

Working for World Peace: Between Idealism and Cynicism in International Organizations

Ben Christian*

Abstract: In International Organizations (IOs), noble ideals often clash with harsh realities on the ground. It should therefore come as no surprise if IO employees become cynical over time. However, while there is a large body of work on “organizational cynicism” in sociology and management studies, a systematic examination of cynicism is lacking in IO research. The article addresses this gap and explores the causes and consequences of cynicism among IO staff based on insights gained in 50+ in-depth interviews with staff members at the UN Secretariat from 2020 to 2022.

Keywords: Cynicism, international organizations, United Nations, hypocrisy, leadership

Arbeiten für den Weltfrieden: Zwischen Idealismus und Zynismus in internationalen Organisationen

Zusammenfassung: In internationalen Organisationen (IOs) prallen oftmals hehre Ideale auf harsche Realität. Es sollte daher nicht überraschen, wenn IO-Mitarbeiter:innen mit der Zeit zynisch werden. Doch obwohl wir einiges über Zynismus am Arbeitsplatz im Allgemeinen wissen, fehlt es bislang an einer systematischen Untersuchung zynischer Einstellungen in IOs. Der Artikel adressiert diese Forschungslücke und untersucht die Ursachen und Folgen von Zynismus in IOs anhand von Erkenntnissen aus über 50 ausführlichen Interviews mit Mitarbeiter:innen im UN-Sekretariat zwischen 2020–2022.

Schlüsselwörter: Zynismus, internationale Organisationen, Vereinte Nationen, Heuchelei, Leadership

Travailler pour la paix mondiale : les organisations internationales entre idéalisme et cynisme

Résumé : Dans les organisations internationales (OIs), les idéaux nobles se trouvent souvent confrontés à une réalité difficile sur le terrain. Il n'est donc pas étonnant que le personnel des OIs devienne cynique avec le temps. Cependant, alors qu'il existe un grand nombre de travaux sur le « cynisme organisationnel » en sociologie et dans les études de management, une analyse systématique du cynisme n'existe pas dans la recherche sur les OIs. Cet article se donne pour mission de combler cette lacune et d'étudier les causes et les conséquences du cynisme au sein du personnel des OI. Empiriquement, il se base sur une cinquantaine d'entretiens menés entre 2020 et 2022 avec des membres du personnel du Secrétariat de l'ONU.

Mots-clés : Cynisme, organisations internationales, Nations Unies, hypocrisie, leadership

* Goethe University Frankfurt, D-60323 Frankfurt am Main, b.christian@soz.uni-frankfurt.de.

1 Introduction: Between Idealism And Cynicism in International Organizations

We are all cynical.

(Interview with a UN Secretariat staff member)

Working for an international organization (IO) like the United Nations is not a job like any other. IOs aim at nothing less than saving the world from the scourge of war, ending global hunger, or stopping climate change. They pursue extremely high ideals, and their employees often have a strong altruistic motivation (Giauque and Varone 2018). At the same time, however, IO staff repeatedly become painfully aware of the limits of their own ability to act: IOs almost always lack sufficient resources to fulfill their mandates and are politically constrained by their member states. Accordingly, lofty principles frequently clash with harsh reality on the ground. It should therefore come as no surprise if IO employees become cynical over time – and anecdotal evidence in the literature support this assumption (Barnett 2002; Weaver 2008; Neumann 2012; Niezen and Sapignoli 2017).

While there is a large body of work on “organizational cynicism” in sociology and management studies (Andersson 1996; Reichers et al. 1997; Dean et al. 1998; Fleming and Spicer 2003; Naus et al. 2007; Chiaburu et al. 2013; Schilling and May 2016), a systematic examination of cynicism is lacking in IO research so far. The present article addresses this research gap and aims at answering the following question: What are the causes and consequences of cynicism among IO staff? In shedding light on organizational cynicism in IOs, the article not only offers an innovative perspective for analyzing IOs “as organizations,” but also contributes to our general understanding of cynicism in the workplace by highlighting its ambivalent nature.

The article is structured as follows: I begin with a brief review of the existing organizational research literature on cynicism (section 2). In a second step, I then take a closer look at cynical attitudes within *international* organizations (section 3). First, I argue that IOs provide particularly fertile ground for cynicism among staff and identify four IO characteristics that contribute to its development: (I) the clash of noble ideals and harsh reality, (II) organized hypocrisy, (III) ambivalences and dilemmas in daily work, and (IV) political appointments of senior leadership. Second, I discuss the ambivalent consequences of organizational cynicism in IOs. On the one hand, cynicism can be a coping strategy for IO employees when constantly dealing with failure and conflicting goals. On the other hand, cynicism can also become a threat to IOs as it stands in the way of organizational reforms succeeding and deficiencies being remedied, thus reinforcing its own origins like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Accordingly, my central argument is that cynicism is a *trap*: It may provide short-term relief for IO staff, but it also reproduces and perpetuates the very reasons why that short-term relief is necessary in the first place. In a third step, I illustrate and substantiate these theoretical arguments empirically, using insights from a case study of the UN Secretariat and more than 50 in-depth interviews with UN staff

members (section 4). I show that cynical attitudes are indeed widespread within the UN, analyze their causes and consequences, and present selected examples of their various manifestations.

2 What Do We Know About Cynicism in the Workplace?

“Cynicism” is a multifaceted and eye-catching term. It appears in many different contexts, and its history can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greek philosophers, the Cynics. However, a detailed terminological reconstruction is neither possible nor useful in the context of this article. Instead, the focus here will be on a very specific form of cynicism, namely cynicism in the workplace. The following section presents a definition and briefly discusses some known causes and consequences of cynicism among employees.

2.1 Definition

Cynicism in the workplace has been studied widely since the early 1990s, and has been labeled and defined in very different ways (cf., e.g., Kanter and Mirvis 1989; Andersson 1996; Reichers et al. 1997). One of the most prominent definitions in the field comes from Dean et al. (1998), whose concept of “organizational cynicism” has been taken up by many scholars. It provides a fruitful point of departure for the discussion in this article:

Organizational cynicism is a negative attitude toward one's employing organization, comprising three dimensions: (1) a belief that the organization lacks integrity; (2) negative affect toward the organization; and (3) tendencies to disparaging and critical behaviors toward the organization that are consistent with these beliefs and affect. (Dean et al. 1998, 345)

It is worth taking a closer look at this definition. First of all, organizational cynicism is understood as an *attitude* (that can change over time) and not as a fixed personality trait. Furthermore, Dean et al. emphasize that organizational cynicism is directed primarily *against the organization* and not against specific individuals such as the direct supervisor.¹ This negative attitude toward one's own organization is composed of three components: a cognitive, an affective, and a behavioral dimension. The *cognitive dimension* refers to the belief that one's organization lacks integrity: Organizational cynics, for example, believe that in their organization “principles are often sacrificed

1 Of course, the (mis)behavior of specific individuals can contribute to employees' doubts about the integrity of their organization. However, organizational cynicism goes beyond this personal level: “Although occasional perceptions that organizational practices lack integrity may be attributed to the specific individual involved, perceptions that such behavior is widespread and enduring in the organization are more likely to be attributed to organizational characteristics” (Dean et al. 1998, 345).

to expediency” (Dean et al. 1998, 346). They think that “unscrupulous behavior is the norm” and “expect to see deception rather than candor” (Dean et al. 1998, 346). The *affective dimension* describes the negative emotions toward one’s own organization – since “cynicism is felt as well as thought” (Dean et al. 1998, 346). Cynicism can encompass a variety of (negative) emotions, from anger to distress and “even shame” (Dean et al. 1998, 346). Finally, the *behavioral dimension* addresses tendencies for disparaging behavior toward one’s organization be it sharp criticism, sarcastic jokes or simply frustrated eye-rolling (Dean et al. 1998, 346).

An advantage of this conceptualization of organizational cynicism as a “multidimensional construct” (Dean et al. 1998, 346) is that it can capture the varying degrees of cynicism. As Dean et al. point out, “the world is not divided into cynics and non-cynics” (Dean et al. 1998, 347). Instead of a simple dichotomy, organizational cynicism should be thought of as a continuum along several axes. Only this approach makes it possible to grasp organizational cynicism in all its varied manifestations and forms empirically.

2.2 Causes of Organizational Cynicism

What leads to organizational cynicism in the first place? What are the causes of cynical attitudes among employees? In line with the above definition of organizational cynicism as an “attitude,” one important finding of research on the causes of organizational cynicism is that cynicism is a phenomenon that results from past experiences within the organization: “Individuals are not simply cynical when they join an organization, they *become* cynics during their employment” (Schilling and May 2016, 282; my translation and emphasis). Injustices and breaches of trust (e.g., “psychological contract violation”, Chiaburu et al. 2013), lack of autonomy and involvement of employees, negative behavior of colleagues and superiors, as well as value conflicts are considered to be the main causes of organizational cynicism (Schilling and May 2016, 282).

These *value conflicts* in particular are repeatedly highlighted in the literature as a decisive factor in the emergence of organizational cynicism. We can distinguish between two related forms of value conflict: First, cynicism can result from perceived incongruences between personal values and the values of the organization (“person-organization fit theory,” Kristof 1996). If employees have the perception that their organization does not share the same values, they may develop a cynical attitude toward it (Naus et al. 2007). Second, cynical attitudes can also arise from perceived discrepancies between the words and deeds of an organization, that is, inconsistencies between the values the organization refers to in official “talk” and its actual practices. It is well known that “the distance between the rhetorical pronouncements of the organization and actual activities” in particular can lead to “cynicism and alienation” (Alvesson and Spicer 2012: 1210; see also Costas and Fleming 2009). This includes

the perception that managers act purely out of self-interest (Schindler 2018, 108), which may also lead to cynicism among staff.

In this context, cynicism can be understood as a *protection shield* for employees – as a defense mechanism “shielding them from frustration and disappointment” (Naus et al. 2007, 197). For individual employees, cynicism can thus be quite functional in that it enables them to deal with the perceived discrepancy between their values and those of the organization:

We conceive of cynicism as a self-defensive attitude, aiming to preserve, defend, or live up to values, traits, and competencies, central to the self in situations of potential discrepancy. (Naus et al. 2007, 197)

In other words, cynicism is a coping mechanism for dealing with the perceived lack of integrity of the organization without having to give up one’s own integrity: It can be seen as a “matter of self-preservation” (Kanter and Mirvis 1989, 14) and an “effort to satisfy the need for self-consistency” (Naus et al. 2007, 189; Reichers et al. 1997, 50; Abraham 2000; see also Kunda 1992 for a similar, but slightly different understanding).

2.3 Consequences of Organizational Cynicism

But what are the consequences of this self-protection mechanism? What are the concrete effects of organizational cynicism? In a detailed meta-study, Chiaburu et al. (2013) distinguish between attitudinal and behavioral consequences of organizational cynicism. With regard to the attitudinal dimension, the study shows that cynical employees have less trust in their employer, are less optimistic and motivated, feel less connected to the organization and are generally less satisfied with their job than their colleagues (Chiaburu et al. 2013, 188; see also Schilling and May 2016, 281). With regard to the behavioral dimension, the study demonstrates that cynical attitudes can also have very practical consequences. Cynical employees, for example, are more inclined to quit their jobs (Chiaburu et al. 2013, 190) and organizational cynicism was found to “have a modest negative relationship with job performance” (Chiaburu et al. 2013, 190; see also Schilling and May 2016, 281). All in all, it seems that cynicism among employees is a *problem*: Most prominent management studies (Kanter and Mirvis 1989; Andersson 1996; Dean et al. 1998; Reichers et al. 1997) agree that cynicism is an “impediment to the smooth functioning” (Fleming and Spicer 2003, 160) of organizations.

In addition, another negative consequence of organizational cynicism must be mentioned here that is of particular importance in the context of this article. Cynicism can make organizational change very difficult or even prevent it, as cynical employees often do not believe that change is possible at all:

Cynicism about organizational change often combines pessimism about the likelihood of successful change with blame of those responsible for change as incompetent, lazy, or both. (Reichers et al. 1997, 48)

In many cases, such cynicism about organizational change is a “reaction to a history of change attempts” (Reichers et al. 1997, 48) that have failed. This, then, results in a certain reluctance to try again and a disparaging attitude toward those who do. Cynicism leads to an “a priori certainty” (Schindler 2018, 99): Cynical employees simply *know* that a new change initiative cannot be taken seriously, they distrust the motivation “behind it” from the outset and do not believe in the possibility of real improvement. In this way, “cynicism ... is an important barrier to change” (Reichers et al. 1997, 48).

3 Cynicism in International Organizations

The previous section has shown that we already know a great deal about cynicism in the workplace. “Organizational cynicism” is a well-established concept in the literature, and both the causes and consequences of cynical attitudes among employees have been extensively studied. In this section, I will now take a closer look at *international* organizations. In doing so, I pursue two goals. First, I want to better understand these international organizations, including their dysfunctions and pathologies (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). An explicit discussion of cynicism, which – to my knowledge – is missing in the IO literature so far, can be very helpful in this respect. Second, I am convinced that we can in turn also learn something new about the causes and consequences of cynicism in general by looking at these specific organizations in more detail. Ideally, then, the focus on cynicism in IOs can contribute both to the IO literature and to our general understanding of cynicism in the workplace.

The main argument of this section is that international organizations provide particularly fertile ground for cynicism among staff. Although cynicism has never been at the center of IO studies, the phenomenon is touched upon quite often in the IO literature: Various studies on the inner workings of IOs suggest that cynical attitudes are very common within such organizations. This is true, for example, of Barnett’s study of the UN Secretariat (2002, 132) and Weaver’s analysis of the World Bank (2008, 187). Neumann makes similar observations, citing diplomats who report deep-seated cynicism among colleagues (“I don’t think the public knows how cynical we are”, – Neumann 2012, 124), while Rauch describes a “flourishing cynicism in the development industry” (1993, 250). Last but not least, cynicism can also be observed among the inhabitants of Autesserre’s *Peaceland*, “who are convinced that they can’t do anything to change the state of the world they live in” (Autesserre 2021, 10; see also Bargués 2020, 239).

However, to move beyond scattered anecdotes and arrive at robust results, a more systematic examination of cynicism within IOs is needed. Consequently, in the following I will identify four reasons why IOs provide particularly fertile ground for cynical attitudes among employees.

3.1 Causes: Why IOs Provide Particularly Fertile Ground for Cynicism Among Staff

In this section, I discuss four characteristics of IOs that can foster the development of cynicism among IO employees: (1) the clash of noble ideals and harsh reality, (2) organized hypocrisy, (3) ambivalence and dilemmas in daily work, and (4) the practice of political appointment of senior leadership. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list. Instead, I have selected the four factors that I believe have the greatest impact with regard to the context of this article. My selection is based on three reasons: First, the importance of these characteristics can be deductively derived from the existing literature on “organizational cynicism” as they relate to the arguments from sociology and management theory discussed in section 2 (e. g., psychological contract theory; value conflicts). Second, these factors also emerged inductively as the most salient in the course of my interviews (see section 4). Third and finally, these four characteristics are particularly pronounced in IOs compared with other organizations.

(1) Clash of noble ideals and harsh reality

One reason for the widespread cynicism within IOs may lie in the apparent clash of noble ideals and harsh reality on the ground that these organizations embody like few others. IOs can be seen as “palaces of hope” (Niezen and Sapignoli 2017): The UN, for example, aims to save the world from the “scourge of war” – as stated in the preamble to the UN Charter adopted in 1945. Other IOs want nothing less than to end global hunger or stop climate change. It is hard to imagine more ambitious organizational goals. In this sense, IOs pursue extremely high ideals – and therefore often attract individuals who have a strong altruistic motivation: “Most individuals join IOs because they want to make a difference and contribute to important societal issues” (Giauque and Varone 2018, 345).

At the same time, however, IO staff repeatedly become painfully aware of the limits of their own ability to act. It has been noted time and again that IOs are often inadequately funded in relation to their many tasks. Moreover, IOs are almost always active in highly politicized fields, and thus politically dependent on, and constrained by, major geopolitical powers, rich donor states, or host governments. Last but not least, some of their goals simply remain out of reach – at least for the foreseeable future. As a result, there is often a corresponding “disconnection between grand aspirations and the day-to-day reality” (Niezen and Sapignoli 2017, 21) in IOs. It should therefore come as no surprise if IO employees become cynical over

time. It may be assumed that the higher the expectations and hopes the greater the disappointment and cynicism when they are not fulfilled (Schindler 2018, 101).

(2) Organized hypocrisy

A second reason for the development of cynical attitudes among IO staff may stem from the necessity of “organized hypocrisy” for IOs.² Compared with private companies, IOs often face highly contradictory expectations and conflicting goals. Different international actors have divergent interests, all of which must be met by the IO if it is to survive in the long run (the “multiple audiences” of the UN; Daugirdas 2019, 226). For Brunsson, “organized hypocrisy” is the answer to the question of how organizations can deal with such contradictory demands. He defines this hypocrisy as a necessary “difference between words and deeds” (Brunsson 2002, xiii) – as it is precisely the “decoupling” of talk and action that allows organizations to fulfil contradictory expectations (Brunsson 2002: xiv; see also Meyer and Rowan 1977).

The functionality of organized hypocrisy for IOs has been addressed in several studies: By decoupling formulated principles and practical action, IOs ensure their organizational survival (Weaver 2008) and remain capable of action (Lipson 2007). At the same time, however, organized hypocrisy can also lead to problems within IOs (Christian 2022). Among other things, it can be assumed that perceived discrepancies between the organization’s words and deeds evoke cynicism among IO staff. In section 2, organizational cynicism was defined as the belief that the organization lacks integrity – and hypocrisy is the exact opposite of integrity. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, integrity refers to “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles”.³ IO employees who observe a discrepancy between “talk” and “action” will thus neither believe that their organization is honest nor that it has strong moral principles. Instead, it can be expected that they will become cynical in the face of perceived hypocrisy.

(3) Ambivalences and dilemmas in daily work

However, cynicism may not only be a reaction to deficiencies in the organization (shortcomings in actual implementation; hypocrisy with regard to noble ideals), but also a consequence of the inherent dilemmas that IO employees are confronted with in their daily work (see also Dairon, this issue). These dilemmas arise from the conflicting external expectations and demands that IOs face (see above). As a result, IOs develop multifaceted identities that often “dictate contradictory goals and practices” (Billerbeck 2020, 207) for IO staff:

Most IOs have operational, normative, and institutional... identities that are fragmented and often contradictory... This, in turn, renders it difficult

2 The following argument is developed in more detail in Christian (2021; 2022).

3 Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/integrity> (31.01.2022).

for IO staff to maintain a sense of their own legitimacy: if they are compelled to violate principles or behaviors appropriate to one side of their identity in order to comply with those appropriate to another, they are unlikely to feel an overall sense of the rightness or appropriateness of their work. (Billerbeck 2020, 211; see also Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 26)

IO employees are thus forced to select one “identity” (e.g., normative vs. operational) and prioritize one set of principles above others to keep being able to take action. In doing so, IO staff members (have to) “violate” the principles and imperatives of other organizational identities: They can never satisfy all conflicting demands equally – they always do it wrong, *too*. Cynicism could be a necessary individual coping strategy in this regard.

Also of interest in this context is Capella and Jamieson’s idea that cynicism can be contagious (1997, 210). Building on this idea, it could be argued that cynicism directed at IOs from the outside (by activists, journalists, diplomats) may affect the IO staff as well: Certainly not in the direct sense that cynical criticism from the outside automatically leads to employees being convinced that they are doing it all wrong, but rather in the sense that employees in IOs are permanently confronted with the *ambivalence of their own work*. Especially for IO employees – who often have high ideals and want to do “something good” – constantly experiencing ambivalence and failure could well lead to the development of cynical attitudes over time.⁴

Another dilemma IO staff face is that their daily work is inherently political, but must not be perceived as such (Louis and Mertens 2021). After all, it is – as Barnett and Finnemore put it – the “myth of depoliticization” (2004, 21) that gives IOs power in the first place. IOs and their staff therefore practice a form of “self-effacement” (2004, 21) to maintain this appearance of neutrality. Nair even calls these practices of IO bureaucrats “servant performances” that require “emotional labor” (2020, 573). While these strategies may be functional and necessary externally, they can cause frictions internally. Very often, IO employees are aware of the political nature of their work, and they know about the political processes at play. The fact that they nevertheless have to maintain the façade of apolitical neutrality to the outside world can lead to cynicism among IO staff, as it – once again – calls into question the integrity of the organization and everybody involved.

(4) Political appointments of senior leadership

A fourth factor that makes IOs a particularly fertile environment for cynical attitudes is the common practice of making political senior leadership appointments. High-level appointments are often made at IOs on the basis of political considerations – for example, to meet the demands of certain member states or to comply with a certain geographical proportionality (Oksamytna et al. 2021). In some cases, this can

4 For an example of IO staff being disappointed in themselves for failing to live up to their own ideals, see Barnett’s analysis of the UN Secretariat during the genocide in Rwanda 1994 (2002, 132).

lead to candidates not possessing the required competencies to a sufficient degree. However, even those executives who have all the necessary qualities in abundance are confronted with a structural problem in such a setting. Political appointments are always a potential trigger for employees to devalue and delegitimize their managers: Politically appointed leaders are exposed to a form of generalized suspicion and a particular pressure to justify they have been appointed, as they do not benefit from the leap of faith that comes with (supposedly) meritocratic selection. Rather, IO employees often approach these managers with cynicism.

The “assumption of self-interest” (Schindler 2018, 97) lies at the heart of this attitude. A frequently raised accusation, for example, is that IO leaders who come “from the outside” are not as deeply rooted in the organization, and care more about their own careers and legacy than the success of the IO (Weiss 2012, 111; see for a critique Schindler 2018). Moreover, non-transparent political appointments can arouse suspicion of sinister machinations and political intrigues behind the scenes. This, in turn, leads IO employees to doubt the allegiance and integrity of their senior leadership: IO employees can never be completely sure – when push comes to shove – whether their superiors will represent the interests of the IO or the interests of their home country. Whether these assumptions and accusations are true or not is irrelevant: political appointments undermine the acceptance and authority of leadership and thus prepare fertile ground for cynical attitudes to form among IO staff.

3.2 Consequences: A “Cynicism Trap” in IOs

Having discussed the specific factors that make cynicism especially likely to emerge in IOs, this section takes a closer look at the possible consequences of cynical attitudes among IO staff. My central argument is that cynicism is a *trap*: It may provide short-term relief for IO employees, but by preventing organizational reform it also reproduces and perpetuates the very reasons why that temporary relief is necessary in the first place.

Cynicism, as has already been made clear, is a double-edged sword with ambivalent effects. Given the discussion in the previous section (3.1), the development of cynical attitudes may be quite functional for IO staff from an *individual* perspective. Cynicism can be understood as a kind of self-protection that allows IO employees to cope with lack of faith in the integrity of their organization as well as constantly experiencing ambivalences and failure in their daily work. At the same time, however, cynicism can also have negative consequences (see section 2). From an *organizational* perspective, cynicism is dysfunctional: It can diminish organizational performance and make successful change less likely.

With regard to diminished organizational performance by IOs, reference can be made to, for example, the work of Trettin and Junk on “spoilers from within” (2013). The authors advocate taking the “human factor” (2014, 24) more seriously

in IOs, arguing that “the individual civil servant can be one origin of a decrease in efficiency in bureaucratic organizations” (Trettin and Junk 2014, 17). They introduce to IO research the concept of bureaucratic spoilers – “individuals or a small group of actors ... working against the interest of the organization” (Trettin and Junk 2014, 21) – and distinguish between three different manifestations (dissent-shirking, obstruction, sabotage). Although the authors themselves say nothing about individual motives for bureaucratic spoiling, it seems plausible that strong cynicism among IO employees could at least encourage such behavior.

Regarding organizational change, cynicism as a well-known “barrier to change” (Reichers et al. 1997, 48; see section 2) is particularly problematic in IOs because reforms and substantive change are generally already quite difficult in these organizations (Weaver 2008; Sondarjee 2021). Many IOs are engaged in constant reform loops – “perpetual reform” in the words of Brunsson (2009, 1) – that produce little actual change. These countless (and failed) reform attempts in the history of the organization not only generate dissatisfaction among IO employees (Weaver 2008; Christian 2022) but can also lead to cynical attitudes toward future change initiatives. Ironically, cynicism can thus become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy:

Cynicism about organizational change can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if cynics refuse to support change. Their lack of support may bring about failure or very limited success. The failure then reinforces cynical beliefs, which further inhibit the willingness to try again. (Reichers et al. 1997, 48)

A vicious circle begins: change is prevented by cynicism, the lack of change in turn reinforces cynicism, which again makes change more difficult. Inspired by Weaver’s “hypocrisy trap” (2008), we can therefore speak of a *cynicism trap* in international organizations that is “easy to fall into and hard to get out of” (Weaver 2008, 8). Though cynicism may serve as a shield safeguarding the individual employee, the IO as a whole gets into trouble when cynical attitudes spread among IO staff. Cynicism then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that creates a dynamic from which the organization is scarcely able to free itself again (Jones 2019). Organizational cynicism thus poses the grave danger of paradoxically reinforcing and perpetuating the very problems and discrepancies in the IO from which individual employees actually want to protect themselves. Cynicism prevents organizational reforms from succeeding and deficiencies from being remedied; the existing problems are perhaps not completely ignored, but nevertheless accepted in the end.

In this sense, cynicism is to be understood as a “conservative force” (Fleming and Spicer 2003, 160) that preserves the status quo. It misleads IO employees into the *illusion* that they are distancing themselves from their own (hypocritical) organization and that they are not “complicit”. While this provides IO employees with some sort of “breathing space” (Fleming and Spicer 2003, 160, 167) and short-term relief, it is in fact a form of self-deception. After all, this “resistance” has

no consequences at all because IO employees still end up reproducing the existing organizational practices: “Cynical employees have the impression that they are autonomous, but they still practice the corporate rituals nonetheless” (Fleming and Spicer 2003, 157). Employees distance themselves, and yet carry on as before – this is more or less how cynicism can be described in IOs, too. All in all, it becomes clear that cynicism is a *wolf in sheep’s clothing* for IO staff: As tempting as cynicism may be as a coping strategy, ultimately it is a trap that poses a danger to both the IO and individual employee by preventing necessary change.⁵

4 Empirical Illustration: Cynicism in the UN Secretariat

4.1 Case Study and Methods

To illustrate and substantiate the theoretical arguments outlined in the previous sections, I draw on insights gained in 52 in-depth interviews with staff members in the UN Secretariat. The interviews were conducted as part of a case study on organizational learning processes in the UN Peace & Security pillar. Most of the people I interviewed were employed in the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), but I also spoke with staff from other departments and offices, such as the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance (DoM), the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) or the UN Ethics Office.

The majority of people interviewed were mid-career staff (P3 to P5). However, my interviews cover many different positions and levels of hierarchy, including Assistant-Secretary-Generals, Deputy Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, Chiefs of Staff, Heads of Office, Directors, Team Leaders, Senior Officers, Political Officers, Policy and Best Practice Officers, Junior Officers and last but not least a (former) trainee. With only very few exceptions, all interview requests were granted; self-selection was thus not observed. All interview partners were guaranteed anonymity to allow open conversations. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of the interviews were conducted online or by phone between October 2019 and July 2021, while the other half were conducted in person during a field research stay of several weeks in New York City.

In the interviews, I followed a loose interview guideline but tried to be as open as possible to the viewpoint of the people I was interviewing in order to avoid priming. It is important to note, for example, that I did not explicitly ask them about cynicism. Only when my interview partners brought up the subject on their own did I sometimes ask a follow-up question about it. The interviews were all transcribed

5 While the status quo-preserving effect of cynicism may be welcomed by some actors in an organization, inertia definitely becomes a problem in the long run as IOs must constantly adapt and change if they want to survive in an ever-changing environment.

and then analyzed – facilitated by MAXQDA software – using qualitative content analysis inspired by Kuckartz (2018, 100).

Before moving on to the empirical results, an important preliminary remark must be made. In the following, I will describe many examples of cynicism within the UN Secretariat. This, however, should not lead to a distorted picture or biased impression. It is important to note that not *all* UN employees are cynical. Such a description would not only be inaccurate, but would also be cynical itself. Even if some staff members describe it this way (see, for example, the quote at the beginning of this article, “We are all cynical”), this does not necessarily mean that it is true – because it is inappropriate to “treat allegations as facts” (Schindler 2018, 103). Instead, I will try to describe a phenomenon that indeed seems to be widespread, but certainly should not be viewed in overly simplistic black-and-white terms. It should thus be kept in mind that there are “varying degrees of cynicism” (Dean et al. 1998, 347) within the UN Secretariat.

4.2 Empirical Analysis

By zooming in on the UN Secretariat, I first show that cynical attitudes are indeed widespread among UN employees: The people I interviewed described themselves and their colleagues as cynical, although to varying degrees and for different reasons, which I present according to the structure of the four IO characteristics explored in section 3. Second, I discuss selected examples of the various manifestations of cynical attitudes among UN staff and their practical consequences. In line with the discussion above, the interviews demonstrate that cynicism can be an individual coping strategy, but also has serious consequences for IOs.

Causes of cynicism within the UN Secretariat

First of all, the interviews in the UN Secretariat support the assumption made at the very beginning – namely that many IO staff members are driven by a high degree of idealistic motivation. In line with the results of various surveys,⁶ my interviewees attribute this altruistic motivation both to themselves and to their UN colleagues:

I'm in the UN because I want to make a difference.

People come to the UN with a kind of vocation ... You know, with this sort of calling thing.

At the same time (or perhaps for that very reason), there is also a lot of cynicism among UN staff. According to many of my interview partners, cynical attitudes are widespread within the UN Secretariat:

6 See, for example, Giauque and Varone (2018, 350). Similarly, the internal “UN Staff Engagement Survey 2019” shows that of the almost 19 000 UN staff members surveyed, 89 % agree with the statement “I am proud to work for the UN Secretariat” (Lynch 2020).

Cynicism is something you find here a lot.

We are all cynical, you know ...

There are many different reasons for this, but overall my interviews substantiate the theoretical assumptions discussed above (see section 3.1). First, the oft-perceived (1) *gap between noble ideals and harsh reality* is indeed portrayed as an important source of cynicism. For example, one interview partner refers to a “stark asymmetry” between a “totally value-driven work environment” on the one hand, and a “reality that is crashingly opposed to it” on the other. According to many interview partners, it is the “political realities” that often lead to the UN not following its own ideals and principles. This, then, evokes cynicism among UN staff – especially in the area of peacekeeping, as this interview quote illustrates:

For the Uighurs in China, we do fuck all. Because China is a veto power. In Myanmar, I'm still waiting for the peacekeeping mission to be set up. But what peace? They're not even in conflict, apparently.

However, perceived (2) *hypocrisy* within their own organization can also be a reason for cynicism, since in the UN Secretariat “saying and doing are two different things,” as one interviewee put it. In my interviews, UN employees repeatedly express doubts about the integrity of their own organization and its leadership:

We tell the world what to do – but in the meantime, within the system ... How can you preach about something you are not doing in your own organization?!

When high-ranking UN officials make idealistic statements, it's just rhetoric, just blah-blah. It's “talk” that gets adopted depending on what's in vogue at the moment. [...] It's a theater, a game.

Furthermore, cynicism is also described by some staff members as a coping strategy for dealing with the existing (3) *ambivalences and dilemmas* in daily work. According to one person interviewed, UN employees work in a “crazy organization” where certain protective mechanisms are necessary. Here, my interview partners refer, among other things, to the inherent ambivalences of working with (and depending on) member states, and to the fundamental dilemmas of conducting peacekeeping missions (“You will never get it right in peacekeeping”). Last but not least, the experience of repeated failures in UN peacekeeping also seems to be a frequent trigger for cynicism, as several of the people interviewed point out:

I was in the field ... At some point you just don't believe in it anymore. Then you get really cynical, because you keep seeing or hearing bad things and you don't know whether the mission is actually doing any good.

Finally, the issue of (4) *politically appointed leadership* also plays a major role in my interviews. Within the UN Secretariat there is indeed a general suspicion that high-

level executives often act only out of self-interest. My interview partners criticize “turf battles” and other internal disputes at the higher levels and are cynical about their leadership’s willingness to bring about significant change:

Those who have made it to the top are often not those who really want to make a difference. They care first and foremost about their own careers.

Consequences of cynicism within the UN Secretariat

The negative consequences of cynicism in the UN Secretariat are manifold and cannot be discussed in full detail within the scope of this article. Instead, I will highlight only a few selected phenomena that featured particularly prominently in my interviews. Showing that cynicism can foster demotivation and inertia, lead to exit from the organization, and frustrate organizational change, I demonstrate that cynicism is indeed a “trap” for IOs and their staff.

First, cynicism can reduce UN employees’ motivation over time and make them more reluctant to try new things, as these two quotes illustrate:

When I came here 20 years ago I loved it. I gave my heart and soul to this place. But especially now, in my position, where I can really look behind the doors, behind the scenes, and see how bad it is ... I’m not going to waste my time for these people.

When you’ve run against the wall five times, then at some point you say: Well, the probability that it will work the next time ... You know?

However, cynicism also manifests itself in far more drastic forms. While some interview participants express despair, others openly think about leaving the UN:

I don’t want to be so cynical, but I just don’t see a path forward.

At some point, you get fed up and decide to step out for the sake of your own health or integrity.

In fact, some interview participants report that many former colleagues have left the organization in great frustration after initial euphoria. This is, of course, a problem for the UN, because the organization loses a lot of potential as a result. In addition to demotivation, despair, and exit, cynicism also impedes organizational change in the UN Secretariat, as anticipated in section 3. Some UN employees no longer take the ever new reform attempts seriously. They prefer to ride them out rather than to play an active role in shaping them:

Sometimes you just disconnect. You hear: “Oh, we’re going to implement this great new reform!” And you’re like: Oh my God, it’s like every year there’s something new. Can we just do our work?

Interestingly, some interview participants themselves mention and reflect on the potential dangers of organizational cynicism. For example, they criticize the cynical attitude of some colleagues who think that UN staff cannot change anything and that leadership alone is responsible for all existing problems. The following statement, which explicitly refers to a “cynicism trap” (without me having asked about it), is a good example of many similar reflections in the interviews. Consequently, it is quoted at length here as a kind of conclusion:

I would say that cynicism is a coping mechanism, because when you see what's happening, you need to rationalize it one way or the other ... But there is a risk, and some colleagues fall into that trap, that you end up being so cynical that you basically block everything and no longer believe that change is possible at all. And that's where we have a lot of problems. There are many people who say, “Oh, nothing ever changes, I shouldn't even try to make an effort or support any kind of change, no, I'll keep doing what I've always done and wait for retirement”.⁷

5 Conclusion: Cynicism in IOs and Beyond

The insights of this article can be briefly summarized as follows. First, IOs provide a particularly fertile ground for cynicism among staff. More specifically, I identified four IO characteristics that can foster the development of cynical attitudes within these organizations: (1) the clash of noble ideals and harsh reality, (2) organized hypocrisy, (3) ambivalences and dilemmas in daily work, and (4) political appointments of senior leadership. Second, this cynicism within IOs must be understood as a trap: It may provide short-term relief for IO staff (as a coping strategy), but (much like a self-fulfilling prophecy) it also perpetuates the very reasons why that short-term relief is necessary in the first place.

By taking a narrowly focused look at cynicism in IOs, this article makes a twofold contribution. On the one hand, it develops a fruitful lens for better understanding of international organizations “as organizations” (for an overview see Badache and Kimber, this issue). Shedding light on the causes and consequences of cynical attitudes among IO staff deepens our understanding of the inner workings of IOs and allows us to look at the internal pathologies of these unique actors in world politics from a new angle. On the other hand, the insights of this article also

⁷ Paradoxically, even those employees who succeed in getting things changed can fall into the “cynicism trap.” Given the many obstacles to organizational change, some UN employees use informal ways to change certain processes. Ironically, however, these successful but informal practices can also lead to cynicism among UN employees: “There are these little changes that you can make at the informal level, but that's not gonna solve your cynicism. Because you're just like, ‘Okay, look, this is just a proof of what I'm saying: this organization is so dysfunctional that the only way to get anything done is to do it informally. So it's almost like a vicious cycle.’”

contribute to our understanding of workplace cynicism in general. By examining IOs in more detail, we can – for example – learn something about certain causes of cynicism that have not yet been considered in mainstream organizational research, such as the internal consequences of organized hypocrisy or political appointments. My findings thus open up new avenues for research, especially for the analysis of similar organizations such as NGOs or public administrations at the national level. Based on the exploratory single-case study in this article, future analysis should therefore strive for more systematization and a comparison across different IOs or between IOs and other organizations.

Last but not least, the results of this article are also of political relevance: What happens when those who are supposed to make our world a better place do not believe in change themselves? What if those who are expected to focus their work on realizing our highest ideals turn out to be cynical? The answer to these questions could easily make one cynical oneself. However, the empirical results of this study also give reason for hope. My interviews indicate that many UN employees have a high tolerance for ambiguity and frustration. They look for coping strategies other than cynicism and transform their frustration into motivation to change things for the better – at least within their sphere of influence. Thus, the idealism of many UN staff is apparently much more tenacious than might be thought, as this concluding interview quote demonstrates: “We are all cynical, but that does not mean that we have lost our idealism”.

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