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Researching Sustainable Communication: Constructively Critiquing Human Resource Management Communication Practices

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Abstract

Ditlevsen and Johansen (2024) introduce in this issue the theoretical concept of sustainable communication as a response to a general call for a responsabilization of communication itself. Sustainable communication refers to communication practices that benefit not only organizations but also people and society at large. Moreover, Ditlevsen and Johansen (2024) present and discuss an integrated framework for sustainable communication – a framework that is based on three distinct yet interrelated mindsets, i.e., the ethical, the reflexive, and the critical, to be used for addressing communication as a responsible organizational function. Based on this, it is the aim of this paper to put forward and discuss illustrative examples of human resource management (HRM) communication practices through the lenses of sustainable communication. Three studies on HRM communication practices with a focus on the discursive construction of the employee (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010; 2022; 2023) serve as the empirical basis. The re-reading and discussion of the three studies follow the methodological framework for doing critical research proposed by Alvesson and Deetz (2021). Following this framework, this paper offers 1) insights, i.e., the outcome of an interpretation and a hermeneutic understanding of the empirical data, 2) critique, i.e., a discussion of the presented insights to expose hidden, taken-for-granted assumptions within the field of HRM, and 3) a transformative redefinition, i.e. “the development of critical, socially relevant knowledge and practical understanding that enable change and provide skills for new ways of operating” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 19). By re-reading and discussing the three studies, it is shown that superimposing the tenets of sustainable communication onto everyday instances of HRM communication can shed new light on known issues and point to much-needed ethical, reflexive, and critically oriented avenues of research. The paper funnels into a discussion of what the implications of the insights gained and the critique offered could be for practice, including specific suggestions for practicing sustainable communication within the field of HRM communication. These suggestions take the form of concrete transformative redefinitions.

Keywords

Human resource management and human resource management communication; organizational identification; sustainable communication; critical organizational communication; critical research methodology; transformative redefinitions.

1 Introduction

Due to a changing organization-society interface where organizations are increasingly seen as political actors with citizenship obligations, a call for the responsabilization of communication has been put forward (e.g., Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016). Ditlevsen and Johansen (2024) contribute to the discussion of a responsabilization of communication by introducing the theoretical concept of sustainable communication, which refers to communication practices that benefit not only organizations but also people and society at large. Moreover, an integrated framework for sustainable communication is presented and discussed – a framework that is based on three distinct yet interrelated mindsets to be used for addressing communication as a responsible organizational function, i.e., the ethical, the reflexive, and the critical. Furthermore, theoretical, educational, and practical implications of the notion of sustainable communication are discussed. In continuation of this, it is suggested that what is needed is “further conceptual development of sustainable communication as well as empirical explorations designed to assess current strategic communication practices’ application of ethical, reflexive and critical mindsets” (Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024). Another suggestion is the need to take “responsibility in communication as the starting point and governing principle for strategic communication, i.e. placing it at the beginning of textbooks and not at the end” (Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024). And, finally, using the notion of sustainable communication as “a point of departure for thinking about how strategic communication is carried out as an everyday organisational practice” (Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024).

Based on this, it is the aim of this paper to put forward and discuss illustrative examples of human resource management (HRM) communication practices through the lenses of sustainable communication. In order to do so, the paper follows the methodological framework for doing critical research proposed by Alvesson and Deetz (2021). Their approach is applied because it relates very well to the main characteristics of sustainable communication with its ethical, reflexive, and critical mindsets, as the following short introduction to the framework shows. Within the framework, the aim of doing critical research is to “offer a counterpoint to dominant ideals and understandings” and, based on this, “to initiate an open discussion of images widely spread by dominant groups and mainstream policy and management thinking through drawing attention to hidden aspects and offering alternative readings” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 16). The method is here seen as “a mode and a framework for engaging with empirical material” (p. 5) and, further, as “a reflexive activity where empirical material calls for careful interpretation – a process in which the theoretical, political and ethical issues are central (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2018; Finlay, 2002)” (p. 5). The suggested framework for critical research comprises three phases or tasks, as it were, i.e. (1) insights, the outcome of an interpretation, and a hermeneutic understanding of gathered data (cf. Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, pp. 128f.); (2) critique, a discussion of the gained insights to expose hidden, taken-for-granted assumptions or – as Alvesson and Deetz put it (2021, p. 18) – “to counteract the dominance of taken-for-granted goals, ideas, ideologies and discourses that put their imprints on social phenomena”; and (3) transformative redefinition, i.e. “the development of critical, socially relevant knowledge and practical understanding that enable change and provide skills for new ways of operating” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 19). These phases will be elaborated on in sections 3-5. By introducing transformative redefinition as an integral part of doing critical research, Alvesson and Deetz call for critical researchers to not “simply critically investigat[e] the contradictions and forms of domination coming from profit and efficiency goals, [but also to make an effort] to integrate these with more democratic and non-repressive forms” (2021, p. 19) – a call that resonates with the three mindsets of sustainable communication (cf. Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024). Based on this, the paper concludes, as part of a transformative redefinition of HRM communication, with a discussion of what the implications of the insights gained and the critique offered could be for practice, including specific suggestions for practicing sustainable communication within the field of HRM communication.

Based on this, we approach the aim of this paper by presenting the empirical field for our critical investigation, i.e., Human Resource Management (HRM) from a communication perspective, and further by presenting and discussing the three phases in Alvesson and Deetz’s research methodology template (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021) with a view to applying said phases, i.e. insights, critique, and transformative redefinition, on some of our previous research on HRM communication from a critical perspective. More specifically, three studies on HRM communication practices with a focus on the discursive construction of the employee (i.e., Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010; 2022; 2023) serve as the empirical basis for this paper. Even though the select studies are not originally situated within a sustainable communication framework but rather within a critical organizational communication framework, they all feature main characteristics pertaining to sustainable communication (Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024), which makes them suitable for the aim of this paper. The research interest and focus of the select studies, thus, share characteristics of sustainable communication (cf. Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024) in that they all a) explicitly recognize the ‘other’ or the ‘alter’ (cf. Luhmann, 1987, pp. 199f.) – a characteristic of the ethical mindset, b) in that the overall aim of doing research is one of questioning practices and underlying assumptions – a characteristic of the reflexive mindset, and, finally, c) in that they are based on the four basic assumptions about organizations as communicative phenomena – a characteristic of the critical mindset. That is, that organizations are socially constructed through communication processes; that they are political sites of power; that they are key sites of human identity formation in modern society; and that they are important sites of collective decision-making and democracy (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). Moreover, the research objects of the select studies revolve around identity formation as an expression of the call for focusing on the individual, *in casu* the employee, and not the organization. Furthermore, the question of identity formation is considered an important part of the overall aim of doing critical research, i.e., to make organizations more democratic and participatory in the best interest of everybody – an aim that is based on the perception of organizations as not being primarily economic entities, but rather political actors with a responsibility of commitment to the individual and society at large (cf. Alvesson & Deetz, 2021). This, in turn, resonates well with the basic assumptions of sustainable communication (cf. Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024).

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, the field of HRM from a communication perspective is introduced in order to account for our understanding of the field and its built-in dilemma(s). Following the methodological framework for doing critical research provided by Alvesson and Deetz (2021), section 3 presents insights, i.e., the outcome of an interpretation and a hermeneutic understanding of gathered data (cf. Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, pp. 128f.). More specifically, insights on HRM communication stemming from the research that forms the basis of the three select studies are presented. In section 4, representing the second phase of the methodological framework for doing critical research, i.e., critique, the presented insights are discussed to expose hidden, taken-for-granted assumptions within the field of HRM. Finally, as the final phase of the methodological framework for doing critical research, section 5 offers a transformative redefinition, i.e., “the development of critical, socially relevant knowledge and practical understanding that enable change and provide skills for new ways of operating” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 19).

2 Background: Human Resource Management as seen from a critical communication perspective

In one of the leading research-based university textbooks on HRM, the field is characterized along these lines:

“Human Resource Management (HRM) is the basis for all management activities, but it is not the basis of all business activities.”
(Torrington et al., 2020, p. 5)

What may, on the surface, look like a straightforward, maybe even neutral description of the state of affairs of HRM is, in fact, anything but. One need not dig very deep to unravel the underlying, albeit unspoken, rift that runs through the entire field of HRM, practice as well as theory. What we are referring to is the rift between business and management activities, a rift that HRM is called into existence to bridge. That, then, is also the one foundational dilemma of HRM, i.e., both its *raison d'être* as well as its *nemesis*. HRM is forever suspended between the two, trying to uphold an uneasy truce between, on the one hand, the goal of profit maximization, i.e., business, and, on the other, the goal of organizing and supervising in order to meet said business goals, i.e., management. Not to put too fine a point on it, whereas both goal sets are dependent on one another, this interdependency does not imply equality. It is a foregone conclusion that business has the upper hand, as it were. Looking at but a couple of papers that have been formative in shaping the modern business philosophy of a Western persuasion will provide us with the underpinning for that statement. In a 1958 paper, with the quite revealing title of “The Dangers of Social Responsibility”, Levitt summarized that:

“Business will have a much better chance of surviving if there is no nonsense about its goals – that is, if long-run profit maximization is the dominant objective in practice as well as in theory.”
(Levitt, 1958, p. 49)

In a 1970 essay published in the New York Times, Friedman echoes this line of thought when the initial statement reads that “[t]he social responsibility of business is to increase its profits.” (Friedman, 1970, p. 17). In an elaboration on this initial statement, he goes on to posit that a corporation has no responsibility towards civil society, its only responsibility being towards its shareholders. We are not saying that the world of organizations and corporations today is necessarily fraught with this sort of single-minded allegiance to shareholders – the mega-trend of CSR (e.g. Nielsen & Andersen, 2018) and a general call for socially as well environmentally sustainable and responsible organizations and cooperations (e.g. Deetz, 1995a; 1995b) seems, in part, to counter that; but we are saying that HRM is still imbued with the ramifications of this underlying philosophy.

Based on this and acknowledging that HRM is forever and uneasily suspended between its two conflicting parental goal sets, our view of the field of HRM – theory as well as practice – is that of critical scholarship. In order to contextualize both our approach as well as our data sets (see section 3), we turn to Alvesson and Deetz for our point of departure. They stipulate that:

“[...] we live in an organizational society, and the management of schools, higher education, social services, hospitals, public administration and, above all, business and services, is crucial.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 13)

They make it clear that not only is society, indeed all walks of life, structured around organizations but it is also permeated by the (HR) management of said organizations, making a case for what Deetz has referred to as the colonization of lifeworlds. Mumby and Kuhn up the ante, as it were, when they say that not only do we live in an organizational society, “[w]e are organizational beings” (2019, p. 3). And in line with Alvesson and Deetz, they elaborate on what – both to them and to us – is one of the core consequences of this state of affairs, namely, that:

“... organizations are not just places where people work but, more fundamentally, they function as key sites for the creation of personal identity ...”
(Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 53)

Being critical scholars, we hold that no organization, regardless of the nature of the organization, can be neutral. It follows that the non-neutral organization cannot entertain non-neutral practices when it comes to forming the identity of its members. The fact that

organizations play an increasingly larger role in forming our identity is not in and of itself a new thing, but contrary to previously, where it would primarily have been "... family, church, government ..." (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 59) that would have taken on the role as vehicles of our identity formation, today this role is increasingly being taken over by the corporation, i.e., the HRM department of the profit-making organization. Needless to say, the modern organization is acutely aware that employee identification with the organization does not emerge unaided (Stuart, 2002), an acknowledgment that, in effect, has given rise to the fact that practices pertaining to 'organizational socialization' (Saks & Ashforth, 1997) is now a cornerstone of HRM communication. Previously, organizational socialization used to focus almost exclusively on the induction or onboarding phase, i.e., the introductory phase in which "[...] newcomers make the transition from being organizational outsiders to being insiders" (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007, p. 707), the scope of organizational socialization today is much broader. The reasoning goes that whereas 'breaking in' (Ardts, Jansen & van der Welde, 2001) the newcomer is necessary in order to ensure initial identification with the company values, etc., onboarding is by no means sufficient to ensure identification throughout an entire career in an organization. Today, organizational socialization has therefore expanded to encompass practices spanning the entirety of the employee life cycle, i.e., attracting, recruiting, onboarding, developing, retaining, and offboarding an organizational member. Whereas organizational socialization practices accompanying the life cycle of the employee are designed to ensure a certain robustness in the employee's identification with the company credo over the span of a career, they are also designed to instill a certain resilience in the employee when the employee is inevitably faced with continuously having to adjust to a plethora of ever-changing organizational circumstances.

In line with us being critical scholars comes an appreciation of communication as being constitutive, i.e., that communication constitutes social reality (e.g., Ashcraft, Kuhn & Coreen, 2009; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). Building on the seminal work of Austin, that communication is also always a 'doing' (Austin, 1962), contemporary communication scholars have moved away from the tenet of early communication research, and with it, the so-called transmissive appreciation of communication (e.g., Shannon and Weaver, 1949), that would hold that communication is primarily (if not exclusively) a vehicle for the transmission of content. Breaking with the transmissive appreciation, the constitutive understanding of communication is firmly cleaved to the idea of the "co-extensiveness of being and communication" (Deely, 2004, p. 16ff). That is, we see communication *not* as a vehicle for the transmission of content (since there is, in our view, no content *per se* to convey) but, radically differently, as the medium in which we, as human beings, structuration like, are both continuously constituting the social reality in which we exist as well as being constituted ourselves. From this, it follows that not only is the organization itself constituted in communication (as the so-called CCO principle, i.e., communication constitutes organization affirms, e.g., Schöneborn & Blaschke, 2014), but so are – among other organizational entities – the employees. Founded in an understanding that communication is constitutive, we can return to HRM communication, for in this view, the very act of performing HRM communication is not merely a question of conveying HR messages from the management to employees. More importantly, at the very heart of the matter lies the conviction that HRM communication is the medium in which employees are constituted. So, when we talk about organizational socialization as being a pivotal part of HRM communication, we do so from the point of view of communication as constitutive, and in doing so, we do – not to put too fine a point on it – both talk about how the organization talks its employees into existence and, derived from that, what, to the powers that be, constitutes a 'good' employee.

That said, we categorically refrain from going down the road of polarizing opposition, that is, we do not stipulate that business activities are 'bad' *per se*, nor that HRM is the handmaiden of the profit-maximizing organization. We find ourselves to be on par with Mumby and Kuhn (2019, p. 52) when they posit that: "Clearly, collective action and members' identification with an organization are necessary for that organization to thrive." The acknowledgment that identification with an organization is not in and of itself a bad thing must not, however, lead one to endorse a sort of *carte blanche* for any and all organizational identity formation practices; we therefore also concur when Mumby and Kuhn immediately afterward go on to say that such practices are fraught with problems. Especially so when it comes to "[...] the extent to which the assumptions upon which identification are based is both open to examination and freely arrived at." (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 52).

If we turn our attention to the modern, profit-making corporation, then – quite tellingly – neutrality has never been part of the discourse. On the contrary, the proverbial call for all employees to live the brand (e.g., Karmark, 2005) – on as well as off work – is a case in point. A train of thought that has found its communicative crystallization point within the field of "Corporate Communication" (e.g., Cornellissen, 2004 *et passim*) with its focus on "alignment" between employee and organizational values (e.g., Volk & Zerfass, 2018), its call for employee ambassadorship (e.g. Heide & Simonsson, 2011) and for systematizing and exploiting employee advocacy (e.g. Men, 2014) – just to mention but a few, current employee identity formation practices. Looking at these practices from a critical perspective, we share Frost's concern that "[...] people operating in organizational arenas may be damaged, compromised, and even destroyed by what they experience in those arenas." (Frost, 1980, p. 501). Needless to say, this concern is well-founded, and today has its outlets in quiet quitting and the great resignation (e.g., Formica & Sfodera, 2022) and not least in an upsurge in work-related stress across occupations (e.g., Gallie & Zhou, 2013).

In this section, we have introduced to the field of HRM from a critical communication perspective by highlighting some of the business philosophical underpinnings of the field and by pointing to some of its fundamental built-in dilemma(s) and related critical issues. With reference to the notion of colonization of lifeworlds, we further pointed to issues of identity work and identification within HRM as potentially having severe negative consequences for employees as individuals. Having, thus, laid the ground for doing critical research on identity formation by situating it in the wider context of HRM from a communication perspective, the next section will report on the insights gained from the select previous studies on different aspects of identity formation from a critical communication perspective as seen through the lenses of sustainable communication (cf. above).

3 Insights from research on HRM communication

As stated in the introduction, the first task of doing critical research, according to Alvesson and Deetz (2021), is labeled 'insight'. Being the "leading edge of human thought", it "denotes the process of seeing into the various ways in which [...] knowledge and the objective character of objects and events are formed and sustained" (p. 17) and is therefore "closely related to – integral to and an outcome of – interpretation" (p. 129). Critical researchers are encouraged to investigate local forms of phenomena (p. 17), focusing on "the powerful exemplar rather than the mass of data" (p. 128). The select studies (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010; 2022; and 2023) are all qualitative in nature and build upon datasets that allow us to investigate local forms of phenomena, in this case, of different communication aspects of identity formation as part of HRM. Before insights from the studies are presented, a short introduction to the three studies in question, including the research designs, is offered.

The first article, "On the discursive construction of knowledge deficits in the 'alter': Communication as an instrument of management" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010), takes its point of departure in corporate communication as an instrument of strategic management (e.g., Cornelissen, 2004, et passim). More specifically, in the notion of alignment between employee identity and organization and, moreover, in the perception of employees as ambassadors of the organization who are expected to live the mission, vision, and values of the organization (e.g., Christensen et al., 2008). Consequently, employees need to be knowledgeable about key issues within the organization to be able to play the role of ambassadors. Based on this, it is the aim of the article to bring empirical evidence for the discursive construction of knowledge deficits in the 'alter' in order to expose taken-for-granted assumptions within traditional, strategic approaches to management and communication. The data for analysis stem from one article in an employee magazine of the Danish company DONG Energy (now Ørsted). The article, "The hot chair – black gold or necessary evil" (DONG Energy, 2008), is staged as an interview with the then CEO of the company, Anders Eldrup, about "whether the utilisation of coal to supply energy is to be seen in light of being black gold or a necessary evil" and, along that line, "whether 'we', i.e., the employees of DONG Energy, should be proud or have a bad conscience where the utilisation of coal to supply energy by 'us', i.e., DONG Energy, is concerned" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010, p. 180). A method assemblage (Law, 2004) is developed and applied, "consisting of a topic analysis (Li & Yamanishi, 2000; Ditlevsen et al., 2007), an analysis of roles and positions (Berger & Luckmann, 1991 [1966]; Davies & Harré, 1990), and last but not least an analysis of the use of argumentation (Toulmin 1964 [1958])." (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010, p. 178). The methodological choices are made "to integrate three different, yet interdependent perspectives of the discursive realisation of knowledge deficits in the 'alter', in as much as it allows us to synthesise and to reflect upon the 'what' (the topic), the 'who' (roles and positions) and the 'how' (textual realization)." (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010, p. 178). As a final step, the analysis, based on the method assemblage, is synthesized by means of a narratological reading (cf. Czarniawska, 1997).

The second article, "The discursive construction of newcomers. A critical examination of the onboarding program of a global pharmaceutical company" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022), focuses on "onboarding activities as social practices that are enacted in the initial phase of the organization's socialization process to facilitate newcomer adjustment" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022, p. 62), or more specifically to facilitate new members' "acquisition of a set of appropriate role behaviors related to the resolution of role demands, the development of work skills, and the integration into the organization's norms and values" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022, p. 64). Onboarding is strategic in nature and is concerned with establishing alignment on different organizational levels, e.g., between the overall strategy of the organization and HR strategies, including onboarding, and, more importantly, between the identity of the organization and employee identity. Based on this, it is the aim of the article "to expose dominant discursive constructions of participants of organizational socialization processes as they manifest themselves empirically in real-life onboarding practices" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022, p. 63) in order to "raise awareness of what is taken for granted within the fields of corporate communication, human resource management, and management" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022, p. 63). The participants of organizational socialization processes comprise the organization and its representatives as onboarders, newcomers as onboardees, and employees as both onboarders and onboardees. The data for the analysis stem from an established corpus containing texts, images, and videos from the "Welcome Onboard"-website of the global pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk – onboarding material that, until recently, has been publicly accessible. A discourse analysis, inspired by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and rooted in a social semiotic perspective on language (van Leeuwen, 2005), was applied to illuminate how the participants of the onboarding process are discursively constructed in the case of Novo Nordisk.

The focus of the third and final article, "Voices in the employee magazine: A critical investigation" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023), is on organizational identification processes as they manifest themselves in employee magazines. Employee magazines are widely acknowledged as a primary vehicle for identity formation within a strategic internal communication framework (e.g., Kounalakis et al., 1999; Kastberg, 2020). This makes them highly suitable for studying power and control issues in organizational identification processes. Employee voice is introduced as a critical lens through which it becomes clear which organizational members contribute to the discursive construction of organizational identification within a strategic management setting. In the article, having a voice is not used in the traditional sense of the concept, i.e., as a matter of speaking up (e.g., Hirschman, 1970; Morrison & Miliken, 2003). Instead, "[h]aving a voice is fundamentally the right to speak in the first place" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023, p. 193). Based on the so-called CCO principle, communication constitutes organizations (e.g. Cooren et al., 2011), "voice is constituted "[a]s soon as one acts for another" (Taylor & Cooren, 1997: 429), that is, when an organizational member (identifiable actor) speaks for the organization (collective agency) in a mode sanctioned (recognized as legitimate) by said organization (the actor's community)" (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023, p. 194). Consequently, "[...] all managerially sanctioned instances of organizational communication, among them the employee magazine, are contributing to identity regulation in this broad sense of the word. An important lesson from this is that the phenomenon of speaking for an organization as its sanctioned or recognized

voice is by no means a trivial matter. Organizational practice, as well as theory, tells us that voice constituted in this sense is a privilege not bestowed on all organizational members. We are thereby able to enrich our basic appreciation of having a voice with the critical addendum that ‘on the whole, managers decide whether or not workers have a voice’ (Ruck, 2015: 51)” (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023, p. 195). The article sets out to answer the questions of “who has a voice in the first place, that is, who counts as a legitimate, organizational ‘voicer’ (Baschur & Oc, 2015, p. 1531), and what messages, what contents, are voiced” (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023, p. 191). Based on the findings, it is discussed “whether the employee identification aimed at by management is open to examination by employees and freely arrived at” (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023, p. 191). The data are drawn from the ‘G Magazine’, July 2019 – a 40-page long employee magazine of the company Grundfos, a global pump company with its headquarters in Denmark, containing approximately 8,100 words and 36 color-pictures of different sizes (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023, p. 195). The July 2019 issue was selected because it is dedicated to introducing the new corporate strategy and, thus, is particularly suitable for the purposes of the study as “the corporate strategy lays the ground for where the organization is going and, consequently, has a huge impact on employee identity formation” (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023, p. 196).

The point of departure for all three studies can be subsumed as the call for employee ambassadorship within the field of strategic management and related fields like HRM and corporate communication (cf. section 2). A call that implies alignment between employee and organizational values and the expectation of employees acting as employee ambassadors, living the corporate mission, vision, and values or the brand, as it were. Moreover, the above studies (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010; 2022; and 2023) all contribute to a discussion of potential consequences of corporate colonization in the context of HRM by exploring identity formation processes from the perspective of an ‘alter’, i.e., the employee. More explicitly, they all contribute insights into the discursive construction of the employee in HRM communication instances that are clearly instruments of management. However, they are not seen from the point of view of management but instead from that of the employees, i.e., focusing on issues and aspects that are seen as important to the employees as individuals and less on issues and aspects pertaining to management’s efforts to reaching the strategic objectives of the organization. That is, the insights contribute to answering questions like what characterizes the discursively constructed employee and who contributes to the discursive construction of the employee. In the following subsections, some of the specific insights from the reported studies on identity formation (processes) are highlighted, where the employees as important organizational members are concerned. The insights, in turn, are structured around the issues of a) discursively constructed employee identity, b) alignment between the organizational and the individual identity, and c) identified social actors.

Employees are generally constructed as propagators of corporate values (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022; 2023). Moreover, they are constructed as being identical to the organization (cf. below) and as becoming the best version of oneself through the organization (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022). They are, further, constructed as being at a loss as to what they should feel – a loss that transcends the boundary between issues related to being employed and an individual’s psychological state of mind (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010). Moreover, they are constructed as being in need of arguments for defending or explaining corporate strategy to outsiders – arguments that they are provided with by the CEO, in this particular case (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010). In that context, employees are, finally, constructed as students of a Socratic dialogue and, thus, as being the intended recipients or learners, and not as part of an actual, open-ended dialogue itself (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010).

A prominent insight based on the findings from the select studies is the fact that there are clear indications of an ideal of achieving alignment between the organizational and the individual identity. Generally, employees are expected to act as representatives of the organization and not as individuals. As representatives of the organization, they (are expected to) support the corporate strategy, including mission, vision, and values, by pointing to and illustrating the strengths and competencies of the company (e.g., Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023). Moreover, the individual and the organizational identity seem to conflate, as it becomes evident in Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022, in which a discourse of being identical with the organization and one of becoming the best version of oneself through the organization is identified. Not only is such a conflation expected and lived, but conforming to the values and principles of the organization is, in that context, presented as a prerequisite for obtaining attractive advantages that follow from being one with the organization, i.e., the opportunity to experience a life-changing career, including career opportunities, and to change one’s (personal) life, including self-actualization and being part of something bigger (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022).

The first group of social actors in identity formation processes that have been identified in the select studies is the group of managers. They explain and illustrate corporate strategy, including corporate values, and thus, they not only show but also lead the way. All in all, they make it clear what one should aspire to (be) as an employee (e.g., Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023). The CEO plays a key role in this context, e.g., explaining strategic issues, setting the scene, and acting as the personification of the organization and, thus, as the one to follow (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023). This is done not only implicitly but also explicitly communicated, as in the case of Novo Nordisk’s onboarding program where the then CEO explicitly states:

“[...] I have made the Novo Nordisk Way [i.e., the Novo Nordisk values and principles] my way. So, my encouragement to you is [to] make the Novo Nordisk Way also your way. This will provide you with an opportunity to have a life-changing career in Novo Nordisk.”
(cf. data set of Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2022)

Finally, in the case of DONG Energy (Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010), the CEO gives the answer to a rather ethical or moral question and is positioned as a bonus paterfamilias, a patriarch or a shepherd, being able to absolve the ‘alter’ from guilt / bad conscience. The second group of social actors, identified in the select studies, is the group of employees who contribute to the identity formation process by playing a strategic role (cf. above), supporting the strategic goals and objectives. This group of employees can be categorized as ideal actors. Due to the nature of data of the three studies ((an article in) an employee magazine and onboarding

material) where the appearance of employees is sanctioned by management, it may come as no surprise that they, thus, act as propagators of corporate values (cf. above).

To conclude this section, the overall insight is that employees are not positioned as individuals in their own right. Instead, they are positioned as ideal employees, acting as ambassadors and becoming one with the organization. This, moreover, clashes with the call for a focus on the individual or the ‘alter’, as it were, that is prominent within an ethical mindset. Moreover, no signs of a reflexive practice have been identified. Finally, the identified predominantly univocal discourse collides with the call for democratization and participation as the overall aim of a critical mindset.

4 Critiquing HRM communication practices

With a firm basis in the insights thus extracted from our previous research, we turn to the second phase in Alvesson and Deetz’s research design triplet, i.e., that of critique. Critique means “to counteract the dominance of taken-for-granted goals, ideas, ideologies and discourses that put their imprints on social phenomena.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 18). This does, in concretization, imply that critique “is directed at the conventions and structures of social orders and the forms of knowledge and privileged understanding that are complicit with such orders.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 132). At this point, it is pertinent to mention that any distinction between insights and critique is bound to be an analytical one. Or, as Alvesson and Deetz put it, “[c]ritique cannot be separated from insight” as far as “[c]ritique builds upon insight.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 132).

As a framing device for our critique, we make use of the three aforementioned sustainable communication mindsets, i.e., the ethical, the reflexive, and the critical, respectively. Complementing the above insights with a critique based on the ethical mindset, it becomes clear that the organizations in question view the identity of the ‘alter’, i.e., the non-managerial employee, as a malleable entity. As we demonstrated in Kastberg and Ditlevsen (2022), the conflation of organizational and individual identity was one of the taken-for-granted goals of organizational socialization. The fact that this goal is never questioned, it is in fact never even addressed, tells us that the proverbial person-organization fit (Kristof, 1996) is so trivial, i.e., has become so naturalized – at least in the settings investigated –, that no room is left for a reflexive mindset in the first place. Needless to say, leaving no room for a reflexive mindset paves the way for what we, from a critical perspective, would label the corporate colonization (Deetz, 1992) of the individual’s lifeworld. In concluding our critique, i.e., based on our empirical insights (section 3) and paying *homage* to one of the foundational quotes in section 2, we are quite comfortable in summing up our critique that “the assumptions upon which identification are based” are neither “open to examination” nor “freely arrived at” (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 52). From the viewpoint of sustainable communication (cf. Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024), our critique highlights the fact that “[...] cultural traditions and the acts of powerful agents contribute to freezing social reality for the benefit of certain sectional interests at the expense of others.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 6).

5 Transformative redefinitions within the field of HRM communication

The final phase, a phase that Alvesson and Deetz have labeled “transformative redefinition” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 19), is quintessential to their critical research methodology. It is so in the sense that the sole *raison d’être* of the previous two phases is to pave the way for this third and final phase. Building on insights and critique, a transformative redefinition aims at spurring research activism in the sense that it should produce “knowledge and practical understandings that enable change and provide skills for new ways of operating.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 19). In effect, opening up “new ways of engaging the social world” in large part by “promoting alternative vocabularies” (p. 139). But, at the same time, they put forward the *caveat* that “critical research should offer ideas and insights aimed at transformative redefinition rather than specific advice on what to do.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 149). While they are not being very concrete about how one should approach transformative redefinitions in the actual organizational workplace, we, nevertheless, venture to re-dress what we have learned from re-reading and discussing three of our papers as the impetus for transformative redefinitions. We do so by pairing our learnings with the three mindsets underpinning the conceptualization of sustainable communication (above), i.e., an ethical mindset, a reflexive mindset, and a critical mindset. However, in order to live up to Alvesson and Deetz’s request that transformative redefinitions should enable change – as opposed to only talking about change, we surmise – we have opted to a) localize and b) operationalize. In terms of localization, our transformative redefinitions only refer to three contexts of our empirical studies. From this limitation, it follows that, in terms of operationalization, we will only be operationalizing such aspects of the above-mentioned mindsets that we deem to be the most salient in our empirical contexts. In terms of “alternative vocabularies” (above), we suggest three interrelated routes for the transformative redefinition of how HRM communication could begin eliciting employee identity formation in ways that are (more) ethical, (more) reflexive, and (more) in line with a critical mindset. Due to the fact that Alvesson and Deetz make use of instructional advice only sparingly, if at all, we have opted to center our “alternative vocabularies” (above) on questions that a) have a firm basis in the three mindsets (above), that are b) based on clear philosophical underpinnings, and that c) are formulated in such a way as to spur a change enabling discourse within the field of HRM – as the field is portrayed in the three papers (above). With reference to the part of our aim (section 1) that seeks to cater to operationalizing our critical approach, we will devote the following subsection to an integration of the tenets of the three sustainable mindsets (above) with what we deem to be a coherent set of manageable questions. Questions, in effect, that aim at constructively disrupting aspects of the taken-for-granted HRM communication practices when it comes to discursively constructing the employee. Acknowledging that “[a] cultural change is difficult to accomplish by

appealing solely to a disadvantaged group.” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 148), our questions are first and foremost designed to be employed at the level of organizational policy making.

As seen from the ethical perspective, a transformative redefinition would be expected to have an egalitarian point of departure, i.e., a point of departure wherein the ‘alter’ is not merely a malleable tool but recognized as a human being in his or her own right. In terms of a philosophical underpinning of our egalitarian *ethos*, we turn to the so-called formula of humanity proposed by Enlightenment champion Immanuel Kant. We do so since this formula commands that we treat other human beings as the ends, not the means to the end (our rendering of the Kantian wording “So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only” (2004 [1785])). In order to instrumentalize an ethical stance that might come across as rather lofty, we suggest translating the gist of said stance into a question that aims at “opening up new ways of engaging the social world” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 139), i.e., in our case, engaging HRM communication:

- How would you talk to someone if you did not view that someone as your tool?

When it comes to the reflexive mindset, our insights and the nature of our ensuing critique compel us to aim for a disruption of the Rawlsian kind. John Rawls introduced the thought experiment that if an institutional decision maker were to be kept in the dark, i.e., behind what he labeled *the veil of ignorance* when it comes to characteristics such as gender, class, age, ethnicity, etc., said decision maker would effectively be barred from making decisions favoring/disfavoring certain social groups (1971). This, in his view, would eventually give rise to a more just society. Needless to say, the idealism inherent in this idea has been heavily criticized, the Rawlsian legacy, nevertheless, lives on in today’s call for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) – at both a societal and an organizational level. Within the confines of this paper, we refrain from venturing out into the broader discourse of DEI. We do, however, posit that as a means of disrupting the organizational *status quo*, the Rawlsian principle may serve as a potent point of departure for a transformative redefinition of much downward HRM communication. Instrumentalizing Rawls’ idea with a view to shrouding the manager in *the veil of ignorance* when it comes to organizational hierarchy could be translated into a reflexive question along these lines:

- How would you talk to someone if you did not know your own status relative to his/her?

Last but not least, when it comes to the critical mindset, we turn to one of the pivots of critical scholarship, namely the (unjust) distribution of power. In the perfect egalitarian and reflexive organization, we take it, the permeating – and indeed, structuring – ideal would be that of power being distributed democratically. However, in line with Alvesson and Deetz’s carefully crafted wording that “[...] critical research should offer ideas and insights aimed at transformative redefinition rather than specific advice on what to do [...]” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 149), we opt for evolution and not revolution. Knowing full well that an ideal speech situation of a Habermasian persuasion is nowhere in sight in most – if not all – profit-maximizing corporations, instrumentalizing a core tenet of the critical mindset with a view to democratization could translate into this question when it comes to HRM communication:

- How would you talk to someone if you did not have formal power over him/her?

With these three questions, we have followed through on Alvesson and Deetz’s request for a tripartite process when conducting critical research (section 1). In doing so, we have not only demonstrated that critical research can be conceptual, empirical, and practically oriented (if not activist) at the same time. We have also demonstrated that despite the fact that we live “[...] in a time partly ruled by neo-liberal ideologies and practices, typically engineered by managerialism [...]” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 195), superimposing the tenets of sustainable communication (cf. Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024) unto everyday instances of organizational communication can shed new light on ‘old’ issues. More importantly, it can point to much-needed ethical, reflexive, and critically oriented avenues of research and, indeed, temperate researcher activism.

6 Conclusion

It was the aim of this paper to put forward and discuss illustrative examples of human resource management (HRM) communication practices through the lenses of sustainable communication. Three studies on HRM communication practices with a focus on the discursive construction of the employee (i.e., Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2010; 2022; 2023) served as the empirical basis for the paper. The select studies are not originally situated within a sustainable communication framework but rather within a critical organizational communication framework. However, they all feature main characteristics pertaining to sustainable communication (Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024) and were, thus, suitable for the aim of this paper. The research objects of the select studies revolve around identity formation as an important aspect of organizational socialization within HRM communication. However, the studies do not focus on organizational aspects of identity formation. Rather, they focus on the individual and contribute, thus, to a discussion of potential consequences of corporate colonization in the context of HRM communication by exploring identity formation processes from the perspective of an ‘alter’, i.e., the employee.

In order to fulfill the above aim of the paper, we applied the methodological framework for doing critical research proposed by Alvesson and Deetz (2021) with its three phases: insights, critique, and transformative redefinition. The reason for choosing this

particular methodological framework is the fact that it resonates well with the ethical, reflexive, and critical mindsets of sustainable communication (cf. Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024). The transformative redefinition phase is of particular interest as it suggests more far-reaching responsibilities of researchers, i.e., not only to gain insights and to critique but also to produce “knowledge and practical understandings that enable change and provide skills for new ways of operating” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021, p. 19). For that reason, the paper offered a discussion of what the implications of the insights gained and the critique offered could be for practice, including specific suggestions for practicing sustainable communication within the field of HRM communication. Due to the fact that Alvesson and Deetz (2021) only sparingly make use of instructional advice, we paired our learnings from the three studies with the three mindsets underpinning the conceptualization of sustainable communication, i.e., an ethical mindset, a reflexive mindset, and a critical mindset. As a result, the three mindsets of sustainable communication were instrumentalized into three concrete questions related to HRM communication practices.

As a final remark, we envision that the methodology proposed here may hold the promise of bridging the disciplinary gaps between business and management (section 2), in effect releasing HRM from its uneasy suspension between its two parental disciplines. Our hope is grounded on the theoretical underpinnings of sustainable communication, our empirical findings, as well as our ensuing discussions. They all point in the same direction, a direction that leads us to posit that the three disciplines, i.e., business, management, and HRM, not only supplement one another, but they do indeed naturally complement one another. In the laconic words of Heinz von Foerster: “You need all three to have all three” (von Foerster, 2003 [1979], p. 284).

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