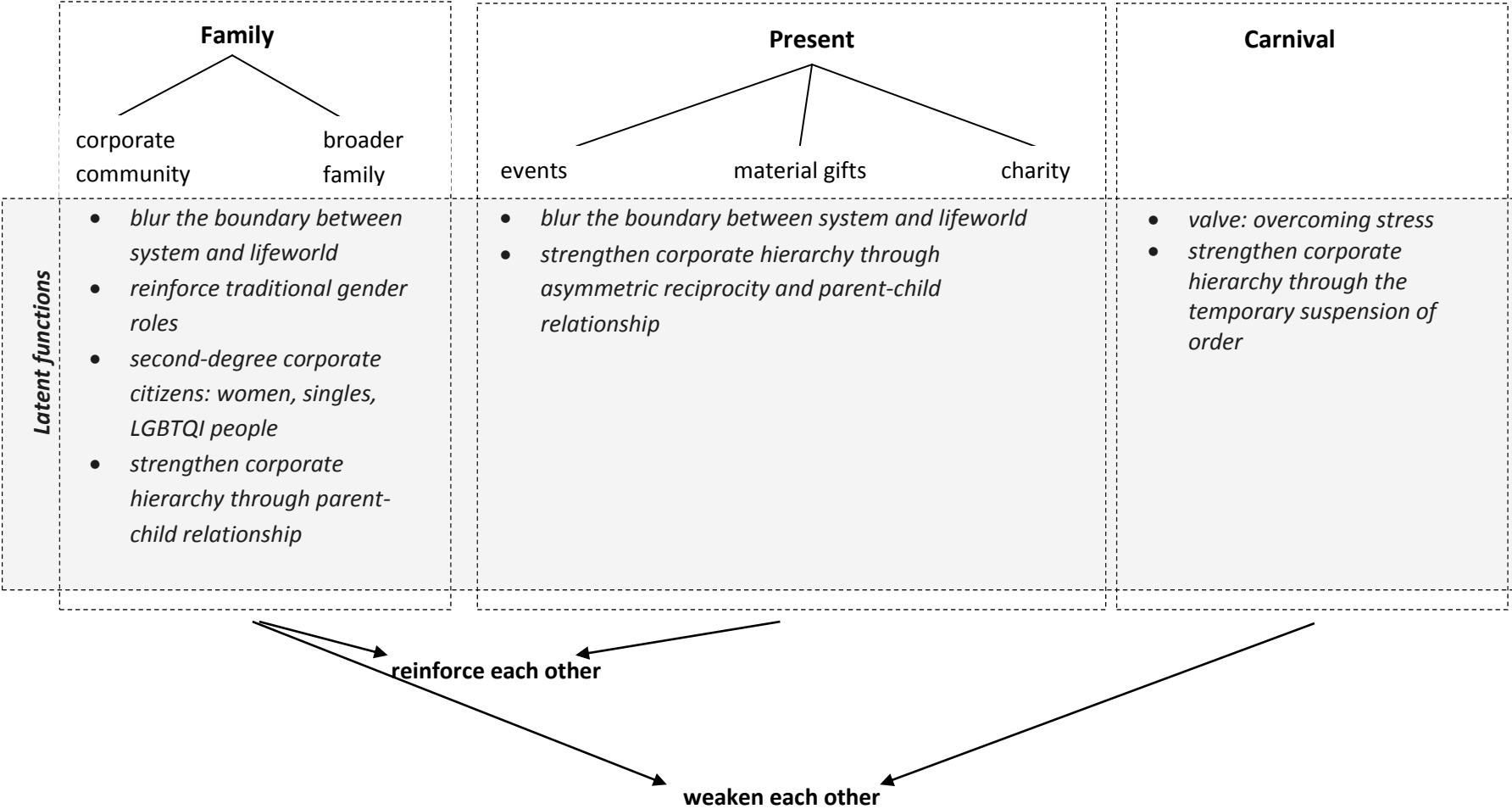
HRM, i.e. that the company needs to adapt to the market environment in order to survive, therefore organizational goals must always take precedence over individual goals, yet performance can only be achieved by ensuring the individual's commitment and loyalty (Legge 2005). And one of the tools for acquiring loyalty is corporate Christmas, which, however, is strategized within a corporate framework. Which on the whole makes participants simultaneously believe and not believe in the „family", appreciate and not appreciate the „presents": the feeling of a collective identity fades, and the meaning of the gift as a symbol becomes uncertain, too, which are indications of disturbances in the reproduction of the lifeworld.

The parent-child relation may also remind us of Kant's (1980) words: „Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance." By accepting – what is more: expecting – the present and participating in their common corporate farce, the employees themselves also become a hindrance to their own emancipation.

The relationship between the **family and carnival** metaphors is the exact opposite. The temporary suspension of morality may endanger one's familial bonds, yet the possibility or obligation – whichever is one's reading – to bring one's partner along and corporate communication impose strong limits on that effect. The management of Engineer Co. described the operation of society using an organic metaphor: its basic units are families, which help each other by arranging themselves into microcommunities, upon which the larger communities, like corporations, are built. Within the framework of this philosophy, family-friendliness may be interpreted as the management's conscious or non-conscious ambition to protect the family as society's basic unit. But what should the family need protection from? The management's declared philosophy suggests: from the social pathologies of atomization and alienation. That is, the value system expressed through corporate Christmas (family-friendliness) is a response to a crisis phenomenon in the lifeworld, which corroborates the statement I made in the theoretical part about the soft tools of HRM, namely that they seek to remedy the disturbances in the reproduction of the lifeworld.

Figure 10. Relationships between the metaphors involved in corporate Christmas

Family

corporate community   broader family

Present

events   material gifts   charity

Carnival

Latent functions

- *blur the boundary between system and lifeworld*
- *reinforce traditional gender roles*
- *second-degree corporate citizens: women, singles, LGBTQI people*
- *strengthen corporate hierarchy through parent-child relationship*

- *blur the boundary between system and lifeworld*
- *strengthen corporate hierarchy through asymmetric reciprocity and parent-child relationship*

- *valve: overcoming stress*
- *strengthen corporate hierarchy through the temporary suspension of order*

reinforce each other

weaken each other

Even the valve-function – which is a feature of carnivals originally – of the Engineer Christmas tends to be dominated by the family metaphor. The company eases the tensions arising from the work-life conflict by saying thanks to and regaling its employees' partners and families, and hence the Christmas party also becomes a field for collectively overcoming any related contradictions and conflicts. That is, the family has to be protected not only from harmful external processes, but from the company itself, as well. This is another internal contradiction originating in modern capitalist society itself, which is further amplified by the contradictory nature of corporate Christmas.

By underlining the ambiguity and temporality of corporate Christmas, the carnival metaphor also exposes the family metaphor: it is only during Christmas time that family comes first, and it is only through its role as a background resource for employee performance that one's family is accepted as a valid constituent of the broader corporate family. That is, the legitimate order within the company as a broader family is determined by people's contribution to its performance. Which underlines the duality of the Engineer-reality, i.e. that family and productivity can simultaneously co-exist as valid root metaphors.

Nonetheless, it applies to **all three metaphors** – and thus the present study confirms previous conclusions in the literature (Rippin 2011; Rosen 1988) –, that **they contribute to the strengthening of corporate hierarchy**. The family and present metaphors do so by symbolically introducing the parent-child relationship to the workplace, while the gift metaphor adds the practice of asymmetric reciprocity. The carnival metaphor, on the other hand, reinforces the power status quo by suspending the hierarchy for a limited time.

III.3. Christmas Hypocrisy: The System of Distorted Communication

Thus it is not an ideally functioning lifeworld free of crisis phenomena that the company and the management are faced with, but an instrumentalized lifeworld burdened by the colonizing effects of the institutions of modern capitalist society. It is these **crisis phenomena that they are seeking appropriate HR solutions for**, one of which is hosting a corporate Christmas party. The case of the Engineer Christmas has shown that this aspiration **fails again and again due to the resistance of the employees**, yet it does still leave a mark. It interferes with well-proven coping strategies, that is, with people's individual interpretations and behavior patterns related to the distinction between work/private life, and creates a system of distorted communication, which manifests in large-scale, communal hypocrisy and self-deception.

Habermas (1981) distinguishes between two types of latent strategic action: conscious deception, i.e. manipulation and non-conscious deception, i.e. the system of distorted communication. The two analytic categories are difficult to apply to real situations: manipulation and self-deception rarely are clearly distinct phenomena. How should one determine whether a given individual engages in conscious manipulation or if they themselves, too, believe the false message they are transmitting?

The critical management literature usually associates manipulation with management tools. In his study criticizing corporate culturism, Willmott (1993) claims that soft control repeatedly faces legitimation issues: meaning that was created   in an administrative way governed by technical rationality can create so-called **dramaturgical obedience** only, i.e. mummery, pretense and play-acting. This behavior pattern is particularly apparent in the case of the Engineer Christmas. My work reveals that everyone is part of the play, everyone partakes in the common Christmas hypocrisy, and everyone becomes its victim, too. Sometimes people believe in the role they play, sometimes they expose themselves, and while this duality of wavering between „true" and „false" penetrates corporate Christmas, certain behavior norms, values and self-interpretations get reproduced in an unnoticed, non-conscious way. What is more, corporate Christmas affects the unconscious just like any other rite does, and therefore it **carries more resemblance to collective self-deception than collective manipulation**.

Willmott (1993) also calls attention to the risks of dramaturgical behavior, which can be phrased in Habermasian terms as follows. **Employees' behavior takes the form of latent strategic behavior, by which they contribute to the maintenance of the system of distorted communication, that is, to the colonization of the lifeworld, and exclude the possibility of the joint creation of a true, moral and authentic organizational lifeworld**. Managers are exposed to distorted communication to an even greater extent, as their role gives them far less room for manoeuvre in escaping the system's interests: it is their very job to ensure that those interests are enforced. **Dramaturgical behavior, however, can only spare the individual from indoctrination as long as the distinction between the work-self and the private-self exists. It is not a coincidence that soft HR tools – among them corporate Christmas – are targeted exactly at this rather blurred line between the two.**

III.4. Relevance of the Theoretical and Empirical Results

Below follows an overview of my dissertation's contribution to academic knowledge.

- According to my present knowledge, no comprehensive paper has been prepared so far on critical management theories in Hungarian. The field is among the lesser known ones in business administration circles. I cherish the hope that my dissertation will contribute to the issues and questions raised by CMS becoming a subject of academic discourse.

- The Habermasian analysis of human resource management is relevant on an international level, as well. Habermas is an author frequently cited in the international critical management literature (see Appendix 1), yet I have no knowledge of a similar analysis on HRM.

- I am confident that my empirical study built on the Habermasian theoretical framework is an important contribution to the field of organization science, with just a very few precursors, as most of the studies are of a theoretical nature (Appendix 1). The overall length of the dissertation allowed for the detailed and transparent discussion of methodological considerations (barely touched upon in the articles examined), which may serve as a baseline for future empirical research.

- Corporate Christmas and the organizational and management aspects of Christmas in general are clearly under-researched topics (Hancock and Rehn 2011). I did not manage to find any relevant Hungarian paper, and the international literature did not comprise too many works that I could build on, either. One does need to mention, nonetheless, Rippin's (2011) study on Christmas headgear, Hancock's (2013) empirical investigation of the Santa Claus service industry, Lemmergaard and Muhr's (2011) quantitative survey on the exchange of Christmas gifts among business partners and Vachhani and Pullen's (2011) analysis of women's Christmas chores. Rosen's (1988) ethnographic study is the only piece of work that focuses on corporate Christmas; and even though it is not critical in character, it does make certain critical statements. Corporate Christmas has not, however, been empirically investigated within a Habermasian theoretical framework so far.

- From amongst the results of my research, the ones I believe to be particularly worth highlighting are the identification of the script elements and the analysis of their symbolism, and the description of the system of relationships – arranged around the three metaphors of family, gift and carnival – beyond corporate Christmas. Concerning the company as a moral community (as one of the layers of meaning of the family metaphor) and its ideological content, our findings are similar to those of Rosen. The present work, however, extends the scope with the broader family metaphor, which is then analyzed in detail from a gender perspective. The interpretation of the Christmas party as a present, which was inspired by the studies of Mauss (1954), and Lemmergaard and Muhr (2011), yielded truly original results. The studies of Rosen (1988) and Rippin (2011) are centered around the carnival-like nature of the Christmas party. The present thesis contributes to our understanding of the metaphor exactly through the lack of a carnival-like character, and points out the mingling of and interaction between the pagan and Christian roots of corporate Christmas.

- My research findings capture the unfolding of the system of distorted communication, and also the way how that drives the entire organizational community to create and maintain the colonization of the lifeworld. The dissemination of said findings might open up opportunities to contribute to the emancipatory project.

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