Abstract

‘Governmentality’ refers to the ways that the social is imagined and governed. The term originated with Michel Foucault who provided only glimpses of what he meant. Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller are central figures to the ‘London governmentalists’ who have used this approach to mapping the social by various accounting and psychological techniques. Following Foucault, Miller and Rose have examined the ways that accounting numbers and psychological metrics have simultaneously created a social and individuals that are knowable and manageable. Above all, they insist that ‘governmentalisation’ is a type of process that is not monopolised by the state but has become increasingly ubiquitous. We begin by assessing the important contribution of the ‘London governmentalists’, especially Rose’s contributions about the history of psychology. Here the governmentalists entreat us to trace the activities of those ‘little engineers of the soul’, who translate broad philosophies of governing into local measurable practices. We take this seriously and look beyond the programmatic level to examine the practice and experience of one group of ‘everyday Einsteins.’ Second, we consider the case of ‘Psyche’, a multinational consultancy who provide, among other things, psychometric testing and counselling. Finally, we consider one of Psyche’s products, a psychometric test and its associated counselling for individuals, as a ‘technology of the self’.

Psyche is a multinational consultancy organisation. The firm has grown from a small regional operation to a highly profitable multinational in less than twenty years. It concentrates on blue chip clients and provides them with a range of psychological, mentoring and teambuilding services. Psyche’s mainstay is psychometric testing. Psyche’s history is bound up with its founder’s lengthy and worldwide search for personal enlightenment. This ended with his encounter with the psychology and philosophy of Jung. This personal encounter was transformed into Psyche’s ‘USP’, infusing psychometric testing techniques with Jung. There are two paradoxes that I’d like to explore. First, there is a clear tension between the technical, statistical expertise that underpins and validates psychometric testing and the important undercurrent of Jungian mysticism evident in the organisation and management, its building and its techniques. Second, key members of Psyche’s staff were attracted to the organisation by a combination of its charismatic founder and by the possibilities for self-improvement that their work offered. In practice, the dominance of the statistical has squeezed out much of the space for applying Jungian psychology to their own working – or personal - lives.
Finally, we consider how Psyche deploys psychometric testing as a ‘technology of the self’. Every test generates a lengthy report on the individual’s preferences, separated into four domains, each denoted by a colour. In turn, this report can be further refined into more specific sub-categories. Through reflecting on her or his report, the individual’s initial response is to confirm its accuracy and to identify those surprises whose truth is revealed by reflection. The end of the report identifies how each personality trait is actually deployed in one’s work role; and proceeds to compare this everyday use of the self with the ‘real’ self identified by the test. Inevitably, this comparison demonstrates degrees of harmony and dissonance. For instance, the analytical ‘cool blue’ personality who is most comfortable at the margins of organisational life but whose work role compels her or him to – uncomfortably – accentuate the supportive, collegial aspects of their personality; that is their ‘sunshine yellow’. The comparison between the ‘real’ self and the workaday self provides space – perhaps shock – of identification of dissonance. Counselling – a form of one-to-one facilitation – deepens the individual’s awareness and allows them to become more skilled, more disciplined in the use of Psyche’s analytical tools. In this way, Psyche contends, the individual can become a more effective therapist of the self. Psyche is careful to refute any suggestion that it provides therapy. However, the post-test counselling sessions are a form of therapeutic intervention.

Psyche does not attempt to repair damage – real or imagined – or to reduce abject misery to commonplace unease, but to prepare the self for work. Psyche’s intervention does require the individual to become her or his own therapist. Or, rather, the individual has first to pathologise himself, then to analyse this condition, and finally to intervene. Individual salvation is always a work in progress. An important part of the counselling process is to return the individual to their organisation’s objectives and how to maximise their individual effectiveness, any shift in the relationship between the individual and the organisation must be infinitesimally small: self-awareness provides only a temporary balm for the distressed soul.

Biography

Alan McKinlay is a Professor in the School of Management, University of St Andrews. He has published extensively in business and labour history and industrial sociology and, like many others, commented on the influence of Michel Foucault on organisation studies.