'Vulnerability' at work: Instrumental vulnerabilities among software professionals

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Abstract: As a self-improvement discourse, 'vulnerability' brings a compelling promise for software workplaces around engendering productivity, innovation and creativity among employees. While critical studies have interrogated various self-improvement discourses, less is known about how workers respond to and negotiate these discourses in professional contexts. This article asks how workers of North American software companies construct vulnerability. It finds that constructions instrumentalize vulnerability in the workplace as the exposure of failures, mistakes and knowledge gaps to enact organizational resilience. Drawing from interviews, the article discusses the implications of these constructions.

Introduction

As a self-improvement discourse, 'vulnerability' has received wide-reaching media coverage in recent years. Rather than focusing on those who occupy marginalized positions that render them vulnerable, this discourse centers the notion of making oneself 'vulnerable' to achieve some aim such as relational closeness, trust, and even intimacy. In fact, the vulnerability discourse has gained widespread popularity within organizations[1] and also in management-oriented cultural products.

Recent headlines on the topic include: Harvard Business Review's 'What Bosses Gain by Being Vulnerable;' Forbe's Magazine's 'Vulnerability is not Weakness, it's core to effective leadership;' and the Financial Post's, 'Vulnerability in the executive suite: Teachers' top lawyer leads with his heart on his sleeve […] shows it's okay to be human' (Grossman, 2019; O'Connor, 2019; Seppala, 2014). The fusing of 'vulnerability' to leadership can even be found in retail advertising. Scrawled on the reusable shopping bags of the prominent Canadian athleisure brand LuLu Lemon are the words, 'vulnerability makes a good leader great.' Such far-reaching cultural uptake indicates that so-called vulnerable leadership is becoming a prominent discourse in multiple realms, circulating the notion that vulnerability is key for effective leadership. These positive connotations may seem a stark shift for a concept that was once derided in corporate spaces. Yet, the warm embrace of 'vulnerability' in corporate life is better understood in light of critical management and organization studies literature.

In the context of knowledge work, many self-improvement discourses have urged people to conceptualize of their careers as deep-rooted aspects of the self, about which they should derive personal fulfillment (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Gregg, 2011, 2018; Rose, 1992, 1996). Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) suggest that within many corporations, leadership have become 'cadres,' and act as visionaries who inspire people to work in specific ways. Such cadres may promote the entanglement of inner lives with careers, drawing from psy-oriented[2] expertise. Philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of biopower helps to elucidate this process, through which workers take up the aims of organizations as though they came to them autonomously. This concept demonstrates how management discourse offers workers autonomy while 'nudging in certain directions' (Fleming, 2022: 5).

Similar to many corporate settings in North America (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019), technology employees are called to take up specific social and emotional competencies. Such competencies are circulated in part through self-improvement discourses that are echoed in and legitimated by industry best practices, popularized media, and workplace norms. As noted by sociologist Eva Illouz (2007), neoliberal capitalism has involved a turn to emotion and an emphasis on improving the self. Illouz (2008) points out that striving to improve the self often leads to new suffering, as it centers an incomplete self that requires continuous work. Considering this, analyses of how employees are called to work on themselves, and how they respond to these calls, can help to reveal the inner workings of the process of inspiring workers (Foucault, 1986, 1988, 1990; Rose, 1992, 1996).

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[1] The *Behavioural Resource Group* helps corporate employees cultivate leadership skills, and incorporates teachings about vulnerability into its programming. A webpage from February 2020 states, 'Our "Your Best Self" retreats enable you to meet others who are focused on personal and self-discovery in an intimate setting built on vulnerability and authenticity.'

[2] Nikolas Rose's (1998: 2) conception of "psy" or "ways of thinking and acting" that draw on the "psychosciences."

During fieldwork in the software industry in 2019, after noting that 'vulnerability' was a prominent theme among participants at large-scale conferences and other professional sites, a research question took shape. That is, what does vulnerability mean to workers in the context of their professional lives? Software is a particularly important industry to focus on for such an inquiry, as there is a great deal of emotion work required of professionals in this and other high-tech industries (English-Lueck, 2010, 2017; Kelan, 2008). Moreover, the cultures of professional settings of software, with their informality and the propensity to entangle public and private realms, contribute to the challenges employees face around professional subjectivity.

The present article assesses how 'vulnerability' in the workplace was constructed by professionals in the software industry where, in contrast to a more authoritative model of employee conduct, ways of being tend to be compelled in less direct ways. The findings show that the discourse about vulnerability involves exposing knowledge gaps, mistakes and failures in organizations, in part to protect against organizational threats. As part of this process, setbacks are cast as opportunities to 'bounce back,' gesturing toward resilience.

The paper finds that workers' constructions at times suggest that they leverage 'instrumental vulnerability.' It reveals vulnerability to be an emotion-centered framework for making sense of the self that, for interviewees, is largely accessible to high-ranking employees. Although helpful to some, this discourse may bring forth an emergent requirement to take up additional work to show the self as 'vulnerable,' while the rewards for doing so may be contingent on one's place within organizational hierarchies.

Literature Review: A Remaking of 'Vulnerability' or the Dynamism of the Enterprising Self?

Self-improvement discourses influence people in complex ways. In an auto-ethnographic study, André Spicer and Carl Cederstrom (2015) conveyed that they frequently felt worse after engaging in self-improvement, and became exhausted from the pursuit. Ronald Purser (2019) refers to contemporary self-improvement as 'McMindfulness,' pointing out how practices to improve the self have detached from longer-standing traditions, rendered more palatable in various settings. For instance, Sarah Sharma (2014) shows how, in the North American corporate wellness industry, yoga has been disconnected from its historical and cultural origins. Yoga becomes a means to sooth employees momentarily to maintain their productivity (Sharma, 2014).

The wellness sector has been found to propagate normative ideals, with its prominent spokespeople often being white, thin, youthful, affluent women (O'Neill, 2020a, 2020b). Furthermore, in relation to subjectivity, self-improvement discourses tend to evoke a shift from focusing on external factors and 'towards interiorized affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring' (Rottenberg, 2014: 424). To question how self-improvement discourses are constructed by organizations and employees is to inquire about the ways of being and feeling rules employees are called towards.

Relatedly, much self-improvement discourse draws from intangible criteria that highlights the importance of positive affect. The boundlessness of self-improvement, and the circuitous practices that it compels, also make it easily commodifiable. In fact, the flexibility of

these discourses make them particularly attractive to software settings that often seek rapid response to change and continued growth as values, which conveniently map onto both the organization and the self.

The self-improvement oriented vulnerability discourse is preceded by a long-standing conceptualization of the display of vulnerability as objectionable in corporations. 'Vulnerability,' with its Latin 'vulnerarae' means 'to wound.' From 'vulnus' meaning 'a wound,' it describes the predisposition to injury (Sabsay, 2016: 285; Hirsch, 2016), a meaning most employees would not care to be associated with. It is tempting to assume the current shift in the meaning of 'vulnerability' may represent a fundamental change to corporate culture. Yet, this remaking of 'vulnerability' may simply demonstrate the dynamism of the enterprising subject.

As a central facet of neoliberal subjectivity, the enterprising subject internalizes institutional norms and codes of conduct that can shape and limit the terms of their agency (Foucault, 1978-79). For the enterprising self, governance relates not simply to how individuals conduct themselves socially but also to how they make sense of their lives (Rose, 1992, 1996). Considering this, self-improvement discourses can be conceptualized as regulatory tools, encouraging individuals to govern their lives according to market logics (Illouz, 2007, 2008). In fact, a growing body of literature on the regulating force of the enterprising self focuses on the constitution of subjectivity in relation to work and the workplace (Conor, Gill & Taylor, 2015; Hochschild, 1983, 1994; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Scharff, 2017).

Additionally, literature on inequities in technology work (Gray & Suri, 2019) sheds light on the workers that management discourses related to self-improvement may overlook. Self-improvement discourses tend to be aimed at workers who possess a certain degree of privilege, rather than those earning the lowest wages internationally, and with the least protections. Research focusing on intersectional inequities, showing how inequities are reproduced (Hill Collins 2003, 1993; Crenshaw 1991), is also pertinent. Technology workplaces are built around organizational structures that enable employees to advance. Considering this, such workplaces are inevitably spaces where hierarchies play a role in how work is organized.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that organization and management studies have a long history in self-improvement. Psychologist Elton Mayo brought forth the therapeutic influence within the manager-worker relation (Gregg 2018). Through the Hawthorne experiments, Mayo inquired about the social and personal lives of factory workers, who were mainly migrant women. Scholar Melissa Gregg (2018) notes that Mayo sought to understand the full picture of these workers in a quest to maximize their productivity, and he applied invasive methods to do so. He even prodded into workers' physiology, documenting their time of menstruation (Gregg, 2018). Management thought in the 21st century has built on these and other findings, entangling public and private life and binding self-understanding to feelings of pride and accomplishment for a job well done (Gregg 2018; Gregg & Kneese 2020). This research continues to inform contemporary ideas around the internalization of work-based accomplishments.

Furthermore, culture is an aspect of this internalization, as cultural texts such as media products call subjects to behave, think, and feel in specific ways. In fact, this process extends to industrial and organizational cultures, which are circulated through industry- and organization-specific discourses and practices. In relation to culture, the vulnerability discourse was popularized following social work scholar Brené Brown's TEDx Houston (2010) and TED (2012) talks, and subsequent media appearances including a 2019 Netflix special.[3] In the latter,

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[3] Brown's TEDx and TED talks have together been viewed more than 63,900,000 times. She has appeared twice on Oprah's Super Soul Sunday, and played herself in Amy Poehler's 2019 film *Wine Country*.

Brown states that cultivating vulnerability involves letting the self 'be seen' to live a 'wholehearted' life (Netflix, 2019). Brown suggests that vulnerability is particularly important for leaders and states, 'brave leaders are never silent around hard things' (Netflix, 2019). In fact, Brown's 'vulnerability' offers a poignant promise for employers, and for technology industries in particular. She notes that she works with multiple tech companies and teaches 'CEOs in Silicon Valley' about vulnerability (Netflix, 2019). She is a consultant for Pixar, IBM and other corporations, coaching executives to incorporate vulnerability into leadership practices (Aspan, 2018).

As a self-improvement discourse, vulnerability involves organizing oneself as 'whole,' which fits into contemporary constructions of selfhood. In an era in which changes to capitalism including digitization have led to work and home increasingly entangling, a flattening out of selfhood is constructed as highly efficient and lucrative. This conceptualization is evoked when Brown states, 'we all have a responsibility to show up, and bring our whole hearts and our whole selves to work, and lean into the tough conversations' (Netflix, 2019).

Additionally, on Netflix (2019) Brown asks, 'how many of you want more love, intimacy [...] in your lives? Joy? You can't have that if you don't let yourselves be seen.' Brown then suggests that 'vulnerability' is the means to let the self 'be seen' (Netflix, 2019), showing vulnerability is not only beneficial in professional but also private realms. While vulnerability has been studied as a discourse circulated through cultural products (Ciccone, 2020; Orgad & Gill, 2021), less is known about how it is negotiated for knowledge workers. This is important since certain emotional and social ways of being are constructed as resources in organizations concerning how day-to-day business is conducted, and how these are taken up can have bearing on workers' careers (Adkins 2002; Cameron 2000; Illouz, 2007; Swan, 2008).

Method

Over eight months in 2019, a multi-sited ethnography was conducted in the software sector. This included participant observation and 75 interviews, 22 of which were formal, with 55 unique interviewees working at software companies in Vancouver and Toronto. Interviewees tended to occupy mid- and senior-level roles. They predominantly worked in software development, product management, sales and consulting. Participants were recruited during the multi-sited ethnography – which took place at a software company, conferences and events – and by reaching out cold. Interviews typically lasted an hour, and took place at times and locations convenient to participants. The 22 formal interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, with consent provided for this. During informal interviews extensive notes were taken, and were typed up immediately afterwards. Data has been pseudonymized, and identifying details of the research have been removed or altered to protect confidentiality of the sites and people studied. Additional details of the method have been discussed elsewhere (Ciccone, 2022, 2023).

The approach to data collection was inductive, and the present article is part of a larger study focused on software workers. The inductive approach meant that analysis took place during data collection and that the scope was adjusted in response to findings (Rivera, 2015). Data were coded and analyzed applying thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Initial codes were developed, data read repeatedly, and codes adjusted. Transcripts and field notes were coded

and analyzed using NVivo, with 34 main codes and 103 sub-codes. 'Vulnerability' became one of the codes, which initially emerged from participant observation, and was then focused on for an aspect of the interviews. Due to the vast ethical considerations for interviewees and industry sites, it was important to keep participants and sites protected.

In terms of the study's focus, self-improvement emerged as a clear theme, of which vulnerability was a prominent aspect. The present paper focuses on how interviewees constructed vulnerability when asked about it. During interviews, a series of questions were asked about how workers understood vulnerability in the workplace, what they thought it conveyed, and what purpose it served. This most often began with, 'what do you think it means to be vulnerable at work?' Follow up questions were used to clarify answers and enable interviewees to expand. Themes emerged around how individuals constructed vulnerability in their workplaces; what they understood as the value of displaying vulnerability; and, for whom vulnerability was thought to be well-suited.

Findings

Vulnerability as the exposure of failure

During an informal interview, Janine, a senior sales leader states that vulnerability materializes on her team as 'confidence sharing' between peers or 'rep-to-rep.' She explains that people confide in each other about 'work and life' and that this sharing is an example of vulnerability. Janine constructs vulnerability not as something one *is* but something one *does* in the form of revealing something about personal or professional life. Additionally, when asked what vulnerability was to her, a senior product manager, Margaret, states:

> it's very much admitting when I'm wrong or when I don't know something […] I think I've earned respect from being able to stand up and say 'yah you know what, we [messed] up this release, here's what we did wrong and here's what we're gonna do different next time.' Publicly saying those things I think has actually helped with, umm, building credibility. And so that's what I think, at least for me, it looks like in the workplace. It's not, it's just kind of being human. Realness. Again, that authenticity.

Margaret constructs placing mistakes and knowledge gaps on display as evidence of 'vulnerability' in the workplace. Her assertions suggest that she understands 'vulnerability' in the workplace to achieve certain things for her (e.g. garnering respect). Margaret also highlights what went wrong and what she will do differently next time. Interestingly, similar logics were at play for a mid-level software engineer, Marcus. He states:

> a huge part of actually being good at your job is just failing. And having that freedom to fail is, you can only do that through vulnerability by putting yourself out there and we encourage that. We try to make it as easy as possible for people to fail in the way that they want. 'Cause only if you fail, you get better at stuff and then the whole organization grows. I think that's what vulnerability looks like – the freedom to fail, and being OK with the fear of failing and just lowering that at some point.

Marcus asserts that through 'putting yourself out there' one can 'get better at stuff,' which he suggests will lead to organizational growth. Both Margaret and Marcus suggest that vulnerability involves placing mistakes on display as a means to improve. Recall that resilience involves bouncing back from hardship through recasting challenges as opportunities. In highlighting what went wrong and what they will do differently next time, Margaret and Marcus begin to show that enacting vulnerability is understood as a means to build, or perform, resilience.

Additionally, of vulnerability in the workplace a mid-level salesperson, Drew, states:

> I think it's admitting that I don't know, that I don't have all the answers. That I don't have the best approach here. Or also here's an example where I failed. Like I'm asking you to be open about what you're challenged by and what you're struggling with, here's what I'm struggling with and here's an example where I failed.

Drew's construction of vulnerability involves the exposure of a knowledge gap or failure. His construction shows that he understands vulnerability to be relational. For instance, he suggests that vulnerability involves offering an example in which he 'failed,' alongside an expectation that those he communicates this to will similarly 'be open' about their challenges. Drew's comments center vulnerability in the workplace within the realm of communication among coworkers.

Moreover, several interviewees position vulnerability as a means to engender productivity in the workplace. A mid-level software engineer, David, states:

> you have to make yourself a little bit vulnerable to a) learn and b) be really productive. You just have to go and do certain things and put it out there and then people will criticize what you did.

Additionally, Zach, a field sales professional, notes, 'So I think there's something to be said for being vulnerable with what you don't know and what you need help with.' Here, the exposure of knowledge gaps and areas where help is needed are constructed as opportunities to strengthen productivity. Also, a mid-level product manager, Sam, explains that vulnerability is necessary to 'get better and better at things.' Sam adds:

> [employees] need to be vulnerable and be open to saying like I don't know this, I need to learn this stuff […]. But even my director would easily say 'I don't know anything about this can you explain it to me?'

Sam suggests that in the workplace, vulnerability allows people to voice their knowledge gaps in an effort to support continuous improvement. In mentioning a director and suggesting that an organizational leader values 'vulnerability' in the workplace, the interviewee constructs vulnerability as a desirable way of being at the company. Additionally, similar to others mentioned above, Sam constructs vulnerability through orienting towards improving.

A privileged discourse: 'Vulnerable' leaders

Multiple interviewees speak of those in leadership positions as being particularly important people to show 'vulnerability' in the workplace. Marcus states:

> I think uhh leadership should show vulnerability. I think people in positions if they're like higher should show vulnerability to show people in like more junior positions that it's ok to make mistakes and it's ok to be completely transparent about stuff because everyone makes mistakes and uhh, and as soon as everyone accepts that it's going to be easier to have an egoless culture. I think it's a very positive and productive work environment.

Marcus constructs leaders as ideal subjects to enact 'vulnerability' through the exposure of mistakes. He also suggests that when leaders show 'vulnerability,' this legitimates it as an intersubjective way of being for less powerful people, demonstrating vulnerability to be a privileged discourse.

Moreover, in commenting that 'vulnerability' enables a 'positive and productive work environment,' Marcus imbues 'vulnerability' with moral undertones. He later adds:

> There was a team that got laid off, like a whole team and it was a huge bummer […] but they just got up and had a frank conversation. I think that takes a lot of vulnerability to do that rather than you know just sending an email […] I think that like supporting this egoless culture makes it easy to be vulnerable and easy to like 'fail out loud' so they say.

The leaders' forthrightness in a time of organizational turmoil is understood by Marcus to be an example of 'vulnerability.' For Marcus, there is a constitutive relation between vulnerability and an 'egoless' organizational culture. Yet, to be 'egoless' may indicate a depoliticization. That is, Marcus' constructions around vulnerability and ego encourage what Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) might describe as the waning of critique. Instead of questioning the layoff, Marcus focuses on the leaders' 'frank conversation' and willingness to 'fail out loud' as examples of vulnerability. In highlighting how the layoff was communicated rather than the fact that it happened, Marcus foregrounds the positive and starts to reframe this situation as an example of resilience. While Marcus' constructions may help him make the best of what happened, they also have the function turning him away from critique. Such a turn has been documented in external research as a common refrain of resilience discourses (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Neocleous, 2013).

Furthermore, speaking about 'vulnerability,' a mid-level consultant, Marie, states that the reason she believes people avoid sharing their mistakes in her workplace was 'probably based on ego.' It is noteworthy that 'ego' is conventionally understood to be a masculinized quality (Collins Dictionary, 2020) and, having an ego is constructed by Marie as a barrier to enacting vulnerability. The repudiation of 'ego' and centering of being 'egoless' among Marie and Marcus, respectively, exposes some of the gendered dimensions of interviewees' constructions of vulnerability in the workplace. Scholar Sarah Bracke (2016) asserts that traditional femininity instructs women to display vulnerability and fragility, urging them to be passive, uncertain and fearful. Yet, certain feminine qualities and dispositions are rendered desirable in the workplace for enabling the exposure of mistakes, failures and knowledge gaps. At the same time, such traits are orienting towards continuously improving. This performance of traits thought to be

conventionally 'feminine' is strategic. It is not about how one *is*, but instead what one *does*. Such constructions echo Janine, the first interviewee mentioned.

Additionally, about vulnerability, Gavin, a mid-level software engineer, states:

> I think it's easier the more senior you get because you have this foundation of capability that's established. If it's something that you couldn't have known, again it's a sort of calculation, like is this something you should have known? But even then you can say like 'yes I should have and I totally missed that.'

Gavin's comments suggest that there is less inherent risk for more senior people to show 'vulnerability.' Such constructions indicate that the possibilities for displaying 'vulnerability' may be different depending on one's seniority level. Moreover, Margaret states:

> credibility allows for more vulnerability. Because if I was to go into a new job I don't think I would just be layin' it all out there, because I haven't proven anything to you yet, but I'm [bad] at this and I [messed] this up publicly [laughs]. I don't know that that would go over in the same way, so I do think that there maybe has to be an element of credibility before you can be truly – well, you can be truly vulnerable, but before it's seen as a strength.

Margaret's quote and the previous comments by Gavin provide insight into how workers come to understand desirable ways of being through the prism of organizational hierarchies. The interviewees suggest that in organizations certain ways of being are more or less accessible to people depending on their level of seniority. This exposes the organization as a site to make sense of the self, as people are urged to take up ways of being considered appropriate for their place in the organizational hierarchy (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; see also Ciccone, 2023).

Some interviewees suggested that enacting vulnerability in the workplace could be risky. Without being prompted to speak about leadership, a mid-level consulting employee, Bruce, states:

> Should you be able to be vulnerable? Yes. Should you be vulnerable? Probably not […] I think it's important for leaders at least to embrace vulnerability as something that is innate to human beings as a concept. It's almost completely unavoidable and you will do better as a leader if you encourage that then if you don't. But regardless of intent it can have a negative impact or consequence to how you're perceived generally if you are a vulnerable person, this is not necessarily a good thing but it is the truth.

Not only does Bruce construct leaders as ideal subjects to enact 'vulnerability' in the workplace, he highlights that vulnerability is both an ontological state and an intersubjective strategy. For Bruce, if one is a 'vulnerable person' then being vulnerable can have 'negative impact,' yet, as a leader it is important to engender the feeling that people have space to be 'vulnerable.'

Ambivalences surrounding 'instrumental vulnerabilities'

The discourse of accountability and 'owning' one's mistakes was drawn on by multiple interviewees when speaking about vulnerability in the workplace. Marie states:

> I hate it when people like pass it off though, and they'll be like 'well you know this happened.' And it's like actually that was you who was responsible for that so why don't you just, like you should have your name on that and you should own that. And people will respect that equally. But not owning it is a sign for me that maybe you're unwilling to learn from it.

Marie is not suggesting that people who are unwilling to expose their mistakes are unwilling to be 'vulnerable.' Instead, the meaning she draws is that they are unwilling to learn, a highly unfavorable construction in software. In this industry, failure is celebrated in part for the lessons it offers, and being unwilling to learn is akin to working against organizational aims. Marie's assertions around taking ownership of mistakes are also individuating, as they require someone to name themselves as the mistake's rightful owner, rather than assessing other factors that may have contributed.

Marie adds that she can also experience vulnerability as 'raw emotion,' but that generally in the context of her work:

> I would probably be more of a logical brain and just be like 'of course I'm going to own this.' You know there's not necessarily emotion tied to it, it's also just like a choice or a decision or a fact, like 'yeah that was my bad.' So I think you can really be either, and it really depends on the context.

She also states that vulnerability is:

> really important to doing your work effectively but also to building relationships at the same time. Because you're not going to be able to do your job effectively without having strong relationships internally and externally.

Marie constructs vulnerability as a logical choice, which she demonstrates through 'owning' mistakes. Such constructions reflect what scholar Jan English-Lueck (2017: 78) refers to as an ethos of instrumentality that pervades all realms of life among high-tech employees. Interviewees' constructions displayed this ethos, and centered the importance of *instrumentalizing* vulnerability. Although showing 'vulnerability' was understood to yield certain rewards such as establishing trust, strengthening relations and assuaging conflict, these rewards also supported organizational resilience.

Some interviewees showed ambivalence about displaying 'vulnerability' in the workplace. A senior-level consultant, Jay, reflects on a recent meeting:

> a lot of people in that conversation we're very open and honest, and I think that's almost become like a very, I don't know if it's a very trendy thing to do but at least a very topical mindset is like being vulnerable. You know what I mean? I think that's kind of like how people operate now.

Jay points to vulnerability as an instrumental intersubjective relation, which he constructs as 'trendy.' He adds:

> I don't think that people should feel pressured to be [vulnerable], which is in some ways [what] I think it feels like now. Like now I'm conscious of the fact that I almost have to be more emotionally open and reveal more of my like weaknesses or challenges or whatever and I don't want to but you almost feel like you have to because that's like the culture we're in, which I don't love.

Jay foregrounds the ambivalence felt by some interviewees concerning 'vulnerability,' which he suggests is an emergent expectation regarding interpersonal workplace communication. Based on Jay's comments, this expectation seems to circulate in organizational or industrial culture.

Jay's quote evokes scholar Elaine Swan's (2008) assertion that the injunction to perform specific kinds of emotionality and intimacy in the workplace can result in employees questioning their own authenticity. Such questioning centers one's ability to be 'real' when employees may feel that the way they are expected to conduct themselves is at odds with how they construct themselves as authentic (Swan, 2008). While some interviewees viewed vulnerability as a vehicle to legitimate themselves as authentic in the workplace (e.g. see Margaret in the first part of the findings section), others such as Jay implied that displaying vulnerability was an organizational expectation in which he did not wish to participate. Others were explicit about how vulnerability is used instrumentally. Gavin states:

> smart people use it [vulnerability] as a tool effectively to increase their influence and build their career. I mean that's a very cynical take on it […] It's a powerful tool and it does affect how other people feel about you and what they think about you.

When questioned further he adds:

> It's a fine line because if you're too vulnerable you can unintentionally look weak or like you don't have your stuff together, on the other hand being calculated about how you're vulnerable can exposes a bit of weakness that just builds trust and like a shared sort of, like, is particularly good if you can share something that you know shows a bit of humanity but that is something that someone else probably has experienced too. So that it's like 'I wouldn't normally bring that up but I know what you're talking about.' Versus something that's like 'oh that's awkward, wish you hadn't said that.'

Gavin's constructions of 'vulnerability' expose the instrumental aspects of it while conveying ambivalence. He unsettles a tension between the broader popular discourse about vulnerability that calls people to let themselves 'be seen' as inherently messy and complex beings, and the requirements of managing the self in a corporation. The corporation is an institutional setting that has long constructed professionalism as void of strong expressions of emotion (Illouz, 2008; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). While software organizations are generally informal culturally, they remain structured by the logic of organizational hierarchy. Showing *too much* vulnerability in these settings can render one a liability.

Discussion

The presumed informality of software workplaces highlights the importance of employing strategic ways of being. In an industry in which people are encouraged to work and play together, the boundaries around professionalism can become nebulous and all the more important to manage. Yet, such informality also bears down on selfhood. As the interviewee Jay pointed out, he does not necessarily want to display emotion in the workplace, yet, feels pressured to do so at a time when vulnerability has become what he describes as 'trendy.' At the same time, negotiating 'vulnerability' with skepticism may still influence how subjects understand their inner lives.

Scholars have asserted that subjectivity and emotion are permeable to intersubjective relations and to culture (Ahmed, 2004; Gill, 2011). Simply because workers have agency in how they respond to workplace and cultural discourses does not negate the importance of these discourses in shaping their inner worlds. Even when vulnerability is constructed as a purely 'logical' way of being to achieve some aim, or as a construct about which one is skeptical, as Hochschild (1975) suggests, people are still sentient subjects. Negotiating 'instrumental vulnerabilities' has bearing on how they make sense of emotions and the self. Moreover, this discourse could be an emergent way in which market logics influence what is felt, and the sense made of such feelings.

Drawing from Illouz's (2008) scholarship around popularized therapeutic ideas, there are several ways in which the vulnerability discourse works productively in the context of professional subjectivity. Firstly, 'vulnerability' fits into the existing social structure rather than challenging it. 'Vulnerability' is both constituted within and by the privatization of risk, widespread political economic uncertainty, and feelings of insecurity regarding the future. 'Vulnerability' also provides direction around what Illouz (2008: 14) terms 'uncertain or conflict-ridden areas of social conduct' such as exhibiting leadership, and discussing failures. It offers an emotional framework to make sense of professional settings, and a toolkit to construct the self intersubjectively. Relatedly, the vulnerability discourse is becoming institutionalized. This discourse is rooted within the social work discipline, and is thus part of a formalized knowledge system that influences conduct within organizations.[4] Furthermore, among professional subjects, 'vulnerability' involves continually guarding against the possibility of becoming ontologically vulnerable through orienting towards organizational resilience. This involves the exposure of knowledge gaps, mistakes and failures intersubjectively in the workplace as a means to guard against threats to the organization. Through this exposure, setbacks are recast as opportunities for the organization to continually 'bounce back' and improve.

Organizations have operationalized resilience discourses to encourage employees to adopt internal tools that will equip them to adjust to difficult work conditions (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). As noted previously, vulnerability can be located within resilience. With its 'fantasy of mastery' that encourages self-sufficiency (Bracke, 2016: 58), 'vulnerability' also brings a compelling promise to technology workplaces around engendering productivity alongside innovation and creativity. This is concerning considering that resilience has been found to call subjects to forego security through embracing exposure to threats, recasting these as

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[4] See footnote 1.

opportunities (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Evans & Reid, 2014; Neocleous, 2013). Yet, in an uncertain political economic context, the elasticity of resilience as a concept holds particular appeal for professional settings. This resilience orientation connects to lived experiences of heavy workloads, the phrenetic pace of digitized work, and the stressors that accompany professionalism. Constructing oneself as a good professional subject through exposing failures validates these experiences, and may also alleviate some of the discomfort they cause.

In understanding the display of 'vulnerability' as good, subjects may derive important affective and social rewards. The present analysis is not meant to diminish these. Rather, it is to point out that this way of being involves constituting the self in a way that fits within the political and economic conditions in which organizations are situated, including existing hierarchies.

Conclusion

The vulnerability discourse is particularly appealing to technology sectors. As scholar Thomas Streeter (2015) argues, within Silicon Valley culture the revelation of failures and vulnerabilities signifies 'authenticity.' In fact, ideal subjectivities in tech have been found to be those that have overcome adversity (Streeter, 2015). Recall that interviewees report that the display of 'vulnerability' involves exposing failures as a means of fostering trust between colleagues. For several workers, sharing failures carries symbolic meaning through which they construct themselves as consistently poised to bounce back from crises, evoking resilience. Not only do such constructions echo Brown's media discourse (Netflix, 2019; TEDx, 2010), they evoke ideal subjectivities of Silicon Valley, which have been popularized within tech sectors throughout North America. The present paper builds on previous research on the emotion work compelled of workers within tech sectors (English-Lueck, 2010, 2017; Gregg, 2018; Kelan, 2008). It shows that workers are negotiating 'vulnerability' as a social and emotional competency and, in doing so, governing themselves according to normative logics. Interviewees' constructions of 'vulnerability' are echoed in and legitimated by industry 'best practices' and popularized media, which reinforces a self-regulating logic by couching it in a broader discourse that carries moral undertones.

Moreover, the present paper finds that dominant constructions of 'vulnerability' in the workplace can be instrumental. Among interviewees, 'instrumental vulnerabilities' took shape as desirable ways of being in professional contexts, which centered organizational resilience. It is perhaps fitting that while organizations continue to shape emotion work, in neoliberal societies this work is accomplished through an internally focused ethos that bolsters organizational resilience.

While 'instrumental vulnerabilities' in the workplace may bring political consequences, they also offer a means to reveal mistakes and to release perfection as a prominent ideal in corporations. Yet, it is not enough to merely compel people to be 'vulnerable' at work. Instead, a broader shift is necessary to challenge inequitable structures that influence who is able to be 'vulnerable.' In fact, the popularity of 'vulnerability' may present an emerging requirement for employees to let themselves 'be seen' in prescriptive ways that require laborious and strategic management of the self, which renders different rewards based on organizational status and positionality.

With its call to embrace uncertainty and use failures intersubjectively to gain trust, create and innovate, the 'vulnerability' discourse offers revamped methods to adjust to increasingly uncertain environments for knowledge workers. Meanwhile, for workers in the sector who are some of the most ontologically vulnerable – such as ghost workers and click bait farmers predominantly located in the Global South (Gray & Suri, 2019) – these people are not called to display 'vulnerability.' Although the vulnerability discourse suggests that everyone can and should be vulnerable, interviewees' constructions conveyed that those who have the most to gain by enacting vulnerability are in fact people in senior-level positions.

While it is in some ways a positive shift that more space is opening for expressions of emotion in software organizations, it is important for workers to carefully consider what it means to perform vulnerability in the workplace. This is not an invitation to show the more emotional or personal aspects of oneself at work, as the popularized discourse might suggest. Instead, it is an emergent emotion-focused language that may be becoming increasingly necessary to take up in order to succeed in certain environments. This is somewhat concerning in a context in which social competencies, especially those that involve feminine emotionality, tend to be imagined as natural to women and less natural to men (Adkins, 2002; Kelan, 2008; Swan, 2008; Woodfield, 2000). In the technology sector, such competencies are unlikely to be understood to be labour for women and are also less likely garner organizational rewards (Kelan, 2008).

Moreover, the cost for 'improperly' displaying such competencies differs greatly along lines of race, class and disability status. As noted by scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 1993), it is important to acknowledge how intersecting oppressions are organized. Leaders, who are predominantly white, cisgender men in software, are presumed to lack the qualities that 'vulnerability' centers. It is for this reason that leaders are constructed as ideal subjects to enact 'vulnerability.' That is, leaders tend to possess what scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) has referred to as multiple intersecting privileges linked to their positionalities, in addition to being at the top of most organizational hierarchies. In other words, leaders are, typically, the least likely to be ontologically vulnerable.

Furthermore, the distinction between the professional and personal is tenuous, and it is for this reason that Foucault's biopower has been such a useful concept in the present analysis. Through biopower, institutions are able to tap into workers' desires. That is, to want to do and be better, to strive for more in life, to improve one's situation, and to feel authentic. Tapping into these aims may indeed draw out the best of workers, and many do not experience this as a negative process.

Relatedly, in the current digitized era, it is difficult to identify a tactical alternative. A retreat to the command-and-control model surely would not be welcome among workers, many of whom enjoy and take pride in their social and emotional competencies at work. Yet, to expect all managers to be 'cadres' requires this group in particular to have a strong emotional skillset, interpersonal ease and, to some extent, cultural knowledge. When deployed well, many employees may prefer and even enjoy such a 'people oriented' approach that operationalizes cadres (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019).

It is due to these somewhat conflicted conclusions that this article ends with ambivalences that echo those of the interviewees studied. Vulnerability may 'work' for individuals, and can foster feelings of wellbeing for some. Additional empirical studies are needed to better understand the politics of 'vulnerability' in the software industry. Yet, as one employee advised, 'I would say, be careful […] you can damage the reputation if you're a little too vulnerable.'

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