Intersection of a Foucauldian and a Bakhtinian analysis of work life discourses – an ethics of dialogue

Martin Mølholm, Ann Starbæk Bager
Aalborg University, department of Communication and psychology, Denmark

According to Michel Foucault, strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge determine how the individual conceives of herself. Norms, values, attitudes and discourses regulate their actions, decisions and behavior. These notions have affinity to Bakhtin whose claim was that authoritative discourses crystallize over time (monologism) when they are shaped and reshaped in situated dialogical interactions in which battles between centripetal and centrifugal forces are going on in the language of life (heteroglossia). These strategies of relations of forces and authoritative discourses exercise influence on the possibilities of conduct in today’s organizational discursive communicative practices.

The authors have undertaken in their Ph.D. dissertations a Foucauldian (Moelholm) and a Bakhtinian (Bager) analytical strategy, both of which can be used to demonstrate some of the conditions that regulate work life practices. These strategies represent two different analytical positions, in which the former centers on an archeology of an archive of more than 50,000 articles, published between 2002 and 2010 in two of the leading Danish business- and labor-market magazines and eight national newspapers. The latter gives voice to an analysis of a polyphonic situated research based forum for co-production of knowledge in and on leadership communicative practices.

In our presentation we will intersect these two diverse analytical positions and show how they inform one another and, thus, which new knowledge they give rise to. We will further discuss how both Foucault’s and Bakhtin’s writings give rise to an ethics of dialogue in which the conduct of conduct and authoritative discourses can be contested in order to oppose – shape and reshape – the mainstream work life communicative practices.

Keywords: work life discourses, Foucault, Bakhtin.