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The worker collectivity and Anglo-Saxon theories of collectivity

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Abstract
The Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard's theory of the worker collectivity is virtually unknown outside Scandinavia. This article presents the basic principles of the theory and compares it to three British theories in the same research area of resistance at work: Stewart et al. on the collective worker and collectivism; Fox on the employee collectivity; and Ackroyd and Thompson on self-organization. The main aim in this article is to examine whether Lysgaard's theory may have anything to contribute to the international body of theories on collectivity. It is concluded that it stands out as a more thorough analytical examination of the constitutional mechanisms supporting collective action when compared to the other theories discussed.

Keywords
Collectivity, resistance, workers

We present in this article a classic Norwegian theory about the 'worker collectivity' – a theory unknown outside Scandinavia – and discuss some differences and similarities with Anglo-Saxon theories. The Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard published his theory in 1961 – the title of the book (in translation) is *The Worker Collectivity: A Study in the Sociology of Subordinates* – and it has had a great impact on Scandinavian working life research ever since then. There is a problem in translating Lysgaard's term '*arbeiderkollektivet*' into English, but we have chosen to call it 'worker collectivity' as the term collectivity is already established through Alan Fox's (1971) theory of the employee collectivity.

We have two aims with this comparison. The first one is to compare theories of collectivity and discuss similarities and differences between them. The second one is to examine whether Lysgaard's theory may have anything to contribute to the

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international body of theories on collectivity. Could it possibly have made any difference to these theories had it been translated into English and reached a wider audience? We start by presenting the basics of Lysgaard's theory. Thereafter we compare the theory of the worker collectivity with two types of Anglo-Saxon theories: (1) theories which also use a terminology focusing on 'collectivity', such as 'employee collectivism' and 'employee collectivity', and (2) theories of similar phenomena using other types of terminology, such as 'self-organization'. Finally, we conclude by suggesting answers to our questions.

Lysgaard's theory of the worker collectivity

In his theoretical approach, Lysgaard makes a distinction between the technical/economic system and the human system of employees at workplaces. The technical/economic system is made up of the work organization, its hierarchical structure of positions and its goals. All employees are part of this system, which demands many things from its members in order to achieve high efficiency and profitability. The human system is defined by the way humans are constituted. What is at stake are the individual's interests as a human being and, since the bearer of labour power is a human being, he or she is also part of the human system. But the two workplace systems are in opposition to each other, placing individual workers in a very difficult situation as they are part of both systems. First, the technical/economic system is insatiable when it comes to the employee qualifications and skills that it has use for, for example industriousness, strength, concentration, reliability, creativity and loyalty. Humans, on the other hand, cannot work indefinitely, nor do they have inexhaustible strength, etc. Human beings are limited vis-a-vis the insatiable demands of the technical/economic system.

Second, the role that the technical/economic system assigns each employee is specialized or one-sided. It is a rather narrowly delimited area that the employee is expected to be unceasingly occupied with at work. In contrast, human beings are complex by nature, having numerous interests and development needs. If you are hired as a welder, the system's only interest is that you keep on welding. It is of no importance that you are good at fishing, like bookbinding, or would like to learn lace making. Finally, the technical/economic system is inexorable. It is not in the interests of the system to keep a certain person employed if he or she can be replaced by someone (or something) that serves it better. But such precariousness is trying as workers as human beings seek security. In this way, the insatiable, one-sided and inexorable qualities of the technical/economic system are opposed to the limited, versatile and security-seeking features of the human system. For the workers, the dilemma is that they, in order to earn a living, have to join a system that runs counter to the qualities of being human. A solution to this dilemma is to make sure that they reach a position of *protected membership* of the technical/economic system by building a buffer between the two systems. They establish this buffer by constructing a self-organized counterculture in the form of a worker collectivity, which can be used as a weapon to defend their human dignity and to gain some autonomy at work. There is, then, a strong tendency for employees, and especially workers on the lowest level of the workplace power hierarchy, to form a collectivity to defend themselves against the demands of the work organization.

The evolution of the worker collectivity

This formation, Lysgaard says, does not occur at random or anywhere. In the first place, three conditions are decisive for the collectivity to emerge at all. First, there has to be a formal work organization characterized by efficiency and profitability, that is a technical/economic system. Second, an employment relationship has to be established, leading to dependency between the two parties involved. The dependency may be regarded as important to both, but generally most so for the individual employee who is often obliged to honour the relationship in order to earn a living. Third, there has to be a hierarchy of occupational positions involving superiors and subordinates. As noted, the collectivity primarily concerns the latter since it serves as their protection against what may be considered excessive and unbearable demands, and these are demands that are generally represented by the superiors. If all these conditions are met, the worker collectivity may evolve into a viable and dynamic system of protection.

The evolution of this system may be summarized in the following way. The work that is done within the organization generally brings people together in a spatial sense. Some of them will meet regularly in order to carry out work; others will meet more randomly or spontaneously during meals, breaks, gatherings, etc. During these different kinds of interaction, they learn to know each other, both in superficial and more thorough ways. All this interaction, in turn, takes place within the particular context embodying the constituting elements of the organization – the division of work, the relationships of power, the skills and qualification of the employees, the orders and demands coming from management – and the effect they may have on working conditions in general. In short, the organization – the technical/economic system – is characterized by a set of conditions, which are related to questions of *proximity, problems* and *similarity*. These conditions may in turn bring about the processes indicated above. The condition of proximity leads to *processes of interaction*, in either a formal or an informal way. Expressions of similarities or differences, such as dress codes, privileges, discriminative practices, employment conditions and working conditions, affect the way employees learn whom to identify with and whom to differentiate themselves from. The development of this is what Lysgaard refers to as the *process of identification*. Finally, the problems related to work lead to *processes of interpretation* through which subordinates reflect and elaborate on their situation – the nature of their work, the relationship to management, the legitimacy of management demands, the character of the discriminative practices and the sorting out of why things are as they are.

These processes in turn affect each other in mutual ways. For instance, those who consider themselves to be equal will be prone to interact more frequently than those who find themselves to be different. Those who share concurrent understanding will more easily identify with each other than those who may see things differently. Conversely, the differentiating effect of this process will work the opposite way and strengthen the common view. In a corresponding way, employees of similar opinions are apt to interact more than those who hold contrasting views. The point is that the processes of interaction, identification and interpretation have reciprocal effects on each other, either in supportive or impairing fashions. If the supportive part is sufficiently viable, collective norms may be the final outcome. These norms, Lysgaard says, make up an ideology that

has bearings on how workers act and construe their conditions. In fact, this is the very definition of what the worker collectivity is about – it is an ideology embodying norms, which tell subordinates how to behave and make sense of their situation. These norms are not, of course, outlined in any formal sense, but the 'members' of the collectivity are nevertheless familiar with their content. The norms act as tacit, mutual contracts that may be more or less strong, more or less binding for each individual worker.

This also means that if they become sufficiently strong, they may act back at the processes that gave rise to them in the first place. In that case, the norms tell subordinates with whom to interact, with whom to identify, and in what way they should understand their particular conditions. If this comes about, the norms have reached a state of autonomy of their own, thus reversing the original causality. Condition and norms enter into a dynamic mutual relationship where they both become causes and outcomes at one and the same time. In this way we are witnessing the emergence of self-sustaining processes – the worker collectivity maintains and reproduces itself.

The efficiency of the collectivity

According to Lysgaard, this phenomenon includes all employees in subordinate positions. This is not to suggest that everyone at this level is equally regulated by the ideological regime. Indeed all are 'members', Lysgaard argues, in the sense that they are affected. But there are different kinds of membership, and according to him the following three are the most important. The first one consists of the opinion-forming activist who plays a major part in defining the conditions and sorting out the appropriate ways of action. The second group includes those who associate themselves with the interpretations and follow the reigning rules and cues out of passive obedience. The third one does not yield to the pressure. Its members are the deviants, the troublemakers or the opponents who neglect to follow the norms of the majority or choose to fight them openly.

The distribution of these different opinions and attitudes among the workers is of course decisive for the efficiency of the collectivity in functioning as a buffer towards the technical/economic system. If conflicting views dominated the scene, efficiency would suffer greatly. To be efficient the collectivity needs to have some common ground, some shared understanding that may be transformed into concerted action. When this is the case, it may emerge as a powerful device for the benefit of its members. This is why Lysgaard says that each individual subordinate is better off by belonging to this kind of community. In his analysis he operates with two different kinds of ideal-typical conditions illustrating the extremes of an imaginary, continuous scale of power. The most favourable position for the worker to be in is what he refers to as the ideal-state of the collectivity. This is a state which is characterized by the fact that vertical contact and communication between subordinates and superiors take place indirectly, via the collectivity and their (accepted) representatives. At the other end, the channels of communication have been changed in profound ways, excluding the collectivity from all contact. The contact is now turned into a matter of a direct relation between the technical/economic system and each individual worker. This is what Lysgaard refers to as the ideal-state of the technical/economic system. All individuals will be left alone without anyone to bring forward support and protection if needed. They have to cope as best they can.

This is also why there exist sanctions to handle those who are unwilling to submit to the norms of the worker collectivity. These sanctions may be at least as inexorable as the demands and dispositions coming from above. ‘A rotten work mate’, one of Lysgaard’s respondents says, ‘is one who is the company’s man – a man who has too much contact with his superiors.’ In line with the norms, these people have to be treated accordingly (Lysgaard, 2001 [1961]: 114): ‘if he has committed an offence’, another interviewee says, ‘he has committed an offence. In such a case, there is no mercy. No one should keep him company or “see” him. He may be frozen out. Then he will feel uncomfortable and then he will leave.’ The very reason for this and similar reactions is to avoid the undermining effect of divergent views and behaviours. In that sense, it is part of the very same logic that regulates the process of interaction. It is, as we have seen, important to keep alternative views at a distance, no matter who their messengers are, be they superiors or equals. The distance is imperative in order to maintain concerted opinions among rank and file. If they are seriously challenged, the basis of the collective power is challenged correspondingly.

The self-preservation of the collectivity system

This brings us back to the question about the reproduction of the collectivity. We have indicated that it may take on a life of its own, independent of the conditions that fostered it in the first place. According to this reasoning, it develops into an autonomous state and becomes self-sufficient. Lysgaard himself suggested this kind of development by arguing that the collectivity may stay operative even after the disappearance of its ‘objective’ foundation of problems. ‘The system continues its own life, detached from its original purpose, rooted in itself, self-sufficient when it comes to underlying intentions and demands/objectives’ (Lysgaard, 2001 [1961]: 228). It is worth noting that this, and the whole theory, is enacted at the workplace. Lysgaard does not go outside the factory gates.

But at the same time he is cautious about drawing any clear-cut conclusion. In spite of its apparent autonomy, the collective system, he says, cannot be considered totally disconnected from its organizational context. In that sense, it may even be said to embody a built-in tendency of self-destruction, because if it is efficient enough, it may succeed in eliminating the original reasons for its emergence. Preposterous demands from the technical/economic system may be reduced to a bearable level; precariousness may be replaced by predictability; procedures of decision-making may be infused by participative practices; management control may give way to some autonomy; discriminative policies and practices may be replaced by increased equality. Thus, the processes of interpretation and identification may change its character. Even processes of interaction may be affected if the collectivity is ‘efficient’ enough, leading to more frequent contact in a vertical sense (for instance in relation to decision-making procedures). The collectivity may, then, be threatened by its very success from attempts at improving the conditions, and the more successful it is, the more important the ideology becomes as a crucial condition for its survival. However, the ideology has to have some correspondence with ‘real conditions’ – with the experienced features of the work. Subordinates may judge the relevance for themselves, confronted as they are continuously by the reigning rules of the regime. Hence, the norm-producing interpretations, Lysgaard (2001 [1961]: 232) says,

'cannot be taken out of thin air. There has to be something with which to back them up, if not, they will fall to the ground.'

Lysgaard's own comparisons

Lysgaard presents his theory entirely without reference to other theories. In the penultimate chapter of his book, however, he discusses differences and likenesses with some important sociological theories of his day. He also takes the opportunity to suggest a solution to contradictory results between two experiments in worker influence on organizational change: in the famous Coch and French (1948) study of 'overcoming resistance to change' the effects of worker involvement in decisions were positive for productivity, while in a later similar study (French et al., 1957) no such outcome could be found. When reading the two reports, Lysgaard cannot find any sign of a worker collectivity in the first workplace but it is obvious that there is one in the second workplace. His explanation is therefore that in the first case, there was no counter-power to the mechanism of the workers' experiences of being involved in the change process, but in the second case there was a worker collectivity that was strong enough to prevent such effects.

With regard to the background to his own theory of the worker collectivity Lysgaard is strongly critical of the reports from the Hawthorne investigations (mainly Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1964 [1939]). There are indeed several hints in the reports that indicate that there in fact existed a worker collectivity at the plant. However, since the researchers' methodology implied a concentration upon isolated groups, they excluded themselves from explanations of deviant behaviour – for example restriction of output – which may have been related to norms stemming from a wider collectivity. Nor were any demands or threats from a technical/economic system considered as relevant. The explanation of work group behaviour was therefore seen as a consequence of the workers' irrationality and their inability to comply with management's norms and ways of organizing work. But, Lysgaard (2001 [1961]: 291) claims, an interest among the workers in 'security, power and honour within a work organisation where they have not had the possibilities to reach these benefits and rights individually in their regular technical/economic roles' is the explanation – not rationality or irrationality.

Further, Lysgaard regards George C Homans' (1950) theory of small groups as a forerunner to his own theory when it comes to the formal way of constructing the argumentation, but he is also critical of parts of Homans' analysis. Although Homans is making a distinction between the group system and an outer system, the need for forming groups only comes from inside, from the members' wish to be part of a group. There is no place for the group being a protection against problems in the environment of the group. Homans' theory also concerns work groups but there is no room for situations in which there is a worker collectivity which make small-group explanations of worker thought and action insufficient. Lysgaard says to Homans: You regard group members' problems as a question of surviving pressure from outside the group, but this pressure appears as emanating from the members' wish to be a group within this context. There is no independent systematic conceptual position in your theory for the need of the group for protection against a problematic context. You only regard the group as a result of a human need as such. Therefore, you cannot explain the source of the group norms – they simply are there.

In this criticism, Lysgaard finds support in Seymour Martin Lipset's (1956) analysis of solidarity, which is close to his own concepts of nearness and likeness. Compared to Homans, he says to Lipset, your analysis contains wider solidarity aspects of interpersonal relations between workers. The conditions you mention as important are in fact the same as the ones I describe: closeness, likeness in relevant statuses and what you call shared values, which I call common problem interpretation. There are many likenesses between us.

Further, Lysgaard discusses Robert Merton's (1957) theory of reference groups, which he finds of interest concerning the question of which reference group – the technical/economic system or the collectivity – workers choose. He also picks up on Merton's (1957: 343) notion of 'institutionalised deviation from institutionalised rules', as a modification of the insatiable, one-sided and inexorable qualities of the technical/economic system. Management informally allows some deviations in order to make the system work more efficiently. The collectivity functions as a hiding place for the workers from the gaze of the technical/economic system and the deviations are compromises between these opposite demands. Although Lysgaard complains that what Merton presents is more a collection of hypotheses than a proper theory, he sees several likenesses with the theory of the worker collectivity. He says to Merton: Apart from the technical/economic system being insatiable, one-sided and inexorable, one can also say that it requires the visibility of the workers' norms and actual behaviour that you write about. Nevertheless, it is not a question of total visibility as that brings with it negative effects for the efficiency of the organization. The technical/economic system therefore allows some wriggle room in visibility. Still, the worker collectivity strives to provide the workers with protection and hiding places from the technical/economic system that are not institutionalized from its point of view.

We note two points in Lysgaard's discussion of comparable theories of his time. One is that he consequently regards them from the point of view of the theory of the worker collectivity. He does not enter any more general debates about the contributions of his contemporaries. The other is that he not only criticizes the theories, but also considers to what extent they reinforce his own arguments when he finds theoretical agreements with them. We will keep these points in mind in our own comparisons between the theory of the worker collectivity and relevant contemporary theories.

Theories of comparison

We delimit the comparisons to Anglo-Saxon theories, as we regard them as more worked out than theories from other regions (e.g. Linhart, 1982). It simply seems to us that Anglo-Saxon social science has a richer theoretical tradition in this field than other regions. We apply two alternative principles in order to choose theories for comparison with Lysgaard's theory. One is that the theory specifies an entity (Elder-Vass, 2010: 16–17) of informal 'collective' or 'collectivity' among 'employees' or 'workers' as its kernel; the other that it concerns a similar field as that of Lysgaard, which is resistance at work. It is enough if a theory fulfils one of the principles to be included in the comparison. Among them is a theory presented by Paul Stewart and colleagues (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 1997; Stephenson and Stewart, 2001; Stewart, 2006) about the 'collective

worker' and 'collectivism' in the capitalist system in general and at workplaces in particular. Further, the theory about 'employee collectivities' which has been put forward by Alan Fox (1971); these collectivities extend from teams at a workplace to national trade unions. Finally, we consider Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson (1999) on 'self-organization' among groups of employees, a concept that is part of their analyses of organizational misbehaviour. Although it was not a criterion of sampling, the first one happens to be a Marxist theory, the second a radical pluralist and the third a critical realist labour process theory.

There are, then, three theories to compare with Lysgaard's. Now, Anglo-Saxon literature does not overflow with theories that can be compared to that of Lysgaard, but we have still chosen to exclude some possible candidates. One is theories in the industrial relations tradition that exclusively deal with formal organizations such as unions and employer associations. Further, there are theories about 'occupational communities' (Salaman, 1974; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984), which can be said to concern a form of collectivity, namely occupationally based collectivities. At the same time, they are defined from the point of view of a specific type of relationship between work and leisure, and they are explicitly said not to be 'cultures of resistance' (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 291). They fall outside our present realm of interest. Another theory concerns 'communities of practice', introduced by Etienne Wenger (1998). It does not, as the theories of occupational communities do, exclude resistance as part of the analysis, but this theme is always subjected to specific conditions in a rather peripheral position. The entity of the theory is not resistance but learning. Finally, there are a number of theories in management literature. They have a clear value bias, which is evident in the terminology used within the field of resistance, such as workplace deviance, antisocial behaviour, dysfunctional behaviour, non-compliant behaviour, employee vice and counterproductive behaviour. This would not in itself disqualify these theories from comparison, but another trait does: collectivities are theorized only as aggregated independent variables, not as agents of resistance. For example, Vardi and Weitz (2004: 30) say about their theory that 'the role of individual motivation and choice is the source and driver' for resistance, not collectivities. The upshot is therefore that we compare the theory of the worker collectivity with Stewart et al. on collectivism, Fox on employee collectivity and Ackroyd and Thompson on self-organization.

Further, in order to analyse the theories we need some dimensions along which comparisons of similarities and differences can be made and we apply five such dimensions. The first one builds on the *transfactual* question 'what must exist for the entity of the theory to exist?' (Danermark et al., 2002: 96 –97). One of the things theories do is to specify an 'entity' (object, thing, process) as existing in the world (Elder-Vass, 2010: 16–17), and parts of all these theories are employees – which is why we have chosen them as cases of comparison with Lysgaard's theory. We limit, however, this dimension to enquire whether the entity of the theory – collectivism, employee collectivity and self-organization, respectively – requires consensus or conflict between employers and employees for its existence (one possible answer is, of course, 'neither'). The second dimension concerns the *embrace* of the theory, that is whether its entity is only subordinate employees and workers, or also employees higher up in the workplace hierarchy. Some theories claim that their entities cannot be found above the most subordinate social

Table 1. Whether consensus and conflict between employer and employee must exist for the entity of the theory to exist.

	Consensus	Conflict
Worker collectivity (Lysgaard)		√
Collectivism (Stewart et al.)		
Employee collectivity (Fox)		√
Self-organization (Ackroyd and Thompson)		√

category, while other theories broaden it to also other employees, for example managers. Third, there is the *extension* of the theory, which concerns whether the entity can exist only within the confines of a workplace or across workplaces or even wider contexts. We term these differences local and global extension, respectively. The fourth dimension of comparison is whether the theory contains a classification into types of the entity. Is there, in other words, a *typology* of worker collectivities, collectivism, employee collectivities and self-organization? Finally, we go inside the entity itself and take into account the relations between its members. Are there analyses of conflicts within the entity? To the extent that there are, we also often find analyses of *internal discipline* in order to uphold the entities' norms (cf. Karlsson, 2012: 190–193).

In sum, these are the comparative dimensions we use: the transfactual question of conflict and consensus between employers and employees for the existence of the entity of the theory; the embrace of the theory when it comes to different social categories; its extension in terms of within a specific workplace or across workplaces; its eventual subtypes; and its internal relations in the form of disciplining members. We combine the answers for each theory in a summary table for each dimension. We are well aware that we thereby cannot do full justice to the subtleness and richness of the theories, but that is something that to some extent has to be sacrificed on the altar of comparability.

Conflict and consensus as required for the entity of the theory to exist

The first dimension is, then, whether the entity of the theory in question requires consensus or conflict to emerge at a workplace. The ways in which we interpret the theories in this respect can be found in Table 1.

In Lysgaard's theory the contradictions between, on the one hand, the technical/economic system as represented by employers and management and, on the other hand, the human system of employees are what make the emergence of a worker collectivity possible. It is established as a buffer to make it possible for workers to get a protected membership in the technical/economic system. What can prevent this from happening is that the technical/economic system succeeds in establishing its own ideology and

communication pattern as the only one existing at the workplace. But even then – as long as this contradiction exists – the worker collectivity also exists as a potentiality.

In their discussion of collectivism, Paul Stewart and colleagues (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 1997: Stephenson and Stewart, 2001; Stewart, 2006) take their point of departure in Marx's (2001 [1867]: 729) notion of 'the collective worker', expressed in this quote:

> The product ceases to be the direct product of the individual, and becomes a social product, produced in common by a collective labourer, i.e., by a combination of workmen, each of whom takes only a part, greater or less, in the manipulation of the subject of their labour. As the co-operative character of the labour-process becomes more and more marked, so, as a necessary consequence, does our notion of productive labour, and of its agent the productive labourer, become extended. In order to labour productively, it is no longer necessary for you to do manual work yourself; enough, if you are an organ of the collective labourer, and perform one of its subordinate functions.

This should not be interpreted as workers acting collectively or a collective subjectivity among workers (Stewart, 2006: 183). The authors argue instead that this leads to there always being collectivism independently of whether there are conflicts at the workplace or not. Conflicts can be present or absent, but that cannot function as indicators of the presence or absence of collectivism. It all must be analysed as parts of the 'relationship between capital and labour in the labour process' (Stewart, 2006: 187). Work under capitalism is always a collective process – even though workers can experience it in individualized ways. Collectivism among workers can, Stewart and colleagues say, be directed towards management and the work organization but they emphasize that this is not necessary for these types of collectivism to exist. Instead, they are expressions of reciprocity and cooperation in employees' everyday life, at work, in the family and in society. Collectivism is primarily cooperation between workers.

Alan Fox (1971) has presented a theoretical framework for analysing work relationships in which the concept 'employee collectivity' is central. We concentrate on this notion. Organizations, Fox says, are structured by roles and social relations ordered in superior and subordinate positions. This structure is legitimized in the eyes of the participants, especially the lower participants, by an ideology and its norms, which means that conflicts in organizations ultimately are normative clashes. Managerial norms are based on the idea that a hierarchy of positions is needed if the organization is to reach its goals, but if the norms are not regarded as legitimate by the lower participants management resorts to using power through its control over organizational resources. Employees' adherence to management norms is always problematic, but it is in situations in which management's normative authority ceases to be legitimized in the eyes of the subordinates and management therefore falls back on power that employee collectivities mobilize counter-power: a collectivity is a concentration of power.

Employee collectivities have their roots in two properties of modern wage labour: one is the 'physical separation and social estrangement of management and workers', the other 'the physical concentration and social identification of the workers themselves' (Fox, 1971: 100). Some factors tend to be favourable for collectivities, such as big rather than small workplaces, division of labour into work groups rather than isolated individuals, and weak rather than strong employers. The employee collectivity strives to replace

the employer collectivity norms with its own norms by imposing them on management as well as on its own members. The employee collectivity thereby acts to establish worker autonomy from employer authority and power.

Finally, in this section we discuss Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson's (1999) notion 'self-organization' of employees at workplaces. In their influential book on resistance and organizational misbehaviour, a point of departure is that self-organization is the 'infrastructure of misbehaviour' (p. 53) or 'the bedrock of employee action in the workplace' (p. 55); and Ackroyd (2012: 23) has later formulated it as 'the foundation for assertive action'. The concept is defined as 'the tendency of groups to form interests and establish identities, and to develop autonomy based on these activities' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 54). The interests of work groups are shaped in relationship with the identity of their members, which in turn is formulated in opposition to other groups – especially management. The authors also argue that 'Self-organisation and the impulse towards autonomy are present in all work situations, varying only in terms of the extent to which they are overt or latent' (p. 55). Any form of resistance and organizational misbehaviour presupposes the existence of some kind of self-organization among employees and all self-organizations contain norms about the conduct of its members at work, both concerning which efforts that are reasonable in which situations and in relationship to company officials.

In sum, we can note that for Stewart et al. questions of consensus and conflict are beyond that of the collective worker. Both can be present, but none of them is necessary for collectivism to exist. Ackroyd and Thompson's theory of self-organization, Fox's theory of the employee collectivity and Lysgaard's of the worker collectivity share an analytical pattern that means that the necessary traits are that conflict but not consensus must be present for both types of collectivity to exist and for self-organization. There can always be some degree of consensus between employers, on the one hand, and lower participants, workers or employees, on the other hand, but as long as there are conflicts between them the preconditions for establishing these informal organizations are at hand.

We can now imagine that Lysgaard, with his own theory in mind, would have had something or other to say to his colleagues if he had had the chance to do so. Inspired by the way his criticism of his contemporaries is structured, we imagine that his comments could be like this:

To Paul Stewart: The concept worker collectivity is of course an abstraction, but it sticks to one and the same level: the workplace. The problem with your concept collectivism, Paul, is that it starts at an extremely abstract level, the capitalist system as such in the form of the collective worker; without further ado, it then swings down to the individual company and its employees. There is an enormous gap there, which you don't consider. The consequence is that you don't see that conflicts play a big role also in your approach. This is most clear when it comes to company collectivism. The reason management wants to create this form of collectivism has

	to be that it wants to reconcile the conflict between the company and the employees – or in my terms, the technical/economic system and the human system. The worker collectivity isn't just any collectivism, Paul, it's the specific form that emerges among subordinates in the contradiction between the demands of the technical/economic system and the preconditions in the human system. The collectivity means that there is internal cooperation, but the basis of this cooperation isn't the abstract collective worker in capitalism, but the necessity to be a member of the other two systems – and they are in conflict with each other.
To Alan Fox:	There are some similarities between us, Alan, but the collectivity isn't simply a question about norms and counter-norms as such. In your analysis, it isn't quite clear why the two sets of norms emerge. In order to understand that we have to address the dilemma in which the workers find themselves through being squeezed between the two systems. Norms are not everything. The demands of the technical/economic system can be felt on the body and in the soul; they take away the workers' honour and dignity as human beings. It is a defence against that situation, the necessity of a buffer, that is the basis of the collectivity.
To Ackroyd and Thompson:	There are clear similarities between us too, lads, mainly perhaps in that employees build their own organization apart from the formal work organization. I think, however, that you ought to go one step further and analyse whether the self-organization has the same qualities in different parts of the hierarchy of the workplace. I'm certain that you would find that it doesn't, depending on if the members in one way or another represent the technical/economic system or not.

Whether the theory embraces only workers or also other employees

The next dimension of comparison concerns what types of employees the theory deals with, which we term the embrace of the theory (Table 2). Does a theory comprise only workers or also employees at higher levels of the hierarchy of workplaces?

Lysgaard argues that worker collectivities only embrace subordinate workers, as all other employees are in one way or another representatives of the technical/economic system. In a similar way, Fox claims that employee collectivities exist only among lower participants because managers climb a career ladder, which means that they are dependent

Table 2. The embrace of the theory.

	Only workers	All employees
Worker collectivity (Lysgaard)	√	
Collectivism (Stewart et al.)		√
Employee collectivity (Fox)	√	
Self-organization (Ackroyd and Thompson)		√

on their superiors for their advancement – something that has a tendency to deter them from collective action. As collectivism in the interpretation of Stewart et al. is a result of the collective labourer it exists wherever there is capitalist production, independently of what positions are involved. Self-organization, finally, can embrace employees at any level in which a group of employees can be found.

All theories claim that workers belong to the object that the theory covers, but it varies when it comes to whether also other employees are included. In the theories of collectivism and self-organization, there is not anything in principle that would prevent these entities from existing among employees higher up in the hierarchy or, in the case of Stewart et al., the whole company. Fox and Lysgaard, on the other hand, agree that employee collectivities and worker collectivities respectively only can be found among workers.

What can we imagine that Lysgaard would have to say to his present-day colleagues when it comes to the embrace of the entity in respective theory? We envisage it like this:

To Stewart: Another problem with the gap between your abstractions that I just talked about, Paul, is that collectivism exists everywhere, among all employees. If collectivism is all-embracing within such a gigantic system as capitalism, it tends to become a rather uninteresting concept. Where is there not collectivism? – that is the question we have to ask.

To Fox: It is correct that managers do not form employee collectivities, but it seems to be empirically incorrect that they do not engage in collective actions. Your British colleagues Ackroyd and Thompson provide a good deal of examples – and so does that Karlsson. I therefore think, Alan, that you ought to think over if it really is fear for their own careers that prevents those groups from forming collectivities. I claim instead that it is part of their positions in the hierarchy to represent the technical/economic system.

To Ackroyd and Thompson:	Here your concept self-organization can help as it means that this kind of organization can occur at all levels of the hierarchy. The problem is still, however, that the concept cannot differentiate between the kind of self-organization among the subordinates and that of other groups.

Whether the theory extends locally or globally

One can imagine entities of the theories being limited to specific geographical places, such as a workplace, or stretching out over wider areas. In the first case we call the entity a local one, in the second case a global one. The way this question is handled in the theories can be found in Table 3

As long as the preconditions of the formation of a worker collectivity are fulfilled at a workplace, that is there are contradictions between the technical/economic and the human systems, Lysgaard's theory says, there is a potentiality for it to emerge. These social situations can be found at many workplaces, but each worker collectivity is confined to its own workplace. Trade unions can stretch across workplaces and regions, but Lysgaard makes a clear distinction between worker collectivities as informal organizations and formal unions. Most unions are formed on the basis of worker collectivities, but they are qualitatively different phenomena and there are often conflicts between collectivities and unions. This can be compared with Fox's notion of the employee collectivity, in which it is possible for all lower participants independently of where they work to regard their problems as common, leading to a collectivity that may transgress the workplace and ultimately embrace all employees in this position. Fox therefore says (1971: 92):

> The relevant collectivity may be either the immediate work group, the wider work group, a trade union's local organization, or the union's national organization – or some combination of these. … The word 'collectivity' must be taken to mean any of these levels, depending upon circumstances.

There is, then, a hierarchy of collectivities – from work groups to workplace collectivities to national ones such as the TUC or AFL-CIO.

In the theory of collectivism, its entity can of course be local as well as global for the same reasons that we presented in connection with the embrace of a theory shown in Table 2. Social positions and groups up to the whole collective worker and the capitalist system are included. This is, however, at a very abstract level but this trait can also be found in the more concrete analyses of Stewart et al. to be discussed under the next dimension. Self-organization, finally, is defined as a group phenomenon, which should mean that it is confined to local contexts.

To sum up this dimension, we find that Lysgaard's worker collectivity is a local one. In the theory of Stewart et al. some collectivism can be found outside work, while other types exist across workplaces and at the same time there is also a specific form of

Table 3. The extension of the theory.

	Local extension	Global extension
Worker collectivity (Lysgaard)	√	
Collectivism (Stewart et al.)	√	√
Employee collectivity (Fox)	√	√
Self-organization (Ackroyd and Thompson)	√	

collectivism at workplaces. For Fox too employee collectivities can be found at both levels, while self-organization is a local phenomenon in a group at specific workplaces and the same goes for worker collectivities.

Lysgaard's comments could, we think, go like this:

To Stewart: The problem, Paul, is the level of abstraction again. The borders of collectivism are the borders of capitalism – and they are enormously wide. In fact, they are so wide that collectivism becomes a concept with unclear borders; it tends to become all-embracing.

To Fox: It isn't quite as bad in your case, Alan, as you stick to the lower participants. Your problem in this respect is that you don't make a distinction between the informal and the formal organization. That unfortunately leads to an analysis which quickly lets go of informal employee collectivities and instead exclusively focuses on trade unions – without observing that they follow quite different principles, they are really different kinds of entities.

To Ackroyd and Thompson: That's better, guys! Here your analysis is sharper than that of both Paul and Alan as you let your entity exist locally at the workplace. At the same time, the problems with different levels at the workplace remain.

Whether there is a typology of the entity of the theory

Our penultimate dimension of comparison is whether the theories propose a single and homogeneous entity or if there are different types of it. In other words, does the author present a typology of the entity or not? The answer can be found in Table 4.

Lysgaard does not provide us with any typology of worker collectivities, although he touches upon the question of weaker and stronger forms of the entity. Neither do

Table 4. Whether the object exists in different types.

	Typology
Worker collectivity (Lysgaard)	No typology
Collectivism (Stewart et al.)	Company collectivism Trade union collectivism Workplace collectivism Everyday life collectivism
Employee collectivity (Fox)	Immediate work group Wider work group Local trade union National trade union
Self-organization (Ackroyd and Thompson)	No typology

Ackroyd and Thompson. Maybe others would counter that Ackroyd and Thompson (1999: 56–57) do present a typology – one that is built on the dimensions formal or informal organizing and external and internal group identity – but we regard this as a way of distinguishing aspects of and behaviours within self-organizations rather than types thereof. In contrast, Fox makes distinctions between types of collectivities according to their extensions: work group, wider work group, local trade union and national trade union.

In connection with studies of lean production companies Stewart et al. identify a number of types of collectivism. These are the company collectivism propagated by management and three forms of non-company centred employee or worker collectivism, namely trade union collectivism, workplace collectivism and social collectivism of everyday life. The success of company collectivism, imposed both practically and ideologically, varies. Practically it can weaken the role of trade unions and accentuate such lines of division among employees as age and gender. Ideologically it claims that profitability is a common goal towards which all employees should work. Not doing so is to let others down. There usually are 'true believers' in this company collectivism, but there are also other forms of collectivism – without necessarily being in opposition to the company. Trade union collectivism is of course expressed in the existence of a union and its activities. In lean labour process companies unions have, however, been weakened. Workplace collectivism 'refers to the willingness on the part of employees to provide support for each other in the workplace around either work or non-work issues' (Stephenson and Stewart, 2001: 6.9). Employees support each other socially, emotionally and practically, which creates trust and is expressed in cooperation at work. Collectivism of everyday life, finally, 'refers to the support, friendship and care employees offer each other outside of work' (Stephenson and Stewart, 2001: 6.16).

In sum, two of the theories make typologies of their objects, namely concerning collectivism and the employee collectivity. Lysgaard's theory as well as that of Ackroyd and Thompson does not contain any typology.

Table 5. Analysis of internal discipline.

	Analysis of internal discipline
Worker collectivity (Lysgaard)	√
Collectivism (Stewart et al.)	
Employee collectivity (Fox)	√
Self-organization (Ackroyd and Thompson)	√

We imagine that Lysgaard's comments would run like this:

To Stewart, Fox, and Ackroyd and Thompson: In this case I have to be self-critical and say that I haven't even tried to develop a typology of worker collectivities. This is mainly due to my study only embracing a single workplace. Perhaps I could have worked out a typology on a conceptual and logical basis, but I leave it to the benefit of making the theory itself of the worker collectivity more complete.

Whether the theory contains an analysis of internal discipline within the entity

Our final comparative dimension is whether the theories contain an analysis of internal discipline of participants of the entities as a result of the interest to uphold the entity's norms against employer norms (Table 5).

Lysgaard analyses quite extensively the way workers guard the norms of the collectivity by punishing those who break them. We have illustrated this earlier, but here is a further example in which a worker has this to say about other workers who have been sanctioned (2001 [1961]: 114):

> It they have been burned, they become more careful, of course. They can get a suggestion from the others to pull themselves together. We can freeze him out … there are not many who can stand that pressure, it is very effective.

Also in the theory of employee collectivities, internal discipline is part of the analysis, as when Fox (1971: 119) says:

> At the informal level of the work-group collectivities, social pressures towards conformity range through a finely graded series from the almost imperceptible hint to the extreme severity of complete ostracism. It is these informal sanctions of approval and disapproval, popularity and isolation, which are the most pervasive and potent in buttressing group norms and values.

Both theories also describe how collectivity leaders guard the communication with management in such a way that no member will be in individual contact with managers, something that could endanger the collectivity norms being upheld.

Self-organizations too establish their own internal hierarchies and exercise internal discipline to uphold them. Ackroyd and Thompson provide many examples of extremely harsh ways of maintaining this social control – ways that must be considered as types of harassment. Still, the authors claim, the victims do not seem to regard them as such but as given parts of the group's life. This can, however, also lead to conflicts with other work groups and it does not follow that solidarity is developed at the whole workplace or in the form of wider class solidarity. On the other hand, trade unions have been established on the basis of self-organizations, although the further relations between them are not necessarily harmonious at all times. In this way, an informal self-organization may develop into a formal organization. This process can also be in effect through management accepting – tacitly or officially – some of its practices, which means that they become institutionalized. It would therefore be wrong, according to Ackroyd and Thompson, to regard self-organizations as only informal organizations in opposition to the formal one. The borders between these aspects are also constantly changing.

Stewart et al. concentrate on the cooperation of and reciprocity among workers and do not discuss internal conflicts, internal rules and discipline. In contrast, Fox, Ackroyd and Thompson as well as Lysgaard use, as we have seen, quite a lot of space to discussing such things.

Lysgaard's comments might go as follows:

To Stewart: You have missed something important here, Paul. Even if you emphasize collectivism as cooperation, that cooperation has to be upheld through norms and the observance of the norms guarded. Your analysis tends to become too one-sided when you entirely disregard conflicts both within and between different types of conflict.

To Fox: There are many agreements in our analyses of internal discipline. However, it is not possible for you to demonstrate differences in how such things are handled in employee collectivities at workplaces compared to large formal organizations such as the TUC and AFL-CIO. This is, of course, because you regard both as the same type of organization.

To Ackroyd and Thompson: It is very good that you pay attention to the internal discipline and the harsh forms it can take. Not everything is cosy just because groups of employees form self-organizations or subordinate workers establish collectivities. But I am far from certain that those who are subjected to this control always regard the punishments as a natural part of the life of the self-organization. Some statements in my empirical material in fact

> indicate the opposite and that there are individuals who try to place themselves outside the collectivity. At the same time it is not possible to be outside the collectivity if you are a subordinate worker; then you are part of the collectivity whether you want or not. And that is why you can be penalized – if a subordinate could be outside the collectivity there would be no reason for disciplining that person.

Conclusions

In comparing the theory of employee collectivism with that of Lysgaard, it seems to us that the differences are more salient than the similarities in that it does not take its point of departure in conflicts between employer and employees but in the cooperation of the collective worker. In both theories there is, however, within the analysis the element of workers supporting each other, although this trait is more prominent in Stewart et al. than in Lysgaard. For the latter, the rationale of the worker collectivity is to function as a buffer against the insatiability, one-sidedness and implacability of the technical/economic system – and thereby it is formed in opposition to this system – or in Stewart's terms, the company collectivism. In Stewart's analysis workplace, trade union and everyday life collectivism can exist independently of conflicts with employers (capitalists), but a worker collectivity loses all meaning if it were not for the conflict with the technical/economic system. Further, as Stewart stresses cooperation and reciprocity in the relations between workers he does not discuss internal conflicts in non-company collectivities, which is an important part of Lysgaard's argumentation – the norms of the worker collectivity are upheld by sanctions against breaches of them.

There are many similarities between Fox's analysis and Lysgaard's, but also some differences. One basic similarity is that the object of both theories is workers at the bottom of the power hierarchy of workplaces, called lower participants by Fox and the subordinates by Lysgaard. All other employees can have other norm systems and cultures, but not a collectivity, as they are positioned in a career ladder or somehow as a representative of the company. In both cases there is also an idea about the respective collectivities being in opposition to an employer collectivity (Fox) or a technical/economic system, represented by management (Lysgaard). The collectivities mobilize power in order to counteract the power of the company. To Fox the collectivity is power in concentration while Lysgaard (2001 [1961]: 148) says: 'Through the use of power and threats of using power, more or less violent, the collectivity makes it possible to respond to the way in which the technical/economic system is practised in the work organization.' Power is used in order to moderate or even replace the influence of company norms with the collectivity's own norms. However, this also means that the collectivity tries to uphold its norms among its members, often with rather harsh methods – both authors mention ostracism as the worst punishment, but Lysgaard also indicates that corporal punishments were practised in earlier times.

The greatest difference between the two theories is that the worker collectivity is an informal organization at a specific workplace, while the employee collectivity most often

is a formal organization that can extend from a work group at a workplace to a nationwide union organization. The bulk of Fox's book therefore deals with trade unions while Lysgaard's stays within the factory gates and only provides short discussions of such themes as the relation between the worker collectivity and the working class.

It is obvious that worker collectivities are a form of self-organization. The subordinate workers form interests through them, (parts of) their identities are established within them and thereby they strive to develop autonomy at the workplace. The relations between self-organizations and trade unions as described by Ackroyd and Thompson are also the same as in Lysgaard's theory. There is, however, a difference in that the worker collectivity embraces all workers in subordinate positions, while a self-organization can concern smaller groups. Lysgaard makes it clear that the entity he analyses cannot be delimited to a small group. Self-organized groups can be in conflict with each other as different entities, but conflicting groups among workers can exist within the entity collectivity.

After these exercises Lysgaard's theory can be seen to have the following qualities in comparison with theories of collectivism, employee collectivity and self-organization. What is necessary for the existence of a worker collectivity is the conflict between employers and employees, interpreted in Lysgaard's terms as the clash between the technical/economic system and the human system. Workers establish the collectivity system as a buffer between these two systems in order to handle the contradiction between them. Without this conflict there would be no worker collectivities. At the same time, the theory only covers subordinate workers in the hierarchy of workplaces and no other categories of employees. The latter can form other types of cultures based in work, but not collectivities. Further, each worker collectivity is limited to a specific workplace – it does not stretch across workplaces – and there is not any typology of worker collectivities in the theory. Finally, the theory considers conflicts within the collectivity and internal disciplining of members who break its norms. Those are the traits of Lysgaard's theory that emerge in comparisons of similarities and differences with a number of contemporary Anglo-Saxon theories.

The main strength of the theoretical approach offered by Sverre Lysgaard is related to the question of *why* and *how* these kinds of collectivities emerge and may reach an autonomous state through self-supporting processes. The answer to the question *why* is based on the contradictory nature of the qualities of two different systems – the technical/economic system and the human system, i.e. the organization and its employees at the lower level of the hierarchy. The demands they are met with are considered unbearable, but the collectivity works as a buffer turning working conditions into a manageable state, thus acting as a protective mechanism for each individual worker. According to Lysgaard, this is the main function of the worker collectivity. Additionally it brings about power as well as honour and dignity to subordinates who otherwise would find themselves in a precarious situation.

The answer to the second question, on *how* the phenomenon may emerge and reach an autonomous state, is rooted in organizational conditions related to proximity, similarities and the nature of work. These conditions trigger processes of interaction, identification and interpretations, which may affect each other mutually. The final outcome of this may be collective norms adding up to an ideology of how to behave and make sense of working conditions facing ordinary workers. No one at the lower level of the hierarchy

is unaffected by its functioning if it exists; those who side with the ideology will be protected by its collective power. Those who may oppose are sanctioned in order to close the ranks to the advantages of power.

Lysgaard's theory can definitely contribute to the existing Anglo-Saxon set of theories on collectivism and resistance. Compared to the theories discussed above, the theory of the worker collectivity stands out as a more thorough analytical examination of the constitutional mechanisms supporting informal collective action. This applies to the complex nature of working life in general as well as collective power, control and worker resistance in particular. This is not, however, to claim its perfection. One of its main deficiencies is related to its failure to consider the potential importance of the context outside the workplace. Lysgaard's analytical approach is based on the contradictory nature of two different systems, but these are systems that are mainly treated as if they were closed and not open. There is no discussion of internal processes and their relation to qualities of the wider community, be it societal characteristics in general, the nature of the labour market, industrial relations, cultural peculiarities, questions related to gender segregation, etc. In short, institutional considerations are absent and this is of course an absence that may bring about problems, both in a comparative and in a longitudinal sense.

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