'Relations are the organization': friendship as a (contested) form of control in post-bureaucratic organizations

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Abstract

How do post-bureaucratic organizations use friendship as a form of control and how do individuals respond to it? The literature mostly looks at friendship at work as a source of positive organizational and individual outcomes such as cooperation, productivity, creativity, job satisfaction or organizational commitment. Yet, an emerging critical literature on neo-normative control has emphasized how friendship can be mobilized to control employees' subjectivity and encourage exploitation at work. Although important in unraveling the more ambivalent and complex role played by friendship in organizations, this literature however currently tends to restrict its understanding of friendship to 'fun' by emphasizing how friendship can divert employees from pressurizing work conditions and encourage them to commit at work through fun. Through our study of a French network of independent consultants, we make two contributions to this nascent literature. First, we show that, beyond the sole element of 'fun', organizational control through friendship relies on five other discursive repertoires: 'equality', 'intimacy', 'growth', 'generosity' and 'reciprocity'. Second, we discuss how organizational members conform to and/or resist this organizational discourse.

Keywords: friendship, neo-normative control, conformity, resistance

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INTRODUCTION

Friendship has long been characterized as a basic human need that contributes to one's social integration and happiness. Although the literature on workplace friendship is now well established, there is no consensual definition of such a notion which has been presented as vague and ambiguous (Allan, 1989; Pahl, 2000; Song and Olshfski, 2008). Still, friendship at work is generally associated with workplace social relations that are characterized by certain features including the fact that they are chosen, affective and based on confidence, benevolence as well as empathy. In this wake, Berman et al. (2002, p.218) define friendship at work as "non-exclusive voluntary workplace relations that involve mutual trust, commitment, reciprocal liking and share interests and value". Relatedly, Pillermer and Rothbard (2018, p.3) says that workplace friendship consists in "a nonromantic, voluntary, and informal relationship between current coworkers that is characterized by communal norms and socioemotional goals".

Most existing research emphasizes the (mostly) positive organizational and individual outcomes of friendship at work (Lu et al., 1997; Song, 2006; Feeley et al., 2008; Song & Olshfski, 2008). At the organizational level, it has been demonstrated that workplace friendship is positively related with knowledge sharing, team cooperation, group creativity and collective productivity. At the individual level, workplace friendship has been associated with many benefits such as positive work attitudes, job satisfaction, individual commitment or well-being. A few studies have also pointed out some negative effects of workplace friendship including favoritism, distraction or lack of corporate loyalty (see Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018 for a review).

All these studies adopt post-positivistic approaches and quantitative methodologies for documenting the causal relationships between friendship at work and individual or collective outcomes (Rumens, 2017). However, they say virtually nothing about how workplace

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friendship manifest in organizational settings and how it is experienced by organizational participants. Yet, 'to consider friendship purely as a potentially functional organization resource—as (…) [it] is common in the literature—is to miss a very great deal about how friendship actually exists and is experienced by people in organizations' (Grey & Sturdy, 2007: p.158). As Rumen (2017, p.1151) puts it: "When researchers fix ''workplace friendship'' as a stable and identifiable relational category (e.g., Berman et al., 2002), they risk losing sight of the multiplicity of meanings that converge on the notion of workplace friendship as well as its porous and mutable character."

In parallel, a few critical studies have pointed out the emergence of a neo-normative discourse promoting a 'culture of friendship' in contemporary settings (Costas, 2012), one that promotes authentic expression and the reconciliation between one's personal and professional life (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017; Fleming, 2009). Generally speaking, this emerging corporate discourse is approached as a managerial attempt to enrol wider aspects of organizational participants' lives at work. In this wake, several studies mention that promoting workplace friendship is a way to foster people's commitment and exploit this central aspect of people's life that was traditionally associated with their personal lives (Costas, 2012). As argued by Grey and Sturdy (2007: p.159): "the dominant ideal of post-bureaucratic organization denotes a situation of organizational porosity in which there is increased fluidity at the boundary of the organization so that the separation of work and private life has become increasingly ill-define", which justifies "giving direct attention to friendship".

However, these studies are still in their infancy and mostly explore the 'fun' and 'playful' dimension of friendship. In this article, we adopt a critical perspective on workplace friendship to address the following question: *How do organizations use friendship as a form of control, and how do individuals respond to it?*

We address this question by investigating how friendship is mobilized in the organizational discourse of a French network of independent consultants and how these consultants subjectively position themselves in relation with this discourse. Our results reveal that, beyond 'fun', organizational control through friendship relies on five other discursive repertoires: 'equality', 'intimacy', 'growth', 'generosity' and 'reciprocity'. We also document how consultants conform to or resist this organizational discourse of friendship by appropriating these repertoires in distinct ways.

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By doing this, our article makes two key contribution: First, we contribute to the literature on neo-normative control by documenting how workplace friendship can be used in managerial discourses in order to obtain people's commitment and how organizational participants conform to or resist such discourses in various ways. Second and more generally, our study also contributes to the broader literature on workplace friendship by enriching critical perspectives on friendship.

Our article is structured as follows. To begin, we review the critical literature and show that workplace friendship has become a key discursive resource to encourage commitment at work. Then, we present the methodology and results of a case study, for which we collected secondary data and conducted 36 interviews in order to apprehend how workplace friendship is mobilized in this consultancy's organizational discourse and how it is appropriated by organizational participants. Finally, we discuss our findings by emphasizing how our study extends existing understandings of both management control and workplace friendship in contemporary settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizations are not what they used to be. For decades, the 'ideal type' of bureaucracy – characterized by 'centralization, hierarchy, authority, discipline, rules, career, division of labour and tenure' (Clegg & Hardy, 2006, p. 426) – served as a dominant model. In bureaucracies, employees are subjected to a culture of obedience exhorting them to follow orders and rules (Courpasson and Reed, 2004). In such a context, personal life in general and workplace friendship in particular should remain at the door of the organization since they are viewed as potential sources of inefficiency and inequity. Social relationships are indeed expected to be strictly instrumental, process-driven and determined by organizational participants' official roles and duties whereas personal and affective relationships are viewed as dysfunctional and undesirable (Mao et al., 2009).

Since the 1980's, a growing number of organizations have adopted post-bureaucratic modes of functioning that are characterized by empowerment, dialogue and consensus rather than by rules, hierarchy and obedience (Hecksher, 1994). Post-bureaucracies do not rely on the domination of legitimate rational authority but on a 'softer' form of control expressed positively in terms of the inculcation of norms of quality, flexibility, autonomy or learning (Courpasson, 2000). Such settings are thus characterized by normative control that promotes a sense of unity

and togetherness along common norms and values. In this respect, post-bureaucracies encourage organizational participants to develop emotional ties with the company and to regard each other as family members (rather than friends). Critics of the cultural engineering which take place in post-bureaucracies even argue that these settings function as very exclusive families, or even as clans or cults, i.e. as close systems where an unalterable sense of identification based on sameness is expected (Kunda, 2009). All aspects of people's lives that would not fit with the corporate family are excluded, including personal relationships that do not originate from and that do not benefit to the company.

More recently, several studies pointed that management discourse has undergone further changes by encouraging organizational participants to 'be themselves' rather than to fit with the one-size corporate mould (Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Ekman, 2013). One potential explanation of such evolution resides in the need to solve the tension between the use of the family imaginary and the promotion of selfhood which is inherent to the normative discourse and that can create cognitive dissonance and dis-identification among organizational participants (Fleming, 2005; O'Leary, 2003). In this respect, neo-normative discourses foster the free expression of one's authentic self but also the conflation between life and work (Bardon et al., forthcoming). It promotes a '*culture of friendship*' (Costas, 2012) rather than a family culture in that it celebrates individual difference, authenticity playfulness and diversity. In such organizational contexts, workplace friendship is promoted through 'parties' and others social events (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009) but also by exhorting employees to have fun and to 'be themselves' at work as they would do with close friends (Costas, 2012). Organizational participants are also regularly encouraged to tap into their personal relationships because working or recruiting friends is presented as beneficial for the company but also fun for individuals (Deldridge, 2020). The studies emphasize that friendship is used to divert organizational participants from pressurizing work conditions and to foster their commitment. Although there is a consensus that friendship is becoming a key aspect of the managerial discourse in an increasing number of organizations, virtually nothing is said about how this discursive resource is used to encourage people to commit and how organizational participants appropriate such a discourse, beyond the sole dimension of 'fun'. Our study addresses this topic by asking the following question: 'How do organizations use friendship as a form of control, and how do individuals respond it?'

METHOD

Research setting

To explore this question, we conducted a case study of a post-bureaucratic French management consultancy (here labeled RATO: 'Relations Are The Organization'). Consulting is a relevant setting to study neo-normative control since it constitutes an extreme case to explore the most sophisticated and up-to-date organizational control practices (see Alvesson, 2012 for a review).

RATO appears to be an ideal setting to investigate our topic. Indeed, and as it will be evidenced in the results section that follows, RATO has been founded by two very close friends – Leonard and David – who not only wanted to start a bussiness with friends but also to create an organization in which the day-to-day functioning would be based on friendship. Concretely, RATO is a network of independent management consultants who voluntarily decide to collaborate. They have very different levels of experience and areas of expertise, although many of them practice executive coaching, self-development and/or managerial training. RATO is organized around a core group of 35 partners, who are legally allowed to bill clients in the name of RATO, and a large group of over 100 'free talents', who attend events and can work on projects with partners more or less regularly.

In 2017, the organization underwent a major crisis. As it will be shown in the result section, many people at RATO said that this crisis was not only caused by a fallout between the two founders but also by a broader conflict between members on whether RATO is (or should be) an organization based on friendship or a much more business-oriented company.

This crisis has resulted in the resignation of one of its founders, Leonard, which led to a paralysis of RATO: all events and meetings stopped for almost three years, until two of the partners decided to revive the network. This crisis was experienced by many of our participants as a particularly emotional time, not only professionally, but also personally, as they told us many friendships were broken. It is thus a particularly interesting setting to explore our research question.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted in two phases: as part of a multiple case study project on new ways of working in consulting rather than on friendship specifically, we carried out a first wave of 8 semi-structured interviews in 2017, i.e. before the crisis. In 2021, When the network was

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revived, we decided to conduct a second wave of 28 semi-structured interviews focusing on the specific role played by friendship at RATO by inviting our participants to reflect on the evolution of the network and the 2017 crisis.

A purposive sampling method was adopted for recruiting informants, with seeking maximum diversity of interviewees based on the length of service, status, closeness and degree of involvement with the organization. By doing so, our goal was to get access to the greatest diversity of subjective experience of friendship at RATO: during the first wave, we interviewed 1 founder, 6 partners and 1 free talent; during the second wave, we interviewed the 2 founders, 3 historic partners, 9 more recent partners, 5 former partners, 1 former employee and 8 '*free talents*'.

All were asked about their careers, how they became independent consultants and decided to join RATO before discussing the role of friendship in the inner functioning of the network, their interpretation of the governance crisis and their individual experience as members. The interviews lasted 65 min on average, were systematically recorded and transcribed. We also had several informal meetings with one of the founders (3 meetings), one historic partner (2 meetings) and a more recent partner who took over the management of the network after the resignation of the founder (one extra meeting). To supplement this data, we analyzed internal secondary data such as self-published literature, the founder's resignation letter, and internal documentation such as the partnership charter or some slide decks used in general assemblies.

Data analysis

We adopted a critical interpretative approach (Alvesson and Deetz, 1999; Deetz, 1982, 1992) to uncover the different meanings attached to friendship in the organizational discourse and how such meanings were appropriated and resisted. We started by coding all the occurrences of friendship in the transcripts. Then, we aimed to identify all the different dimensions of this discourse of friendship both in the discourse of the founders and historic partners (through our interviews and the analysis of the secondary data), as well as in the discourse of later partners and free talents. We double-coded a subset of the data so as to come to an agreement as to what these different dimensions could be. This initial list kept being refined as the whole dataset was later coded. We in turn identified six different discursive repertoires associated with friendship: 'fun', 'equality', 'intimacy', 'growth', 'generosity' and 'reciprocity'. This phase of double-coding also allowed us to identify counter-discourses in informants' accounts that we coded

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under the antagonist discursive repertoires of 'tension', 'informal hierarchies', 'distance', 'stagnation', 'self-interest' and 'obligation'.

FINDINGS

RATO's friendship-centered organizational discourse

David and Leonard, the two founders, insisted a lot on how RATO finds its origin in their long-lasting friendship:

> *We have been friends since we met at [Big 4], right. And we thought: now may be the time to build our dream company, to build our own world. (David, Founder)*

They said their goal was not only to create a company with their best friend but also an alternative form of organization based on friendship:

> *David and I are RATO, David and Leonard, Leonard and David. We shared everything. We even lived together. All the fundamental principles of RATO were there from the start (...) Our mantras were: no rules, no boss, no money. No money in the sense that there is no money issue, everything is transparent (...) That means something is working. This something is 'Relations are the Organization'. (...) You have a problem, you call, we talk about it. (Leonard, Founder)*

Other historic partners explained how they started working on assignments with their '*best friends*' (David) who were soon offered to join the partnership to '*do something together*'. As summarized by Robert:

> *In the beginning, RATO, it was above all the story of a bunch of friends. It had a real emotional component. We didn't even think about feasibility or profitability. It was just a bunch of buds saying 'we're gonna work together, it will be fun. (Robert).*

They pushed this ideal of a company based on friendship one step further by working solely with independent consultants and refraining from employing anyone, except Leonard's assistant, to provide some stability for her. This later came to be defined as the *'social purpose'* of RATO: proving to the world that such a form of organization based on '*beautiful relationships*' (internal documentation) could thrive.

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Six related themes were particularly salient in the organizational discourse: fun, equality, intimacy, growth, generosity, and reciprocity.

Fun. Pleasure and fun kept being advertised as some of the key features of RATO. Socialization was at the heart of the organization, through its many trainings, practice sharing events, thematic conferences and other management meetings. All these events were designed to incorporate elements of fun and entertainment. David and Leonard, for instance, once organized a rock concert, supposedly with their own personal funds. All the training sessions organized by RATO include open bar parties, and thematic diners are frequently organized to gather members of the network. RATO is described as a place people can join to avoid feeling isolated as independents, as a '*community of alter egos who are happy to be, and joyful to act*' (excerpt, self-published book).

Equality. Being friend at RATO also means treating each other equally in spite of their differences, whether in approaches, in sales or in experience. At the heart of RATO is the idea that, no matter how financially successful people are as professionals, they all have something to bring to the table and the potential to enrich the discussions. As such, all should be granted the same voice. In line with this claim, as RATO grew, the partners adopted what they call the '*one person, one vote*' principle of shared governance.

> *The way we work is 'one person one vote'. That means when free talents and partners discuss something, everyone has one vote. And every voice is heard. (Leonard, founder).*

They refer to this as the culture of '*palaver*' (excerpt, self-published book) consisting of always searching to have friendly discussions, even in case of disagreement, until the best argument wins and a common decision is reached.

Intimacy. In spite of equality, intimacy also remained a strong promise of the organization. Training sessions, in particular, were presented as fostering deep and authentic relationships.

> *We spent 21 days training together. It creates bonds, and it creates shared fundamental values. And those bonds are long lasting. (Leonard, founder).*

In these '*highly emotional sessions*' (Robert, historic partner), which were taking place over three separate weeks (including weekends) in remote locations, participants were invited to

open themselves and be vulnerable in front of each other as we do with close friends, which was designed to '*deconstruct and reconstruct one's mental relation to others*' (Matthew):

> '*In the deconstruction period, it can be very tough, very traumatic I mean. So, in the end, when you reconstruct yourself and succeed in doing so, it creates very strong affective bonds. All the people who have gone through the 21 days training together have very strong affective bonds.' (Matthew, historic partner)*

General assemblies were also conceived as spaces fostering strong intimate relationships and requiring friendship to function: because people were friends, they could speak their minds and be authentic, they could argue with each other in sometimes very intense ways without damaging their relationships. As a result, RATO is defined as a place where people can also count on each other: where '*If people feel down, they just need to call, there will always be someone by their side*' (Leonard, founder).

Growth. Beyond the claim that it enables the development of deep and caring relationships, friendship is also presented as a way to make people flourish professionally and personally: *Come play with us, you'll be rich and very happy,* Leonard told us. Friendships '*create the conditions for the development of talents*' (excerpt self-published book) since each member seek to enrich each other in the service of a meaningful project. They present themselves as role models whose objective is to help others to reveal their true potential and grow:

> *We thought that if we gave people some keys, everyone could do everything. I had this fantasy that if you gave people information, competence, they could do it all (David, founder).*

David and Leonard thus claim to have deliberately opened the doors of RATO to people who would not have been able to join any traditional consultancy because of their lack of experience or because of their niche positioning.

> '*We allowed some people to enter a partnership when they would never have made it partner anywhere, never!' (David, founder).*

Generosity. At RATO, being friend not only means helping others to flourish but helping them to do so for free. Gratuity is presented as a key principle at RATO: '*Everything was shared, knowledge (…) We gave everything. And we gave it for free. Everything was free*' (David, founder). Members can access best practices, skills training, expertise, networks, or advice, comfort and solidarity, all for free.

> *We organized summer universities, thematic evenings to make people come. We worked on projects, shared our knowledge. All of that was done for free. We told people 'we give, we give, we give, just come!'. (Matthew, historic partner)*

Founders and historic partners say that friends should be altruistic and selfless between each other's without expecting something in return. Leonard, for instance, explains that he '*loved everyone, even those that hurt him in return*' and that '*whatever people do, (he)'ll keep reinvesting in them*', which he describes as '*a matter of faith, of love*'. They often emphasize everything they have given to the organization over the years:

> *For 15 years, I have managed RATO for free. I have developed contacts with other networks to expand RATO, all of that at my own cost.* (Leonard, *founder*)

Reciprocity. Although the generosity of RATO is promoted, it is emphasized that good friends give back without being obligated to, as in a reciprocal relationship. One should not give to RATO because they are required to do so, they should do it because they care for their friends and feel redeemable to them: '*RATO doesn't create obligations: freedom, trust, friendship, relations, caring, this is what works*' (excerpt, self-published book). As illustrated by David's personal example:

> *For instance, if I get a project, but this project comes from a friend who told me 'you should call this HR director who has this specific need'. I consider this contact has value, so if I sell a project for 90K, then I call my friend and say 'bill me for this much'. I consider he gave me something. The idea is that if you receive value, you should redistribute it. (David, founder)*

RATO's members are thus invited to donate to the organization whether in cash, (e.g. initial financial investment, payment of the annual fee, payment of a percentage of the turnover they generate), in time, or in content (e.g. knowledge, network, training facilitation, proofreading of proposals, etc.), which is referred to as '*pro bono*' (Leonard). Such a behaviour is praised by the partners, who applaud people who give back to RATO:

> *Several times, consultants came to me saying 'I would like RATO to bill me, because what it gave me saved me. It has value, and I want to pay for it. We gave so much, sometimes without even realizing, that people felt they would never be able to give back. (Leonard, founder)*

They explain that people should decide for themselves what they should give in return for everything they get from their friends at RATO (Leonard), that it is '*by living together that people want to live together, as a mutual choice*' (David).

Individual responses to RATO's friendship-centered organizational discourse

Friendship is not only a theme that is apparent in founder's and historic partners' discourse or in internal documents, but which is also used by others members, both later partners and free talents. They explain either having been friends with one of the founders or historical partners prior to joining RATO, or becoming friends with them after joining:

> *David kept telling me, every time I saw him, 'come check RATO out!'. At every party, he kept going on and on about this. We were just friends at the time. And every time I saw him: 'come check it out, come check it out!'. (Nathan, Partner)*

> *Initially these were professional relationships, and then it became more friendly. (…) With James, for instance, we got on really well, I gave him work, he gave me work. There was a real exchange, and it became also true in business. (Andrew, Partner)*

The discourse of friendship created by the founders and reproduced by the historic partners is often initially met with a strong sense of identification from the consultants who later decide to join RATO. As the organization grew and tensions emerged around the *raison d'être* of the organization, a counter discourse was however crafted, which questioned the extent to which RATO is (or should be) an organization based on friendship or much more business-oriented. Of course, some informants adopted multiple subject-positions by drawing on both discourses.

Fun vs. Drama. All of our interviewees presented RATO as a place where one could have fun, meet other consultants who share the same desire to enjoy each other's company and avoid the sense of isolation and boredom independent workers can sometimes experience. Many consultants explain having been enthused by the atmosphere of the summer universities, the trainings or the conferences organized by RATO:

> *We went away from everything, just amongst ourselves. And there was this atmosphere… I mean, I went to business school, and there was the same kind of collective hazing thing going on. We work all day, we party all night, we're a community, we're away from everything, in a remote location. It was a bit like a cult. But in a good way, it gave us a sense of community. (Mary, Free Talent)*

> *It was magical. Really. (…) It was very festive. A bit like La fête de l'Huma [a music festival organized by the left wing journal l'Humanité]. We all met together in these kinds of very festive events. (Martin, Partner)*

> *A group like RATO, it's above all about physical encounters, about meeting up, getting a bite to eat, drinking together, these bonds are… I don't know… (…) these are affective bonds! (Peter, Partner)*

However, there is also a counter-discourse in our interviews, where having fun and partying is also presented as an obligation: '*It's not Woodstock (…) but you need to enjoy partying, or you'll struggle to fit in!*' (Damian). Some are also much more negative explaining how the atmosphere had progressively become '*tense', 'stormy'* (Martin) and '*violent' (Nathan)* as much as the tensions developed between those who were business-oriented and those who privilege friendliness as the main purpose of RATO. People from both sides expressed the same frustration and disappointment with the tensions

> *At some point, there were a lot of tensions between people who were very business oriented and people who were… more warm, more empathetic. (Martin, Partner)*

> *The last general assembly was very violent. I experienced it as something very violent. Very necessary, but I saw people suffer. I suffered. I was not well. And I saw Leonard suffer. So necessarily, when I see people I love suffer, it hurts. (Nathan, Partner)*

> *When you spend a lot of time at RATO, you have no result and no fun… That's a little masochistic! (…) I remember one thing: every time we met, it was to talk about nothing but money… (Jack, Former Partner)*

Equality vs. Informal hierarchies. The principle of considering everybody equally, resolving issues in friendly manners by taking into account all arguments and having no hierarchy are presented by informants as an ideal form of organizing:

> *Having a vote, no sales objective, no boss, no hierarchy, that was very attractive, the collectivist element suited me. (Thomas, Partner)*

> *Trust came from the culture of palaver: the quality of interaction relied on rethorics: talking, debating, disagreeing. If there was a problem, it was managed through palaver, not through contracts and lawyers. (Lea, Former Partner)*

Yet, in spite of the ideal of equality, few informants also acknowledged the existence of informal hierarchies between members in practice. Many members of RATO say that '*some were more equal than others*' (Peter), especially the founders:

> *Leonard was worth ten, David was worth ten … so 'one person one vote' in reality, it's not what was happening. That's always been the problem. (Anna, Free Talent)*

Leonard was saying one person one vote, but actually, what he expected from the partners is that they would carry on his project. He acted like a boss 'that's my company, I'm the founding father, and I want it this way'. (Matthew, historic partner)

Informants say that although the founders created a project based on equality between friends, they behaved in a paternalistic way, attempting to dominate them: RATO was '*their baby*' (Steven) and they were not ready to let it leave the nest and make its own decisions: they only wanted shared governance as long as members agreed with them. Some describe these tensions as a '*teenage rebellion*' from RATO's consultants who wanted to emancipate themselves from the founding fathers.

Some informants also emphasize that informal hierarchies were created based on economic success or gender which gave some consultants more power and influence on others:

There were differences… probably on sales and on what people did or brought to RATO. And often there are people, I won't say their name, but people who say 'I billed all my projects through RATO and that's like 220 000 last year so shut your mouth.' Basically 'What did you bring?' Ok, I'm exaggerating a little, but that was basically it. At least it's what everyone heard because it sounded very clear. (Alex, Former Partner)

Even if it was 'one person one vote', the issue was also to be listened to when you were talking! As a woman, sometimes I have had to ask to be listened to a bit more. There weren't many of us among the partners. (Patricia, Former Partner)

Intimacy vs. Distance. Beyond the ability to have fun at RATO and to recognize other members for who they are in spite of their differences, our study participants also explain that the relationships they have built are deep and meaningful on an emotional level. They acknowledge that intimacy is at the heart of RATO's mode of functioning. The training sessions offered by RATO, in particular, are seen as creating indefectible bonds between their participants. These trainings rely and build on intimacy to succeed:

I did the first module of training, it was amazing. The group was great, I have very specific memories with each of them. We stayed in touch, the bonds we created were important. I think everyone who went through this training remembers it. You spend 24h a day with the group, what you learn is very striking, and it gets quite personal, you go deep, you confide in others. (…) That's RATO's spirit. (Damian, Free Talent)

In line with the coaching methods used by many members of RATO, these sessions allow people '*to share their doubts*' (Sarah) and '*show their vulnerability*' (Lisa), which according to them is a basis for successful joint work but also for indefectible support in all situations. For instance, Nathan explained that he experienced such solidarity directly when he underwent eye surgery and could no longer work:

> *I just had a month and a half off, because I had an issue with one of my eyes. Leonard calls me and says 'How can I help'? To me this is priceless. (…) Behind this question there is 'I am here, you can count on me, if you need help just ask and we'll be there'. This is precious. (Nathan, Partner)*

However, informants emphasize that– due to diverse factors including the increasing number and geographical dispersion of members – intimate ties have progressively distended over time.

> *There were always a lot of tears at the end of the 21 days, but it was amazing. The older of us, that's what we tell each other now: 'when it's 30 people, no one cries anymore, when it was 5 or 6 of us, we used to cry.' (…) when it's 7 or 8 people who are emotionally close to each other, who can say things that are emotionally charged, that create strong emotional reactions… Pleasant or unpleasant ones. That's something you cannot do beyond a certain size, you just can't. (Robert, Historic Partner)*

In this wake, several informants, both recent members but also people who joined the network at an early stage explain not longing for the kind of intimacy that historic partners tried to encourage:

> *We can have a drink, have a team dinner, have a laugh, that's great. But I wouldn't go on holidays with them either. (…) I don't want it to become too intimate, I need it to stay professional. I don't know how to explain it… work friends that's great, but that's where it ends. (Gwen, Free Talent)*

> *Leonard, I never did anything with him. To be honest, he made me very uncomfortable. (…) It's someone with a certain aura, and everything. But (…) he freaked me out a little. I saw a bit of a guru, I don't get him when he talks, he's a bit cosmic. I'm very pragmatic so… wow… (Alex, Former Partner)*

> *'RATO is their life project. For many of us it's a professional life project. I have another life next to it.' (Matthew, historic partner)*

Growth vs. stagnation. Many of our interviewees explained that the people they met through RATO were not only people they could have fun with, or even make deep emotional

connections with, but were also people who made them grow professionally and personally. They explain how training, mentoring or even simple advices provided by others '*changed their life*' (Peter), were '*a revelation*' (James), '*lit up something*' in them (Anna) or were like a '*slap in the face*' (Lisa), which allowed them to progress and flourish.

> *It helped me grow faster. When David said, once, I remember 'what are you doing the day after tomorrow?'. I said 'not much. (laughs). I'm looking for clients, as usual.' He said 'Come, come with me. I only ask you… I don't want to hear a word from you, but come see what I do.' So I could shadow him for two days, two days of facilitation. And that has a real value. It allowed me to make up my own mind about what works, what he did very well and that perhaps I could see myself doing as well. Not reproducing it, but taking inspiration from it. Something I liked and I wanted to implement… but staying true to myself, I don't know if you see what I mean. Something that inspired me and that could perhaps… be some kind of a template. (Alex, Partner)*

At the same time, informants felt that they did not learn as much as they would have liked from others, those who were presented as their friends and were supposed help them grow did not do so, leading them to stagnate professionally and personally rather than flourish.

> *The promise 'come play with us'… I have never ever had the opportunity to come play with them. So, in terms of business development, the balance is at zero. Nothing, nothing, nothing. (Alex, Former Partner)*

> *It was a promise that was made to me. It wasn't written anywhere but I was told 'come play, you'll develop your business, etc.' And I'm not playing, and I'm not developing either. But…(…) maybe it was a time issue, but time passed and nothing came. (Alex, former Partner)*

Generosity vs. self-interest. Many informants describe founders and some of the most active partners as extremely generous people who are '*not even aware of how much (they) gave*' (Peter) and who '*embody the magic of the project*' (Martin). They say that they are driven by selflessness and that they do it for free without expecting return from others:

> *David gave a lot, a lot of time, a lot of energy for RATO. People who invest in a project like he did, they can only be respected, held in high regard. I have done that in other contexts and I know it's not easy. (Peter, Partner)*

> *I didn't understand how it could work. I mean I was told 'Don't worry, you'll be able to eat'. 'But what do I need to do in return?' They didn't ask for anything in return. (Jonathan, Partner)*

The generosity of RATO and its leaders is nonetheless challenged by certain informants emphasizing that many are in fact looking for their own self-interest. Some participants even felt they had been lied to, betrayed or emotionally manipulated by founders and historic partners whom '*advocate a model that they do not even apply to themselves*' (Sarah) who had prioritized their own economic interest over the well-being or the economic interest of the community:

> *The idea, with my friend, was to say 'how can we sell seminars to HR directors?'.*
> *I bring Leonard with me to meet my friend, one meeting, a second meeting and*
> *then nothing. I call Leonard and I say 'what's going on?' Nothing. Ok. (...) I call*
> *my friend and he says 'It's great! We built something, we signed a first project.'*
> *For me that's unacceptable. (Andrew, Partner)*

> *It was a very difficult time, first of all personally speaking, because I broke up*
> *with Leonard. It's an affective breakup, yes. The end of a friendship, of an affective*
> *bond. When I saw Leonard put a lot of affective pressure on people... It's tough*
> *to fight it (...) he would impress anyone, anywhere... when it can be useful to*
> *people that's great, but when it's for his own interest and you don't know where*
> *it's going, when you feel manipulated... the line is quickly crossed. (Steven,*
> *Historic Partner)*

The feeling that people prioritized their own economic interest over that of the collective, was not solely something that was reproached to the founders, it concerned many of the partners more broadly:

> *RATO was precious to be able to get big clients. That's a major issue for*
> *freelancers, before working for a client, you need to be referenced and that's a*
> *long and difficult process. (...) But there was no transparence. RATO was*
> *referenced, but this was done individually by partners who had done it to get in*
> *certain organizations, but who didn't necessarily want to share it with everyone.*
> *(...) There was a contradiction between the individual self-interest of the partners*
> *and collective interest. There were strong personalities, too strong, who didn't*
> *necessarily let collective interest come first. (Patrick, Partner)*

This counter-discourse points out the fact that the discourse of generosity completely writes out the economic motives of individuals within RATO, as if friendship were entirely incompatible with profit.

Reciprocity vs. Obligation. In line with the organizational discourse, many interviewees explained that although '*nothing was asked in exchange*' for what they were given (Jonathan),

they wanted to give back. They told us that they felt they had received so much from RATO, its founders or some of its influential partners, that they were indebted and thought it was natural to give back, even though it was not expected. This is why some invested a lot of time or money in the development of RATO:

> *I give a lot. But honestly, it's not that much. (…) This pro bono time, I offer it to RATO (…) it's like a good balance. This has been lost in most organizations, we have very unilateral relationships, saying things like 'I give you this, it's normal because you pay me' but… there's no exchange. I receive from RATO, I'm a partner so I paid something for it, ok. But I get so many benefits from it, intangible ones also, like relationships, friendship, support. (Nathan, Partner)*

> *I do a lot of volunteering for RATO. I used to do a lot of network management, building the community of consultants. I was very committed to that. I worked… yes, I was very active in volunteering. (Ben, Partner)*

Others argue that they feel they realized at one point that there were '*few rights, but many obligations*' (Ben). In particular, several of them refer to a chart was introduced to specify how members of RATO were supposed to share value. This is referred to as "the pie": 20% of the billing for the person who sold the project, 10% for the person who designed the methods, 55% for the person who is actually delivering, and 15% for administrative costs and the development of RATO). Although many informants explained that this enabled reciprocity and permitted a certain level of transparency, which simplified relationships and avoided conflict, others argue that this formalization and quantification of expectations through the 'partnership pact' and its pie directly questioned the logic of reciprocity. They say that as members' contributions to RATO started to be quantified, they could be compared, which led them to question the reciprocal nature of relationships: '*This community made a blood pact saying* '*never without RATO and it will pay back*' *but wasn't this a fad?*'(Andrew).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through our study of RATO, we show that friendship is used as a mode of neo-normative control through six different discursive repertoires: 'fun', as anticipated from the literature, but also 'equality', 'intimacy', 'growth', 'generosity' and 'reciprocity'. By using these six repertoires, the founders and historic partners of RATO invite their members to blur the boundary between their professional and private lives by spending a lot of their time (and money) to contribute to the development of RATO, although they are not financially retributed

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nor contractually obligated to do so. We also show how individuals respond to such attempts to coopt their personal lives either by reproducing the organizational discourse, by resisting it through the elaboration of a counter-discourse challenging the nature of relationships at RATO or, as is the case for many of our participants, by adopting a more ambivalent and polyphonic response navigating between the discourse of friendship and its binary opposition. This allows us to make two important contributions to the literatures on friendship and on neo-normative control.

First, we add to studies of neo-normative control (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Sturdy & Fleming, 2011) by documenting the role played by the discourse of friendship in control, beyond the sole element of 'fun'. The literature has indeed insisted so far on the way post-bureaucratic settings characterized by a culture of 'friendship', rather than a 'family' culture (Costas, 2012) use friendship as a means to encourage playful self-expressions and the reconciliation of work and life, for instance by encouraging friendly socializing outside of work, with the intent to foster high levels of organizational commitment and to encourage self-exploitation (Fleming, 2009; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2020). We extend this understanding of friendship by looking at a setting in which friendship is not only peripheral to the work and control does not solely take place *around* the work task (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) but where friendship *is* the organization. This allows us to highlight the existence of two additional sets of discursive repertoires beyond friendship as fun: friendship as a source of equality and friendship as a source of self-development.

Through the discursive repertoire of equality, friendship is associated with the celebration of individual differences and their value to the organization: all consultants have the same worth no matter their business success and all should have an equal say in decision-making. The discursive repertoire of 'intimacy' strengthens this further: relationships with friends are presented as necessarily transparent, respectful and benevolent, which writes out power struggles. In her study of a large global consultancy, Costas (2012) did point to the role played by friendship culture in fostering a sense of inclusion and egalitarianism amongst consultants by downplaying the existence of hierarchy. In our case, this goes even further as equality is supposedly embedded in the governance of the organization through the '*one person one vote'* principle. It is not only used to downplay the existence of (informal) hierarchies and the influence of the founders on decision-making, as in Costas' study, but also and above all to encourage individuals to take an active part in the organization by donating money, or investing time and effort in the development of the network. Through the discourse of friendship, and by

adopting the principles of a democratic form of organizing, individuals are encouraged to recognize that they do not only have rights (as organizational citizens of sort) but also and above all obligations towards other members of the network. This is all the more present in our study that RATO presents itself as a 'liberated company' (Getz, 2009). As discussed by Picard and Islam (2020), 'fun' and 'injunctions to enjoy' are often emphasized as a core component of the culture of liberated companies. We add that this may be even more the case in the context of independent work, where individuals willingly commit to an organization outside of the formal ties of an employment contract and encouraging individuals' free and willing contributions to the organization is central to its survival.

Yet, in spite of the discourse of friendship, we note a persistence of the discourse of '*family*' and '*community*' in some of our participants' accounts, which present the founders as the '*fathers*' of the organization, RATO as '*their baby*' and members who resist at least in part the discourse of friendship as '*teenagers*'. This points to a tension between neo-normative control and the discourse of friendship emphasized in the managerial discourse which celebrates individual differences and agency on the one hand, and more normative elements of discourse which embrace unity and communion in support of the leaders' strategic choices. Such a tension between forms of control that are often intertwined in practice has already been identified in the literature on neo-normative control, which shows that although individuals are invited to 'be themselves', self-expressions which depart too much from desired identities are disapproved of (Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Costas, 2012; Bardon et al., forthcoming). We show that, even in the context of independent work, where bureaucratic control is kept to a minimum given the absence of employment relationships, subordination and formal structures, there is nonetheless a persistence of the normative discourse of the 'family': where neo-normative control fails (because friendship ties can be broken more easily than family ones), the encompassing paternalistic discourse of the family takes over.

Next, through the discursive repertoires of intimacy, growth, generosity and reciprocity, RATO also develops an instrumental definition of friendship as a resource to be exploited for self-development. As such, it aims to reconcile friendship and performance, by making personal relationships the site of learning and self-development: intimacy and generous reciprocal relationships become the condition of real self-improvement. This echoes a classic critique of self-development, which aims to encourage self-exploitation and the positioning of the self as an object to be improved (Townley, 1995) and yet goes one step further by making the self a mean of performance, but extending this to our relationship to significant others.

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The discourse of friendship mobilized by the founders however writes-out self-interest, economic and financial motives as well as instrumental relationships and thus denies, at least in part, some of the realities of organizational life at RATO. There is a paradox between emphasizing generosity and altruism on one side, and yet presenting friendships as means of self-development and potential vectors of new business. Such a conception of friendship is in line with the dominant view of friendship in the literature, which present it as something that is not instrumental, or as Grey and Sturdy (2007: 161-162) put it, it 'idealizes friendship as a kind of authentic, free activity while also offering an impoverished version of organizational life (…) (as) friendship never – or rarely – takes place simply as free choice in isolation from other relations and roles'. Our study contributes to enriching the literature on workplace friendship by showing how such a simplistic conception of friendship can generate tensions as it prevents individuals from articulating friendship and work, which are conceived as mutually exclusive: either we are friends and necessarily disinterested and caring, or we are colleagues who are motivated by self-interest. This paradoxically reinforces control as, just like neo-normative control 'detracts' individuals' attention from more traditional forms of normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011), it also detracts their attention from the way personal relationships, emotions and affects are actually exploited for corporate purposes.

Our second main contribution concerns the way individuals respond to the organizational discourse around friendship. We show how RATO's consultants adopt a multiplicity of subject positions when confronted to the managerial discourse of friendship, from conformity to resistance through the crafting of a counter-discourse around six alternative discursive repertoires: 'drama', 'informal hierarchies', 'stagnation', 'self-interest' and 'obligation'. A number of participants actually adopt more polysemic responses by drawing simultaneously on both the conforming and the resisting discourses. As in Musson and Duberley's (2007) study of individuals' appropriation of the discourse of participation to change in organization, our participants adopt contrasted, ambivalent and sometimes contradictory positions in the face of the managerial discourse around friendship. This highlights the fluidity of individuals' responses to control, beyond conformity, resistance and distance (Collinson, 2003). Yet, if the counter-discourse was rather strong during our second wave of interviews, it is partly because – as mentioned before – the ideals of equality and self-development both exclude the possibility of instrumentality in friendship, which is incompatible with the economic ambition of the organization. As soon as elements of instrumentality were perceived in practice, this could generate a very strong sense of betrayal leading to a breach of trust and a potential withdrawal

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from the organization. This constitutes one of the main limits of this specific form of control which can be extremely powerful in coopting individuals' private lives and encouraging commitment, especially when there are very few means of technocratic control, but can also generate strong resistance. When the counter-discourse relying on the repertoires of self-interest, stagnation and obligations became dominant amongst partners, conflicts emerged, forcing one of the founders out. But the organization did not survive it: between individuals who were faithful to their friends, those who felt betrayed and upset and those who preferred to maintain some distance, this created a sort of arrested organisational state. We could actually not fully grasp the extent to which the friendship discourse could also be repelling to a number of consultants who refused to join RATO because of its emphasis on friendship, but based on what some free talents who did not want to become partners told us, it is very likely that it could actually be as attractive as repelling.

Our study opens up a number of avenues for further research. First, it would be interesting to explore further how friendship is used by management as a form of control in other kinds of settings where individuals may have less autonomy and a higher level of dependence to the organization, as in the case in digital labour platforms for low skilled workers for instance (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). It would also be interesting to study the discursive repertoires individuals draw on to respond to such attempts to coopt their social lives in these kinds of settings and whether this generates similar responses than for our participants. Finally, our article also invites us to explore further the limits of the reach of the discourse of friendship, especially as it may generate strong negative emotions and disidentification, within and outside the organization.

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