When does Superiors’ Deviance threaten Organisational Hierarchy?

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Abstract
There has been some research into employees’ organisational misbehaviour. But how about managers’ or superiors’ deviance? Little is known about the impact of superiors’ misbehaviour on the system of hierarchical order. This theoretical paper, therefore, investigates how, why and when superiors’ crossing of boundaries contributes to the stabilisation and continuation of hierarchical social system – and when their misbehaviour threatens it. For investigating this question, the concept of crossing of boundaries will be applied to superiors’ deviance in the realms of social action, interests, social identity and ideology. Findings suggest that almost all of superiors’ deviance does not threaten hierarchical organisations.

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Managers, hierarchy, organizational misbehaviour, crossing of boundaries
1. Introduction

According to prevailing management concepts, organisations shall function efficiently and smoothly - and so ought their members. Opposition to, and deviance from hierarchical order, therefore, is regarded not only as a threat to other members of the organisation but to the survival of the whole system. Cases when people do not behave as expected are portrayed as ‘workplace deviance’ (e.g. Bryant & Higgins, 2010; Spector & Fox, 2010). Following Robinson and Bennett (1997, p. 6), deviant workplace behaviour can be defined ‘as those behaviors that violate norms that are perceived by organizational members to be pivotal or significant norms to the dominant administrative coalition of the organization.’ Terms such as ‘organisational misbehaviour’ or ‘dysfunctional work behaviour’ make it even clearer that any (intentional) deviation from organisational norms and expectations is regarded negatively for the individual as well as the organisation (Goldman, 2008; Griffin et al., 1998).

So far, mostly employees’ or subordinates’ organisational misbehaviour has been interrogated - particularly how their dysfunctional behaviour and oppositional practices might impact negatively on organisations and how it can be punished or ‘managed’ (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Boye & Slora, 1993; Courpasson & Dany, 2003; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Prasad & Prasad, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1997, 199). But how about managers’ or superiors’ deviance and misbehaviour? Superiors seemingly function well on a regular basis - even the occasional scandal supports the notion that superiors’ misbehaviour is the exception to the rule. Superiors are professionals; they are quite aware of what is expected from them and how they should carry out their job and official tasks. Superiors in hierarchical organisational structures (try to) demonstrate superior knowledge and experience, mastery and leadership, dominance and power, responsibility and legality in accordance with their functional roles (Hales 1986; Scott, 1990, p. 3). Biggart and Hamilton (1984, p. 546) found in their empirical research that ‘the importance of obedience to role obligations as the route to power was described in numerous ways by actors. People often spoke of the importance of “honesty,” “integrity,” or “credibility” meaning the willingness to uphold the standards of the job.’ Public obedience of organisational rules and norms ensures the personal legitimacy of the superior and the continuation of their career (Courpasson & Dany, 2003, p. 1233).

In some contrast, we know very little about the hidden practices and activities of managers, i.e. their hidden misbehaviour, personal insufficiencies, dysfunctions, deviance, or mal-practices. The talk is not so much about those extreme cases of corporate scandals where senior managers enrich themselves at the expenses of shareholders and the wider public “beyond their wildest dreams” and then leave the company in disarray with a golden handshake. It is more about the daily countless little acts of managerial misbehaviour, particularly towards and against (their) subordinates and the organisation as a whole.

There is only little research into managerial deviance (Messner et al., 2008). For example, Bryant and Cox’s (2003) investigation of some ‘atrocity tales’ about managerial violence during organisational change or Vredenburgh and Bender’s (1998) brief investigation of ‘hierarchical abuse of power work organisations’ contribute to a small minority of studies which try to shed some light on managers’ organisational misbehaviour. However, close to nothing is known about the impact several types of superiors’ misbehaviour might have on the system of hierarchical order; when and why does their deviance contribute to the further stabilisation of the system – and when does their misbehaviour, indeed, constitute a threat to it? So far, most of the reasoning concerning superiors’ hidden transcripts and
crossing of boundaries can still only be based more on conjectures rather than comprehensive empirical research and thorough theoretical analysis. This paper, therefore, shall contribute to analysis of the problem when and how exactly superiors’ deviant behaviour might challenge or even threaten the system of hierarchical order – and when it might contribute to its further stabilisation.

For this, the concept of crossing of boundaries (Scott, 1990) will be used and will be differentiated further into weak, medium and strong crossings. The concept will be applied to superiors’ deviance in the realms of social action (Weber, 1921/1980), interests (Moore & Loewenstein 2004), social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) and ideology (Abercrombie et al., 1980; Diefenbach, 2009). The theoretical approach and analysis are largely based on Scott’s (1990) socio-anthropological concept of public and hidden transcripts and deviance and concepts of (managerial) deviance and misbehaviour (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Boddy, 2006; Kreiner et al., 2006; Levin, 2005; McLean Parks et al., 2010; Rayburn & Rayburn, 1996; Robinson & Bennett, 1995 and 1997; Vardi & Weitz, 2004; Vredenburgh & Brender, 1998).

2. Crossing of Boundaries

2.1 Organisational context and crossing of boundaries

In organisations, like in any other longer-lasting social system, social positions and relationships as well as ‘do’s’ and ‘don’t’s’ are institutionalised. Especially in hierarchical systems - whether it is formal or informal hierarchy (Akella, 2003; Courpasson & Clegg, 2006; Courpasson & Dany, 2003; Nelson, 2001; Oberg & Walgenbach, 2008) - the roles and positions of all actors and parties involved are clearly defined and demarcated from each other (Finkelstein, 1992, p. 508). Superiors’ and subordinates’ positions and responsibilities within the hierarchy are defined and protected by boundaries (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006; Scott 1990). As a social construct ‘boundaries’ can be seen as formal or informal social rules defining what is, or is not, “allowed”, “appropriate” and “acceptable”. Boundaries are subjective, to a great extent in the minds of people. As ‘psychic artifacts’ (Diamond et al., 2004, p. 37) they contribute to the regulation of people’s behaviour; people ought to act in circumscribed ways within the confines of their social roles and positions (Biggart & Hamilton, 1984, p. 543). In this sense, ‘boundaries’ are very similar to ‘norms’ (e.g. Levine, 2005). However, whereas norms are more meant as ‘shared’ beliefs and - at least officially - unite people, ‘boundaries’ primarily divide people, their views and actions. From an anthropologist viewpoint, boundaries are markers of differences and are often ‘sacred’ or ‘taboo’ (Diamond et al., 2004, p. 36 referring to Stapley & Leach). Boundaries can be regarded as ‘limits that define domains’ or ‘mental fences’ (Kreiner et al., 2006, p. 1318). For example, in the context of hierarchical systems, boundaries represent ‘social and cultural barriers between dominant elites and subordinates’ (Scott, 1990, p. 132). A boundary is, so-to-speak, the line drawn into the sand one must not cross!

But this is what people do; they challenge and cross boundaries. The phenomenon of crossing of boundaries becomes even clearer when one follows Scott’s (1990) concept of ‘public and hidden transcripts’. According to this model, crossing of boundaries means that hidden phenomena such as actions or beliefs (‘transcripts’) come into the public domain, i.e. become known to other parties. Scott defined the hidden transcript as ‘discourse that takes place “offstage,” beyond direct observation by powerholders’ (1990, p. 4) and the public transcript as ‘the open interaction between subordinates and
those who dominate’ (1990, p. 2). A ‘crossing of boundaries’ means when hidden transcripts become public. ‘Crossing of boundaries’ can be understood as any non-compliance with prevailing social expectations in a specific social situation. This is nothing unusual, on the contrary; whether daily battles at an individual level, groups of people trying to pursue their specific goals within a certain social context or class struggles at a historic scale; boundaries are being challenged, shifted and crossed on a regular basis (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010; Passini & Morselli, 2010, 2009).

2.2 Weak, medium and strong crossings of boundaries

Boundaries can be challenged and crossed with different intensity. The intensity of a boundary crossing is a result of objective factors (such as the actual event, people’s actions and factual consequences) as well as their subjective interpretations of the parties involved over time. At a general level, intensity might be operationalised as follows. A crossing of boundaries is

a) ‘weak’ when the factual boundary crossing, its perception and immediate consequences following it are all within the range of ‘typical daily life experiences’. Besides coping with the crossing of boundaries itself, no further adjustments beyond the actual situation are needed by the actors involved (e.g. an employee comes late to work once and has not informed his or her supervisor about it. The supervisor has a conversation with the employee in which they discuss and solve the issue);

b) ‘medium’ when the factual crossing of boundaries is (perceived as) so severe that further adjustments and additional resources are required from the parties involved in order to cope with the consequences (e.g. senior management expects all staff to become ‘customer-oriented’. For this, employees have to change some of their attitudes, behaviour, even rhetoric and ways of thinking in order to comply (convincingly) with this demand - or to pretend doing so);

c) ‘strong’ when the crossing of boundaries and / or its perceived relevance has got fundamental consequences not only for some of the actors involved but for the further existence of the whole social system (e.g. a group, an organisation or a whole nation are at the fringe of disappearance because core values, principles, or mechanisms are not being accepted anymore and might be superseded by others).

Since in this paper the focus is on the persistence of hierarchical order, i.e. the whole social system, the three different grades of intensity are seen primarily with regard to the stability of the social system. This is not to deny that most boundary crossings usually have more important and severe consequences for (some of) the actors involved than the social system they are part of. Yet, this investigation is about how a crossing of boundaries may or may not constitute a challenge, even threat primarily for the continuation and persistence of the superior-/subordinate relationship, i.e. the social structure, not the actors involved.
2.3 Social actions, interests, identities and ideologies

Crossing of boundaries can happen in different realms of social life. The perhaps most obvious processes can happen in the realm of social action. According to Max Weber (1921/1980) social action can be understood as people’s behaviour, attitudes and actions in the presence of others. In order to cover more phenomena, social action is here also understood as communication. Moreover, it does not necessarily need to happen in the presence of others. Much social action nowadays happen via media (such as e-mails or other information and communication technologies, personal and mass media), i.e. not in the presence of, but with relevance for others. Hence, the crucial aspect is that someone’s action (or in-action) has got consequences, whether intended or un-intended, for others.

When people do or don’t do something consciously, they do it for a reason. In this sense, behind people’s conscious (social) actions are interests (Darke & Chaiken, 2005; Hendry, 2005; Miller, 1999; Moore & Loewenstein, 2004). Interests represent a crucial explanatory link between context, people, their decisions, and actions (Hindess, 1986; Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004). They shape how people see and interpret the world, they form people’s ideas and intentions, decisions, attitudes and actions. In this sense ‘interest’ is meant, and shall be defined here, as a real person’s or group of people’s attraction towards a certain object or objective.

Which interests people have depends to quite some extent on how they see themselves (as such and amongst others), i.e. it is about their identities (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Elstak & Van Riel, 2005; Gabriel, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within the social sphere a person’s identity might be called ‘social identity’. According to Tajfel (1978, p. 63), social identity can be understood as that part of an individual’s self-concept ‘which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.’ It is the self-image of an individual which stems from its roles and positions, rights and duties, privileges and prerogatives in a given social system (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

Finally, people’s actions, interests and identities are largely shaped, if not driven by norms and values. Although every individual has its own views and opinions, convictions and beliefs, key parts of these can be traced back to general, even collectively held norms and values. These norms and values provide explanations and justifications of the natural and social world as well as of the positions of groups and individuals within it. In this sense, they are a ‘normal’ part of our construction and sense-making of the world, of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). If values and beliefs are particularly exclusive in a certain way (for example they claim to provide the only possible view on things and / or portray one state or conduct of social affairs as preferential to others), they might be called ideology. Most value and belief systems are ideologies (Abercrombie et al., 1980; Brookfield, 2005).

Overall, superiors’ and subordinates hierarchical relationship is a dynamic one which is almost permanently re-established and challenged via multiple processes in the realms of social action, interests, identity and norms and values. Many of these events (potentially) are crossing of boundaries with different intensities. Figure 1 provides a visual idea of such crossings.
In the following sections it shall be analysed what consequences subordinates’ weak, medium, or strong crossing of boundaries within the four realms can have for hierarchical order.

3. Crossing of boundaries

3.1 Superiors’ crossing of boundaries in the realm of social action

In the realm of social action continuing interaction between superiors and subordinates takes place largely in the form of learned (role-) behaviour. Both superior and subordinate usually try to function according to prescribed role-expectations. However, well-functioning is never complete and deviance from expectations happens on a daily basis. Deviating behaviour at the workplace can vary enormously and there have been several attempts to classify it - largely seeing or portraying it negatively as ‘dysfunctional’ behaviour (e.g. Biron, 2010; Boye & Slora 1993; Lehman & Ramanujam, 2009; MacLean et al., 2006; Prasad & Prasad, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1997, 1995; Vardi & Weitz, 2004; Wahrman, 2010).

At the workplace as well as in research it is mostly subordinates’ deviance, dysfunctionality, and resistance which is recognised (Prasad & Prasad, 1998). Yet, it might be quite realistic to assume that many superiors show the same whole range of deviating or dysfunctional behaviour within organisations like their subordinates - perhaps even more and worse. This could be so, because superiors’ position higher up the pecking order provides them with more opportunities to deviate more from norms of ‘good behaviour’. Larger elbowroom enables superiors to enact more of all these little incivilities and bad atti-
tudes people with poorly developed character and inferior moral value systems demonstrate in the presence of other, particularly weaker and disadvantaged people. Ashforth (1994, 756-757) gave quite a good description of some of these minor forms of personal aggression and inappropriate behaviour carried out by people he called “petty tyrants”.

Organisational misbehaviour of petty tyrants can be regarded as superiors’ weak crossing of boundaries in the realm of social action (with regard to the system of hierarchical order. In contrast, for subordinates who are at the receiving end of such behaviour it might constitute a strong crossing, indeed). To a certain degree it is even required from superiors to differ from “societal ideals of good behaviour” in their conduct of their job. They need to get a job done and, for this, to demonstrate attitudes of ‘the’ manager, leader or doer, such as: pragmatism, determination, toughness or even ruthlessness (of course, all for the sake of the area they are responsible for and cushioned by ‘emotional intelligence’).

To cross lines, to overcome odds and to demonstrate non-compliance every now and then seems almost a necessity for managers - at least for the ones who want to be seen as ‘pro-active’ and ‘result-oriented’. In addition, many superiors have learned to play the game during their organisational socialisation and career progress - otherwise they would not have reached their position. There, hence, seems to be some logic inherent in hierarchical organisations that superiors cross boundaries quite regularly. Most, if not all of such low-level deviance of superiors is perceived, portrayed, and accepted as ‘normal’, as the normal abnormality of organisational life and contemporary society. In this sense, their deviance does not constitute a threat to the hierarchical order.

However, it is only a small step from superiors’ low to a more medium-intense crossing of boundaries. Serious personal workplace aggression, for example bullying, abusive behaviour or ongoing interpersonal conflict and persistent hostility, can constitute such medium-intense crossing of boundaries (e.g. Bassman & London, 1993; Zapf & Gross, 2001). And there can be also criminal actions of individual managers by which moral and legal boundaries are being crossed, for example corporate tax evasion, personal enrichment, bribery of government officials or other forms of gross managerial misconduct.

Again, even such medium-intense crossings in form of immoral and / or criminal behaviour of individual managers do not constitute a threat to the hierarchical order. One reason for this is that even superiors’ more severe misbehaviour does not really come as a surprise. When such behaviour becomes public, observers often come to the conclusion that “this is the way things are!” , “this has always been the case!” , and that “they do it, anyway!” For example, in his excellent study of the ‘power elite’, in which Mills revealed quite a few of superiors’ misbehaviours, he found that criticism of the powerful ‘does not arouse indignation on the part of anyone in a position voluntarily to do anything about them, and much less about the corporate system in which they are firmly anchored.’ (Mills, 1956, p. 157).

Another reason can be found in the way superiors’ possible organisational misbehaviour is handled. More or less serious attempts to reveal and punish such deviance often follow the policies and procedures which are in place, for example company’s codes of conduct, HR-policies and -procedures, committees and complaints commissions, organisational power- and control-systems and the like. These systems are regularly strongly biased towards superiors, towards the protection and strengthening of superiors’ positions and managerial prerogatives. Quite often, the incident - or crucial parts of it - is being swept under the carpet or dealt with by the system in ways which are sympathetic particularly towards superiors’ positions and interests. Hence, the majority of cases to punish superiors’ or-
ganisational misbehaviour by using the organisational systems and procedures in place end up either with whitewashes or with decisions which recommend the instalment of further hierarchical and bureaucratic policies and procedures. Somewhat cynically, this ‘orderly’ handling of cases of subordinates’ crossings of boundaries even demonstrates that ‘the system’ works and lives up to its official norms and values. Minor as well as medium-intense forms of superiors’ misbehaviour are therefore not system-threatening, on the contrary; they often contribute to a further strengthening of the system of hierarchical order.

This could be different if superiors’ misbehaviour represented not only individual but collective, at least widespread mal-practices (or even illegal practices) of larger parts of the power elite, such as:

- massive and unjustified group-based privileges and prerogatives, systemic inequalities and greatly unjust allocation of opportunities and resources (e.g. executives’ salaries and bonus schemes, pay-schemes for certain professions, senior public servants’ privileges and salaries, advantages of members of the establishment);
- systematic exploitation and poor treatment of subordinates (systematic and regular physical and psychological violence against workers organised by management or foremen);
- endemic mis-management or un-ethical behaviour in many organisations or even whole industries (e.g. banking and finances, insurance companies, real estate agencies, automotive industry, chemical and pharmaceutical industry, or the like).

Such examples also show that cases of systematic misbehaviour of superiors are not necessarily confined to so-called ‘banana republics’ or a few dubious or even illegal industries in industrialised nations. Un-ethical behaviour, unjustified group-based privileges, systematic exploitation and injustices can be widely accepted standards and practices in many parts of the economies and societies of industrialised countries. This ‘normalisation’ is further evidence for the fact that power elites and superiors usually are quite successful at legalising and institutionalising their antisocial behaviour by creating appropriate laws, regulations, customs, cultures, norms and values. Superiors know very well that they can only carry on with their practices and (anti-) social actions as long as they inherit the social position (and have access to and control over the means coming with it) and as long as the system of hierarchical order exists. Their misbehaviour is about taking advantage of the system, not against it.

It could be, though, that such actions weaken the system over time indirectly, i.e. that superiors’ widespread and systematic misbehaviour contributes to a slow erosion of the system. In such cases the whole ruling elite (or parts of it) appears to be corrupt and / or unfit to govern. Sooner or later, some or even all superiors will then be replaced. However, if this ‘change’ in government or even ‘revolution’ is confined to the realm of social action and does not come with a fundamentally different (value) system all what happened was the substitution of one ruling elite by another elite. Hence, even superiors’ collective, at least widespread misbehaviour will not challenge the hierarchical order as long as it is confined to the realm of social action. It ‘only’ exploits and abuses the existing system but does not challenge or change the guiding norms and principles of the system of hierarchical order.

To sum up: Superiors’ weak and medium-intense crossings of boundaries in the realm of social action are largely acceptable for the system of hierarchical order - or even encouraged. Even superiors’ wide-
spread, collective and systematic misbehaviour over a longer period of time ‘merely’ abuses people and the system, but does not challenge the very foundations and principles of the existing hierarchical order. We therefore can propose.

**proposition 1:** Within the realm of social action none of superiors’ boundary crossings is system-threatening.

### 3.2 Superiors’ crossing of boundaries in the realm of interests

Publicly, superiors’ first and foremost interest is serving the whole - whether this is ‘the country’, ‘the nation’, a people or an organisation (Pettigrew, 1973/2002, p. 97). To work very hard and unselfishly ‘for the sake of the whole’, even being intrinsically motivated to find ‘the best’ solutions for the system, is also said about superiors within organisations (e.g. Zaleznik, 1989, p. 197). According to Willmott (1996, p. 326), the ‘privileged yet dependent positioning of managers within the industrial structure induces them to represent their work – to other employees and owners – as impartial and uncompromised by self-interest or class-interest, motivated only by seemingly universal virtues of efficiency and effectiveness.’. To claim that their main interest is to ‘serve’ the common interest and that their partial interests are good for the whole has been the cunning and cynical strategy of the privileged and careerists in all hierarchical systems at all times. Pfeffer (1981, quoted in Willmott 1996, p. 325) explained that it ‘is certainly much more noble to think of oneself as developing skills toward the more efficient allocation and use of resources – implicitly for the greater good of society as a whole – than to think of oneself as engaged with other organizational participants in a political struggle over values [and] preferences.’

Nevertheless, superiors’ hidden personal and group interests are quite different. Like many other employees, managers’ first allegiance is not to the company they are working for, but to their individual aims and careers, their peer groups and profession, even to their private lives and concerns. Superiors do not care (so much) about the system but about their position and opportunities within the system. If they had not put their personal and career interests first, and everything else, including their employer companies second, most managers would not have reached their positions (and will not make future progress). Such an orientation is even expected from them. The hierarchical organisation is based on the principles of increasing privileges and prerogatives, and material and non-material advantages along the lines of the hierarchical division of labour. As soon as one has begun to taste the privileges of the level one has reached within a hierarchical social system, there is no way back. Many superiors, hence, have a very strong interest to keep and protect, indeed to increase what they have achieved for themselves so far (Clegg & Walsh, 2004, p. 230-231; Willmott, 1996, p. 326; Zaleznik, 1989, p. 152). Most superiors’ prime interest is gaining, keeping and increasing their formal position - and all what comes with it, i.e. social position and status, dominance and supremecy, responsibilities and influence, privileges and prerogatives, material and immaterial resources, career opportunities and other chances to increase one’s individual market value.

This broad mix of superiors’ hidden personal individual and group interests often shines through when they try to get things done. Although these interests go against the publicly portrayed interest in serving the common good (and, hence constitute crossings of boundaries) they do not constitute any threat to the hierarchical order. Many believe that only superiors who are ‘ambitious’, who want to excel and
who want to make a career are that type of ‘doers’, ‘achievers’ and ‘leaders’ who can get things done (and other people going) and who are good for the system. Hence, superiors’ interest in cunning little acts of twisting or bypassing ‘technical’ rules and regulations, of taking personal advantages while performing and achieving ambitious goals, playing the system or strengthening one’s formal and informal influence and position does not challenge the system, on the contrary; superiors’ weakly deviating interests are acceptable since they leave the system intact - often they are even expected and encouraged. The pursuit of superiors’ individual and group interests contributes to the continuation of the hierarchical system.

Usually, superiors’ minor boundary crossings happen, and shall happen, within the existing hierarchical structures and processes, power-and-control relationships, policies and procedures, performance measurement- and management-systems. However, many superiors will not stop with twisting or breaching minor technical rules and regulations in order to get their interests through. In the long run, they are interested in having the “right conditions” to pursue their individual and group interests systematically and in organised ways (with the help of powerful allies, skilful advisers and wilful servants). Superiors’ main interest is that the hierarchical system works for them - as smoothly and as ‘naturally’ as possible. In this sense, medium-intense crossing of boundaries in the realm of interests aim at shaping power-and-control relationships, policies and procedures, performance measurement- and management-systems, structures and processes of the system of hierarchical order so that it serves superiors’ interests as much as possible.

That the institutionalisation of individual and group interests via hierarchical structures is the main interest of superiors is even more obvious when one looks at established regimes, for example monarchies. The organisational structures and processes of the court and palace, cultural norms and values, the constitution of the state, the built environment as well as all these countless little signs and royal symbols shall demonstrate only one thing; the (allegedly legitimate) interest of the power elite (King or Queen, royal family, wider circle of aristocracies, and professions which benefit from the ruling elite) to dominate and to keep their system of social dominance going as long as possible. The same could be said about the political and military elites in the former communist states, managers in hierarchical organisations or any other power elite which only exists because of an institutionalised group-based social dominance (Mills, 1956; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

This last point shows that superiors and members of ruling elites know very well that their privileges and prerogatives are not carved in stone. They only come with their positions within the hierarchical system - and only hierarchical systems can provide and guarantee group-based dominance and privileges. Without the system they would be nothing. Superiors are very aware of this. As members of the ruling group superiors have a fundamental interest in the continuation of the hierarchical system, to further institutionalise their individual and group interests, privileges and prerogatives, to keep and protect the system. They are interested in taking advantage of the system, not to damage or even destroy it. It is very exceptional that some members of the ruling elite develop strong interests in overcoming hierarchical order. At an organisational level they sooner or later leave the organisation (and start their own companies), at an societal level it depends on the civil rights, political and societal culture in what ways they are isolated, silenced or worse. Besides such exceptions it can be said that usually there is no strong crossing of boundaries in the realm of superiors’ interests.

All in all, superiors’ weak and medium-intense crossings of boundaries in the realm of interests are
largely system-stabilising (or can be easily dealt with by the system), and a strong crossing of boundaries hardly exists at all. In other words:

proposition 2: Within the realm of interests none of superiors’ boundary crossings is system-threatening.

3.3 Superiors’ crossing of boundaries in the realm of identity

Superiors’ publicly portrayed identity shall mirror (and protect) their advanced position. It is the classical identity of ‘the’ superior, of powerful rulers who have ‘a vital interest in keeping up the appearances appropriate to their form of domination.’ (Scott, 1990, p. 70). Social domination needs to be carefully maintained. In this sense, superiors see themselves - and want to be seen! - as the guarantors for order and control (Zaleznik, 1989, p. 45). ‘Order’ and ‘control’ are the main rationales and concerns in superiors’ and elites’ reasoning about subordinates, themselves, the whole social system and the world in general. It is the public image as well as self-image of the superior; superiors like to see themselves as self-disciplined, that they think and act logically and objectively, and that they manage organisational issues of the social system unbiased and on the basis of rational calculation and exchange (Zaleznik, 1989, 45-58).

Nonetheless, at the same time superiors’ public identity also includes the ideas of the ‘doer’ and ‘leader’. Such an identity is in some contrast to the one of a ‘rational commander-in-control’ because it comprises ‘entrepreneurial’, ‘creative’, ‘risk-taking’, even ‘irrational’ and ‘emotional’ aspects (for example a ‘passion’ to lead people and a ‘sixth sense’ for identifying threats or opportunities). Hence, already the public identity of superiors is a rather inconsistent set of rational and irrational elements. Somehow paradoxically it is probably exactly this kind of (partly) contradicting, if not to say schizophrenic public identity of ‘the’ superior which helps to portray and justify them as the ones responsible for the whole; hierarchical systems need superiors who at the same time set directions as irrational leaders and organise and control subordinates as their rational overseers.

Superiors’ hidden identity can be very different to the public one, though. Particularly the hidden identities of power-oriented superiors comprise strong aspects of careerism and opportunism - with necessity. People with such personality traits seem to be drawn particularly to (larger) hierarchical organisations because there they can find the sources of power, privileges and prerogatives they seek to accrue to themselves (Boddy, 2006, p. 1462). Rayburn and Rayburn (1996) called people who behave in such ways ‘modern-day Machiavellians’. According to them, such an individual ‘has an immoral reputation for dealing with others to accomplish his/her own objectives, and for manipulating others for his/her own purpose’ (p. 1209). A ‘modern-day Machiavellian employs aggressive, manipulative, exploiting, and devious moves to achieve personal or organization objectives.’ (p. 1210). Rayburn and Rayburn found empirical evidence that Machiavellians are more likely to be ambitious individuals and that individuals of higher intelligence tend to indicate that they would behave less ethically. They called this ‘Type A personality-orientation’. Such behaviour is ‘a life-style or general orientation to life, characterized by a high degree of ambition. These individuals are constantly striving to attain material things or achievements in the shortest period of time.’ (p. 1212). Boddy (2006, p. 1462) called them ‘organisational psychopaths’ and highlighted the fact that such superiors ‘are employees with no conscience (...) who are willing to lie and are able to present an extrovert (...), charming façade in order to gain
managerial promotion via a ruthlessly opportunistic and manipulative approach to career advancement’. However, as problematic as this might be for the people around them, particularly for those who have to work with and under these petty tyrants, such weak crossings in the realm of social identity do not threaten the principles of hierarchical order, on the contrary; they very actively contribute to keep the system of hierarchical order going since it is their lifeblood.

A crossing of boundaries in the realm of identity would become medium-intense if superiors would begin to live out their hidden identities to the full. This would mean that superiors would regard the organisation they are working for (almost) as ‘part of their identity’ (like some company or factory owners). In contrast to a weak crossing, in such cases superiors are not only ‘insecure careerists’ anymore, but ‘dictatorial egomaniacs’ who see the organisation or the area they are responsible for as their realm in which they can do whatever pleases their distorted identity. This could become a greater problem even for the system (e.g. Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007). However, to some extent hierarchical systems can live with such superiors and their unbalanced identities (however schizophrenic and fragile these are). The hierarchical organisation, any hierarchical system, even needs greedy and unscrupulous individuals who want to make a career, gain and use power by (almost) any means and, in doing so, live out and nurture their unbalanced identities. A medium-intense crossing of boundaries in form of severe individual deviance by superiors can be tolerated by the system for quite some while - even used for the further stabilisation and continuation of the system. And if the individual manager became indeed too extreme in his or her ‘personality’ and unbearable for the system, he or she will be simply replaced, i.e. promoted (which is often the case), allocated to other parts of the company (which sometimes happens) or sacked (rarely). In this sense, even the worst examples of individual managers or other superiors are not system-threatening.

This could be different if superiors developed a strong group identity. For example, Mills (1956, p. 11) found that there is ‘a kind of mutual attraction among those who ‘sit on the same terrace’ and that they ‘come to understand what they have in common, and so close their ranks against outsiders.’ Solidarisation of people, indeed, can mean a threat to the system of hierarchical order because it goes against one of its founding principles, ‘Divide et impera!’. Nonetheless, whereas subordinates’ solidarisation is definitely seen with suspicion, it is different in the case of superiors’ identities. Hierarchical systems are regularly group-based hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). It is perfectly ok for superiors to have a strong group identity and that the ruling elite’s group identity is exclusive - otherwise they would not be the rulers and distinct from ‘ordinary’ members of the hierarchical order. Moreover, in order to protect and defend their status (against other aspirational groups) and provide orientation, members of the ruling elite usually show a strong group identity and cohesion (‘stick together’). They only need to make sure that their identity seems to be compatible with the system. Even superiors with individually severely deviating identities or whole groups of superiors with a very strong exclusive group identity will defend the very system they seemingly negate and counteract with their group cohesion and egocentrism. Superiors’ solidarisation, hence, is not a threat to hierarchical order but contributes to the further stabilisation of the system.

Nonetheless, there could be a strong crossing of boundaries within the realm of superiors’ identity which could threaten the system of hierarchical order quite seriously. As indicated above, most superiors have hidden identities which are fairly compatible with the public identity of the superior. But
there could be also some who have truly alternative identities, i.e. ones which go against the very notion of being a superior. Such identities would comprise self-images which have no room whatsoever for seeing oneself ‘superior’ to, or ‘above’ others and, therefore, challenge the very idea of hierarchy. Such identities and self-images (and corresponding views and behaviour) would obviously clash relatively quickly with the identities and expectations of other superiors – as well as with those of many subordinates. Because of their work-related and organisational socialisation many subordinates would have quite some difficulties with such a “superior”. Most importantly and decisively, ‘the system’, i.e. its senior management or administrative units such as Controlling or HR, could hardly tolerate such an identity. A non-hierarchical identity of superiors simply doesn’t fit into any system of hierarchical order. Hence, superiors with such identities may cause some temporary problems, but do not threaten the system seriously - simply because such people sooner or later would leave the hierarchical organisation (or are forced to leave) and will work in different work environments.

Overall, superiors’ crossing of boundaries concerning their identities does not seem to cause severe problems for the hierarchical order. Their minor deviance is at least accepted, even expected since it reconfirms claims of the superiority of non-totalitarian hierarchical systems. Medium-intense deviance can be either coped with by the system (in the case of individualisation) or can be accepted as an exclusive group-identity as long as the power elite upholds the idea of hierarchical order (which it usually does). And with extreme cases of superiors’ deviance the system will cope ‘in appropriate ways’. Therefore, none of superiors’ crossing of boundaries in the realm of identity constitutes a serious threat to the system of hierarchical order.

**proposition 3:** Within the realm of identities none of superiors’ crossing of boundaries represents a serious threat to the system of hierarchical order or might destroy the existing order.

3.4 Superiors’ crossing of boundaries in the realm of ideology

People’s actions, interests and identities never exist only on their own. They are shaped and justified by comprehensive and well-developed sets of norms and values which prescribe how social reality ought to be, i.e. ideologies (which are then re-established and re-confirmed on a daily basis by people’s social actions enacting their interests and identities). Ideologies explain and justify people’s roles and positions, privileges and duties within the system of hierarchical order as well as the goodness and rightness of the whole system. Moreover, in the case of a hierarchically organised social system it also needs to be explained and justified why there are superiors and subordinates at all. The public ideology of superiors crucially depends on a compelling justification of why social differentiation should lead to social stratification. According to Beetham (1991, p. 59) ‘the inequality of circumstance between dominant and subordinate is justified by a principle of differentiation, which reveals the dominant as specially qualified, suited or deserving to possess the resource, pursue the activity or hold the position which forms the basis of their power, and the subordinate as correspondingly unsuited or unfitted to do so, and hence rightly excluded from it.’ Accordingly, the public ideology of a hierarchical system is an ideology of domination based on (constructed) legitimacy and (alleged) merits. One way or the other, there shall be good reasons why superiors inherit positions higher up the hierarchical order (and enjoy the privileges which come with them), why superiors deserve to be there – and why
they must be there.

In this sense, superiors’ public ideology is one of functioning and performance not so much within but for the system. Officially, superiors’ greatest concern is the care for people and the survival of the whole (Fu et al., 2010; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005; Mills, 1956, p. 17). Leaders and members of the ruling elites do their work allegedly not because of personal or selfish reasons, but carry out duties unselfishly in order to “serve the greater good” (the group, tribe, country, nation, organisation or whatever is constructed and portrayed as a ‘higher entity’). The official values and beliefs of superiors and power elites are propagated on a daily basis by a whole variety of means; official speeches and mission statements, public appearances comprising highly symbolic acts (such as opening ceremonies, remembrance days or visits to schools and hospitals) or the re-enactment of those official claims by their followers in countless little acts.

In contrast to superiors’ public ideology, we know very little about their hidden ideology. This is partly due to the fact that shared beliefs and values of superiors or powerful elites shall be kept hidden because they form, like their hidden social actions and identities, a crucial part of their power base – and only if they are kept secret superiors can continue to rule. Interviews, observations or other research methods, even investigative journalism or police inquiries may occasionally uncover some hidden social actions or identities of some individual members of the power elite. But they are limited in their ability to reveal superiors’ real beliefs and there have been still too little attempts (and opportunities) to disclose power elites’ hidden value systems.

One way to provide an idea about superiors’ hidden ideology might be by concluding it indirectly from advice given to leaders (or to those who want to become one) – although this is still more of a first approximation than a true and complete picture (partly because it is public advice or advice made publicly. Advice given ‘behind closed doors’ is probably still very different). For example, Offerman (2005, p. 37, highlights added) suggested: ‘Sometimes, good leaders end up making poor decisions because well-meaning followers are united and persuasive about a course of action. This is a particular problem for leaders who attract and empower strong followers. These executives need to become more sceptical of the majority view and push followers to examine their opinions more closely.’ Statements like this provide some hints that superiors’ hidden ideology is mainly one of mistrust and fear. In quite some contrast to public claims and rhetoric, superiors do not trust their subordinates much. They particularly fear a possible individualisation and / or solidarisation and unification of subordinates. Superiors’ hidden ideology is largely based on deeply rooted feelings of insecurities and fears, anxious worries about their positions and privileges and, hence, misanthroposophic ideas of oppression and control of their subordinates, the units they are responsible for as well as the social reality as a whole. If, for example, it became evident that most, or even all organisational performance-measurement-, control- and punishment-systems, managerial procedures and policies are largely the result of superiors’ hidden ideology of fear and mistrust, this would mean a weak crossing of boundaries in the realm of ideology. Moreover, it would mean a serious threat to the system because people would not accept anymore ‘functionalistic’ explanations of those systems and, hence, would not comply with them anymore.

That there is quite a gap between the official rhetoric / public set of values and superiors’ hidden ide-
ology is even more obvious when one concludes from superiors’ individual actions to their underlying personal values and beliefs, for example: lavishness in the face of claims of tight resources, personal greed and enrichment while talking publicly about the need for ‘tightening our belts’, bullying one’s subordinates while otherwise giving ‘people-are-our-greatest-value speeches’, reducing subordinates’ responsibilities in the context of introducing a new change initiative based on ‘empowerment’, or similar contradictions. These are not only a few examples of hypocrisy, but at the same time strong reasons for subordinates to developing serious doubts about the whole system (Scott, 1990, p. 105). A possible revelation of fundamental differences between official rhetoric and personal beliefs, of superiors’ hypocrisy, undermines their claims for power seriously. It weakens their assertions of their distinct qualities, their justification of the rightness of their position and the privileges they enjoy. It questions the validity of their official claims, the whole set of official values and, hence, the very system of hierarchical order on which superiors’ existence is based. Publicly exposed cracks in the ideological justifications of leaders’ position and privileges, of unequal social relationships or the existing order constitute a serious threat to the system.

Moreover, beneath the surface of an all-inclusive ideology and a united ruling elite there are usually quite different understandings of its key buzzwords and fundamental ideological differences between members or fractions within powerful elites. Such different cosmologies and clashing ideological interests can provide the basis for quite some deviation from the official norms and values (e.g. Westphal and Khanna 2003). If they surface, for example during strategic change initiatives in organisations, they represent medium-intense boundary crossings within the realm of ideology. However, even the players actively involved in those struggles (for example those who either want to stay in power or want to become the new leaders) may go to great length, but will not deliver the final blow; they challenge other proponents of the ruling elite (via ideological controversies), but do not challenge the ideological foundations of the existing system of hierarchical order. The absolute majority of ideological controversies between power groups, even the peaceful or forceful replacement of one power elite and its ideology by another group, happens within the existing system of hierarchical order. A mere change in ruling elites, however worrying and revolutionary it may look at the time it is happening, only threatens the old elite. Ideological agendas may change, but the hierarchical structures and processes are being kept in place. Medium-intense crossings of boundaries in the realm of ideology do not challenge the system of hierarchical social order.

This would be only different if a power elite challenged the system on the basis of a fundamentally alternative ideology and value system. In the case of hierarchical order this would mean an anti-hierarchical ideology such as egalitarianism, communitarianism or similar concepts. A strong crossing of boundaries in the realm of ideology has, and can have only one goal: to overcome the existing system and its replacement by another one. In the area of (business) organisations there are relatively few examples which come close to such ideals, though. Even types of organisations quite different to orthodox ones, such as co-operatives, participative, post-modern, or network organisations are still based on principles of formal or informal hierarchy. The development and realisation of truly anti-hierarchical organisations is still pending. If it happened it would mean the end of hierarchical order and unequal social relationships and their replacement by different principles, structures and processes.
All in all, a perhaps intriguing finding has occurred concerning superiors’ crossing of boundaries in the realm of ideology; weak and strong boundary crossings threaten hierarchical order, medium-intense ones don’t. A weak crossing of boundaries is serious; if it became public that superiors distance themselves from the prevailing ideology against their own claims, such hypocrisy damages severely superiors’ image and position as well as subordinates’ belief in them as well as the rightfulness of the whole system of hierarchical order. It would mean “the beginning of the end” of the system and, hence, superiors’ dominance. And a strong crossing in form of a true alternative ideology also means a serious threat to the system since people would began to vote with their feet. A medium-intense crossing of boundaries by superiors, though, does not challenge the system much; superiors may demonstrate ‘technically’ quite different sets of beliefs and values, i.e. ideological principles on which they actually carry out their jobs. Power elites may even openly fight each other on ideological grounds. Nonetheless, even such dramatic, seemingly revolutionary changes actually do not change much; hierarchical structures and processes are kept intact, the principles of hierarchical order remain, and the ideas of dominance and obedience continue to guide the system and its members. In this sense it can be said:

*proposition 4a:* Within the realm of ideology a weak or strong crossing of boundaries constitute a serious threat to the system because such crossing challenges the very foundations and guiding principles on which the system is built.

*proposition 4b:* A medium-intense crossing of boundaries does not constitute a threat to the system since it represents ideological struggles between power elites whose prime interest is to gain power and, hence, to leave the existing system of hierarchical order intact.

4. Conclusions

The discussion of superiors’ crossing of boundaries has generated results which could have been expected as well as some possibly more surprising insights which might even contradict common sense assumptions. It could have been assumed that most, if not all of superiors’ deviance could be quite problematic for the system of hierarchical order since superiors represent the system in their words and deeds and any deviance might undermine this. However, the analysis revealed that superiors can get away with much more non-conformist behaviour than commonly thought - and that hierarchical order is much more resilient to superiors’ deviance. The table below presents and summarises the key findings.
| public transcript | demonstration of dominance, power and superiority, responsibility and legality | leading, serving the system (e.g. ‘team’, ‘family’, ‘the corporation’ or ‘nation’) | publicly portrayed and showed identity of ‘the’ superior; rational ‘commander-in-control’ irrational ‘doer’ and ‘leader’ | ideology of functioning and performance; serving the greater good unselfishly leadership, leaders justification and legitimacy of differentiation based on stratification / ‘the collective’ |
| hidden transcript | insufficiencies, mal-practices, illegal practices | personal interests | non-conformism, breaking out of routines, ‘schizophrenic identity’ | distrust and fear, insecurity and Darwinism, oppression, control |
| a) weak crossing of boundaries | individual insufficiencies and mal-practices | breaching or bypassing ‘technical’ rules in order to pursue one’s own interests | rule-based non-conformism (‘petty tyrant’) | personal values and beliefs in contrast to the ideology publicly upheld (hypocrisy) |
| b) medium crossing of boundaries | workplace aggression, bullying, individual criminal actions and scandals | changing existing immediate social situation and practices in one’s favour | individualisation solidarisation | hidden ideology is publicly enacted and institutionalised over time fundamental ideology differences between powerful elites |
| c) strong crossing of boundaries | widespread mal-practices or illegal practices of the power elite | none (because of fundamental interest to keep the system) | alternative identity to the one ascribed to superiors | alternative ideology / value system: anti-hierarchical utopia |
| consequences for a) weak, b) medium, c) strong crossing of boundaries | a) and b) are system-stabilising because they will be either swept under the carpet or dealt with by the system c) is not challenging the system since superiors’ misbehaviour is or will be institutionalised and leaves the hierarchical structures intact | a) and b) are system-stabilising because they will be either swept under the carpet or dealt with by the system c) is very exceptional | a) has safety valve-function, is system-stabilising b) and c) might be system-threatening temporarily but not permanently | a) and c) are system-threatening because subordinates will start to question the basic values on which the system (and superiors’ dominance) is built b) is not system-threatening since it merely means a change in power elites still supporting the order |

Table 1: Superiors’ crossing of boundaries.
In the realm of social action superiors’ individual ‘insufficiencies’ or ‘malpractices’ are being widely accepted, ignored, swept under the carpet or handled by organisational policies and procedures in well-meant ways. What is perhaps really astounding is that superiors seemingly get away with even severe forms of organisational misbehaviour, for example collective or at least widespread malpractices or even illegal activities; none of superiors’ social actions threatens the system of hierarchical order, even superiors’ strong crossing of boundaries in the realm of social action is not seen as really dangerous.

This is so mainly because superiors’ social actions do not challenge the very idea and fundamental principles of hierarchical order, on the contrary; even strongly deviating superiors are still very interested in keeping the system intact because it provides the conditions under which they can carry out the actions for the pursuit of their individual and group interests. All what they want from the system is to take advantage of it. And systems of hierarchical order have been created primarily to serve the interests of superiors and power elites.

A similar result emerged concerning superiors’ identity. Again, none of superiors’ deviance in the realm of identity is really threatening, some even strengthen the system. For example, the development of a strong individual or group identity constitutes no serious threat to the system - at least, when members of power elites do it. Their solidarisation is acceptable because it makes them stronger - and stronger power elites are also good for the hierarchical system. And since superiors usually are very aware of the fact that they need the hierarchical order for the pursuit of their personal or group interests, they have no reason whatsoever to destroy the very foundations on which they exist and are keen to keep them intact. Hierarchical systems are tailor-made for superiors’ interests and identities.

It is different, though, in the realm of ideology. Here, superiors’ boundary crossings are potentially dangerous from the very beginning since they challenge the founding principles and core values on which the system of hierarchical order is based. Hence, even slight deviance from the public ideology threatens the system. Quite puzzling, this doesn’t seem to be the case with superiors’ medium-intense deviation from the prevailing ideology. But such deviance is largely a result of ideological clashes between powerful elites. As such, these clashes have little impact on the system since all participants in such ideological battles do not want to damage the hierarchical system; this is the prize to win and all parties involved in the struggle therefore will do their utmost to keep the idea and system of hierarchical order intact.

All in all, the sheer scale of superiors’ crossing of boundaries, as well as how much of this doesn’t seem to be problematic for hierarchical social systems is astonishing. Superiors (can) do many things which are quite damaging for organisations, for others and / or the society as a whole - but they do not threaten the idea of hierarchy.

However, although the analysis could shed some light on superiors’ hidden social actions, interests, identities and ideologies, we still know too little what happens when boundaries are crossed and why which consequences emerge. For example, in this paper only the nucleus of the concept of boundary crossings was applied. Only single crossings of clearly demarcated boundaries and their more direct consequences for the system were interrogated and superiors seen as quite a homogenous group. However, social dynamics are often more complex and unfold over longer periods of time. The concept of crossing of boundaries can be used for more differentiated, multi-dimensional, multi-methodological
and interdisciplinary investigations, specifically: vaguely defined or changing boundaries or thresholds, multiple crossings with reciprocal and mutually reinforcing behaviours (e.g. ‘tit-for-tat strategies’ or ‘vicious circles’), material, political, social, physical, socio-psychological and / or psychological consequences for the parties involved as well as division within the groups of superiors (struggles between power elites) or subordinates (‘divide et impera’). In this sense, there is also a great need particularly for more empirical research in order to gain a better understanding of superiors’ ‘hidden world’, i.e. their secret worldviews and actual interests, their thoughts and deeds behind and beneath official rhetoric and public images. Moreover, it is worth to think about alternatives. So far, hierarchical systems are made primarily for superiors. The values and objectives, structures and processes, privileges and prerogatives reflect mostly their interests and worldviews, their identities and ways of life. Over time, this often leads to bureaucracy, inefficient allocation of resources and sub-optimal outcomes. If organisations shall become more flexible and efficient, we need to continue to search for alternatives.

**Literature**


Chatterjee, A. and Hambrick, D.C. (2007): It’s All About Me: Narcissistic Chief Executive Officers and Their


