



A threat rather than a resource: why voicing internal criticism is difficult in international organisations

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Abstract

Voicing criticism seems to be a difficult task for employees in international organisations (IOs), as numerous anecdotes in the literature suggest. This observation is alarming, since internal criticism is an indispensable resource for organisational learning processes. So why are IOs apparently not using this resource to its full potential? The present article is the first to provide a comprehensive answer to this question by combining insights from organisation theory with an empirical case study of the UN Secretariat. My general argument is that ‘criticism from within’ is ambivalent. It can be a resource for, but also a threat to IOs: internal criticism can endanger an IO’s external reputation as well as destabilise the organisation from within. Based on this theoretical understanding, I identify and empirically examine three specific reasons for the UN Secretariat’s weak criticism culture: (1) Criticism is suppressed due to a widespread fear of leaks resulting from external pressures. (2) Criticism is avoided as a strategy of self-protection in the face of (inevitable) failures. (3) Constructive criticism is difficult to express in settings where organisational hypocrisy is necessary.

Keywords Internal criticism · International organisations · Organisational learning · Peacekeeping · Self-legitimation · United Nations

Introduction: ‘criticism from within’ in international organisations

‘Open criticism... Phew, that’s basically suicide.’ (Interview with a UN Secretariat staff member)

Voicing criticism is difficult in international organisations (IOs). At least this is what numerous anecdotes in the literature suggest: there are many indications that internal

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criticism expressed by staff is often ignored or even actively suppressed. Catherine Weaver, for instance, observes a ‘pervasive intolerance of open dissent’ (Weaver 2008: 81) in the World Bank and quotes, among others, former World Bank President James Wolfensohn, who threatened his employees with dismissal should they voice criticism (ibid.: 82; see also Goldman 2005). Similarly, Séverine Autesserre describes how the United Nations (UN) ‘condemn[s] dissent’ (Autesserre 2014: 44) and how hard it is for staff in peacekeeping missions to express divergent opinions (see also Barnett 2002). However, this suppression of internal criticism has so far only been referred to anecdotally and has not been dealt with systematically: scholars of IOs have not yet theorised and empirically investigated the phenomenon of ‘criticism from within’¹ in IOs.

This lack of attention² is puzzling, given that internal criticism is an ‘indispensable resource’ (Wimmer 2003: 50) for organisational learning processes: organisations need criticism from within in order to learn from their own mistakes (cf. Levitt and March 1988). From the perspective of organisational learning theory, a culture of repression when it comes to dealing with internal criticism in IOs—as described above—must therefore be regarded as a serious problem. So why are IOs apparently not using this resource to its full potential? Why is it so difficult to express criticism within IOs?

This article seeks to provide an answer to these questions by combining insights from organisation theory with an empirical case study of the UN Secretariat. I argue that criticism from within is ambivalent in that it can be a resource for, but also a threat to IOs: internal criticism can endanger an IO’s external reputation as well as destabilise the organisation ‘from within’. Based on this theoretical understanding, I identify and empirically examine three specific reasons for the UN Secretariat’s criticism culture: (1) Criticism is suppressed due to a widespread fear of leaks resulting from external pressures. (2) Criticism is avoided as a strategy of self-protection in the face of (inevitable) failures. (3) Constructive criticism is difficult to express in settings where organisational hypocrisy is necessary.

With its explicit perspective on criticism from within, the article speaks to at least four strands of the IO literature. Firstly, focusing on internal criticism provides a useful additional lens to study organisational learning processes in IOs (cf. Benner et al. 2011; Junk et al. 2017). Secondly, looking at the suppression and avoidance of criticism from within helps explain some of the difficulties experienced when it comes

¹ The term ‘criticism from within’ is used in this paper as a synonym for the notion of ‘internal criticism’. The term is intended to make it particularly clear by whom or ‘from where’ this criticism is expressed—namely, in contrast to criticism from the outside (media, critical NGOs, etc.), by employees *within* the organisation itself. See also the definition in the second section.

² This research gap becomes even more apparent when compared to the large body of IO research focusing on external criticism. There is now extensive research addressing the question of how IOs deal with criticism voiced by NGOs playing their role as ‘watchdogs’, transnational advocacy networks pushing for a specific reform, or critical journalists looking for the next scoop. The literature provides us with ample insights, for example, into the many different mechanisms IOs have developed to respond to these criticisms: While some are ‘opening up’ to their critics (Tallberg et al. 2013; see also Park 2005), others try to co-opt them by staging a dialogue (cf. Anderl et al. 2021: 4) or by making ‘empty promises’ (Deitelhoff 2012: 63).



to the implementation of IO reforms or change in general (cf. Barnett and Coleman 2005; Weaver 2008; Knill et al. 2019). Thirdly, analysing the ‘conditions of critique’ (Celikates 2019: 127) in IOs offers new insights into the formation and consolidation of bureaucratic pathologies in IOs (cf. Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004). Fourthly and finally, understanding IO staff members as critics of their own organisations contributes to the growing scholarly interest in the role and agency of individual bureaucrats and diplomats (cf. Chwieroth 2013; Michalski and Danielson 2020; Heinzl and Liese 2021), their language and feelings (cf. Nair 2020; Wong 2020), and their self-legitimation strategies (cf. Billerbeck 2020).

Beyond this, however, my findings are also politically relevant and have practical implications, as an improved understanding of the mechanisms of and barriers to internal criticism can help IOs to better fulfil their ever-growing responsibilities. Today, the projects and interventions of IOs ‘affect the lives of millions’ (Benner et al. 2011: 52). In order to avoid massive failures (cf. Barnett 2002), IOs are thus highly dependent on internal criticism. Put simply, criticism from within might be a threat to IOs, but IOs without criticism from within are certainly a threat to many people around the world. This is particularly true in the field of peace and security. Accordingly, by examining the internal dynamics in the UN peace and security pillar, my paper also contributes to the ongoing discussion on whether (UN) peacekeeping works and how it could be improved (cf. Howard 2008; Autesserre 2014; Coning 2018). The insights provided by this article are thus not only of interest to IO researchers, but are also relevant to the wider IR community.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: in the next section, I explain why internal criticism is an important resource for organisational learning processes, drawing on insights from organisation theory. I then contrast this theoretical insight with the practice observed in IOs, referring both to the existing descriptions in the IO literature and to findings from my own empirical case study of the UN Secretariat. Based on 22 in-depth interviews with UN staff members from 2019 and 2020, I show that there is a considerable discrepancy between the formal learning infrastructure and the internal criticism culture in the (peace and security pillar of the) UN Secretariat: despite the fact that, on paper at least, there are many formats in which self-criticism could be practiced and critical discussions could take place, the actual criticism culture prevents this from happening in practice. In the third section, I develop the theoretical argument and discuss the reasons that make it difficult for IO staff to express criticism from within. In the fourth section, this theoretical argument is empirically investigated and illustrated. I analyse the current criticism culture in the UN Secretariat and examine in detail the three barriers to internal criticism mentioned above. In the fifth and final section, I summarise my findings, outline empirical and theoretical questions for future research, and discuss the policy implications of this article.

Internal criticism as a resource for IOs—but only in principle?

This section is divided into three parts. After defining the terms that are central to my argument, I explain why internal criticism is an indispensable resource for organisational learning processes. I then compare this theoretical insight with the



actual practice in IOs regarding criticism from within, drawing on findings from my case study of the UN Secretariat.

Definitions: ‘criticism from within’ and ‘criticism culture’

In this paper, ‘criticism from within’ is understood as a negative judgement and its expression by staff within an organisation. Of course, a judgement can—by definition—also be positive (‘positive’ criticism/praise). But since ‘negative’ criticism (pointing out mistakes, expressing dissatisfaction) is the focal point of this article, this narrower specification will be used. What I aim to achieve with the explicit focus on internal criticism is to distinguish my work from the many studies on individual ‘feedback’ (cf. Ilgen et al. 1979; Cannon and Witherspoon 2005) or organisational ‘evaluation’ mechanisms (cf. Wildavsky 1972; Culbertson 2010). Although criticism certainly plays an important role in these contexts as well, my aim is to concentrate on those organisational topics and situations in which things flounder or do not function. Focusing on ‘criticism’ allows me to look beneath the surface of the often outwardly harmonious ‘lessons learned’ or ‘best practice’ activities in IOs.

Criticism from within as defined above can take many different forms and can vary in several aspects, such as the channels (e.g. within or outside a given learning infrastructure), the objects (e.g. internal strategies/decisions;³ external actors), the articulation (e.g. polite or aggressive; personal or structural), or the intentions of internal criticism (e.g. self-interest or in the interest of the organisation). A comprehensive systematisation or typology would go beyond the scope of this paper. But what is important to make clear is that I am not interested in the specific substantive criticism of individual employees, but rather in the general organisational patterns of both the expression and the handling of internal criticism. The paper thus focuses on the criticism culture within the organisation.

Criticism culture is part of the general organisational culture. Similar to organisational culture, criticism culture also consists of collective, learned, and unconscious convictions (cf. Sackmann 2017: 42; Schein 2010)—but it comprises only those specific convictions and basic assumptions that are linked to the expression of or the dealing with criticism from within. Much like organisational culture in general, criticism culture provides organisational members with a form of orientation: it shapes the perception of internal criticism (‘interpretative frames [...] to make sense of the world’—Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 719) and influences its expression and the way it is handled by determining what behaviour is ‘right’ and ‘appropriate’ in the organisation (cf. Sackmann 2017: 41). In this sense, an organisation’s criticism culture conveys very specific expectations about how exactly criticism should be expressed or dealt with internally. In a nutshell: criticism culture is about the ‘shared

³ The focus of this paper is on specific criticism of work-related issues (‘The strategy of the UN mission XYZ is wrong’) and not on ‘ordinary’ criticism of working conditions (‘Our salaries are too low’). Nevertheless, it is clear that it is not always possible to maintain this distinction. With regard to the criticism culture, both forms are relevant because the perceived way in which an organisation deals with one form can influence the expression of the other.



understandings of “how things are done” (Weaver 2008: 36) with regard to criticism from within.

Criticism from within in theory: an indispensable resource for IOs

While in our everyday understanding criticism and conflict are often seen as something negative—as a problem or a disturbance—criticism can also be understood positively ‘as a reason-based push for the transformation of a (social) structure’ with which ‘a change for the better is aimed at’ (Jaeggi 2014: 134). Large parts of organisation theory share this productive understanding of conflict and criticism. Organisations—so the tenor goes—are dependent on criticism: they need criticism from within in order to learn and to adapt to constantly changing environments. In line with Mary Parker Follett’s (2003) concept of ‘constructive conflict’, internal conflicts and differing opinions cannot be avoided in complex organisations, and should therefore not be problematised, but rather made use of. As long as the conflicts are dealt with constructively, the existing internal criticism and ‘friction’ (Parker Follett 2003: 6) can have a productive effect on the organisation. In general, organisation theory emphasises the importance of internal criticism and constant ‘irritations’ for organisational development and ‘forward-looking self-renewal’ (Wimmer 2001: 254). Internal dissent is therefore seen as an ‘indispensable resource’ (Wimmer 2003: 50) for complex organisations.

But why exactly is internal criticism so ‘indispensable’ for organisations? Organisations improve the quality of their work by learning from their own mistakes (‘learning-by-doing’ or ‘trial-and-error’, cf. Levitt and March 1988: 321). In order for mistakes to be learnt from, however, they must first be recognised as such. Internal criticism can point such mistakes out and identify dysfunctional processes and rules: ‘Organizational learning is a knowledge-based process of *questioning* and changing organizational rules to change organizational practice’ (Benner et al. 2011: 55; emphasis added). Before organisational practices can be changed, they must be questioned and criticised—‘defining a problem’ (Antal et al. 2017: 171) and communicating this has to be the first step. If, in contrast, an organisation’s culture ‘encourages people to avoid asking difficult questions’ (Alvesson and Spicer 2012: 1210-11), the organisation has a serious problem: ‘As the airing of problems and critique are prohibited, the capacity to engage in critical reflection is reduced’ (ibid.: 1205). Internal criticism is therefore a central resource for organisations to learn from their own mistakes and to develop and improve.

This holds true for all types of organisations, but is particularly important for IOs: as Thorsten Benner and colleagues point out, IOs need to reflect upon ‘their failures and successes, especially if they work on complex and contested issues [...] that affect the lives of millions’ (Benner et al. 2011: 52). This covers two important aspects: first, many IOs work on ‘contested issues’ for which there is no single answer, but which must be continuously renegotiated. It is therefore crucial that IOs at least try to ‘cultivate a spirit of epistemological uncertainty’ (Barnett 2010: 211). In this context, internal processes of reflection and self-criticism are particularly important. Second, ‘mistakes’ made by IOs can have dramatic consequences,



as their projects and interventions often have high stakes and existential effects on millions of people. To avoid catastrophic failures, IOs are highly dependent on criticism (for one example among many, see Wade 2016). For IOs in particular, criticism from within is therefore an indispensable resource. This, in turn, also means that ‘unwillingness to speak freely or challenge superiors obviously diminishes the organization’s ability to recognize and correct errors’ (Barnett and Finnemore 2018: 73). For IOs, using internal criticism as a resource can thus be extremely challenging and difficult in practice, as will be shown in the next section.

Criticism from within in practice: a case study of the UN Secretariat

In stark contrast to the widely shared consensus in organisation theory that internal criticism is indispensable, criticism from within often finds little support in IOs in practice. Taken together, the manifold anecdotes in the IO literature (see Barnett 2002, Goldman 2005; Weaver 2008; Autesserre 2014) make it clear that the positive understanding of criticism as described above serves, at best, as a desirable ideal in IOs themselves.⁴ The observation is supported by further anecdotal evidence from investigative journalists. Emanuel Stoakes, for example, shows in great detail how UN employees in Myanmar are put under pressure by superiors to stifle their criticism: ‘When [staff members] confronted [their manager] about this, a threat was issued: they were told never to raise this again with her or anyone else “if you want to continue your career at the UN”’ (Stoakes 2016). It seems that especially in IOs criticism from within is thus not used constructively, but is instead often seen as a problem.

However, to move beyond scattered anecdotes and arrive at robust results, a more systematic analysis is needed. With this in mind, in the following, I analyse the criticism culture within the peace and security pillar of the UN Secretariat.⁵ This case was deliberately chosen for the present study as there is a highly institutionalised ‘learning infrastructure’ (Benner et al. 2011: 59) in the UN Secretariat as well as a long-standing discussion about past failures, especially in UN peacekeeping. It could therefore be assumed that internal criticism is indeed understood as a resource in the UN Secretariat. If dealing with internal criticism is difficult even in an IO like this with a particularly sophisticated learning infrastructure, then it is reasonable to assume that this might also apply to other IOs with a less developed infrastructure. In a sense, case selection here thus follows the logic of a critical case: ‘If it is valid for this case, it is valid for all (or many) cases’ (Flyvbjerg 2006: 230).

⁴ For example, and very similar to Weaver’s observations quoted in the introduction, Michael Goldman (2005: 168) refers to ‘instances of outright suppression’ in the World Bank and quotes an employee: ‘The Bank is a tough place to discuss different ideas’ (ibid.: 143).

⁵ When I refer to the ‘UN Secretariat’ in this study, I am referring to the ‘peace and security pillar’ of the UN Secretariat, unless otherwise stated. This pillar consists mainly of the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). The term ‘UN peacekeeping’ is also used as a synonym for this pillar.



For the case study, I conducted 22 in-depth, anonymised interviews with staff members (5 female, 17 male) from various hierarchical levels and different departments within the peace and security pillar of the UN Secretariat.⁶ Most of them (14) were based in the UN Headquarters in New York, but I also talked to the staff of ongoing peacekeeping field missions.⁷ I followed a loose interview guideline, but tried to be as open as possible to the viewpoint of my interviewees in order to avoid priming.⁸ Despite the relatively open questions, patterns emerged and saturation was reached quite early on with regard to the specific research interest of this article.

In what follows, I will describe the criticism culture in the UN Secretariat based on these interviews. My analysis shows a considerable discrepancy between the formal learning infrastructure, on the one hand, and the internal criticism culture, on the other: although many mechanisms and processes in which criticism could be expressed and in which learning processes could take place have been worked into the organisational design, the existing criticism culture in the UN's peace and security pillar prevents this from happening in practice.

To shed more light on this discrepancy, it is worth first taking a closer look at the existing learning infrastructure in UN peacekeeping—since the internal learning and evaluation instruments that the UN has developed over the years represent the formal institutionalised processes of dealing with criticism from within. Benner and colleagues (2011) analyse comprehensively the learning infrastructure in the UN peace operations bureaucracy. Based on five case studies, the authors describe the laborious establishment of several structures and tools to strengthen learning processes in UN peacekeeping, arriving at a mixed conclusion: '[N]either the doomsayers who hold that bureaucracies cannot learn save in situations of extreme crisis nor the management gurus who promise swift transformations into a "learning organization" have it right' (Benner et al. 2011: 211). Nevertheless, they show that, over the years, the UN Secretariat has made great progress in establishing a professional learning infrastructure for UN peacekeeping activities, both in terms of structures—first and foremost the Policy, Evaluation and Training Division (DPET) in the Department of

⁶ Most of them were employed in DPO and DPPA, but I also spoke with staff from other departments and offices, such as the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance (DoM) or the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS). The majority were mid-career staff (P3-5). However, my interviews cover many different hierarchical levels and positions, including Assistant-Secretary-Generals, Heads of Office, Team Leaders, Senior Officers, Political Officers, Best Practice Officers, Junior Officers, and last but not least a (former) trainee.

⁷ Every interview request was accepted, self-selection could thus not be observed. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity to allow for open and honest conversations about the potentially sensitive topic of internal criticism. In part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online or by telephone between October 2019 and December 2020. However, this did not—at least from my point of view—result in any great 'distance'; instead, I almost always encountered a very friendly conversational atmosphere. Being at home perhaps even helped some interviewees to talk about these sensitive topics more openly.

⁸ To be more specific: I took great care not to ask questions such as 'What's wrong with the UN?' or 'What do you criticise about the status quo?'. Instead, I asked very open and narrative questions about the general processes of organisational learning, such as 'If you have ideas about how something could be improved, what exact steps might you take?'.



Peace Operations (DPO)—and specific formats (e.g. ‘After Action Reviews’, ‘Lessons Learned’, Town Hall meetings, staff surveys, etc.).

However, when asked about their own perceptions of this institutionalised learning infrastructure, staff members’ reactions are far from enthusiastic. First, they generally doubt that the results of the numerous learning exercises and evaluations ultimately have any consequences at all. For example, one interviewee criticised that some managers lack the courage to expose the wrongdoings that are discovered:

We once had an Under-Secretary-General in OIOS [the internal oversight body of the UN] who internally stated: ‘I don’t want to rock the boat.’ I mean, we are an oversight body – and our boss doesn’t want to make any waves. Okay, but if we don’t make waves, who does?

Many internal evaluations are seen as a ‘completely blunt sword’ by staff members—often with good reasons, as previous studies show: ‘Reviews undertaken [here in the context of UNMIS] had neither resulted in changes of operational policies nor in the improvement of operational performance’ (Antal et al. 2017: 177). Second, it is not only the ‘output’ of evaluations that is perceived negatively. The opportunities for employees to propose new ideas or criticism via the formal channels provided by the UN management are also viewed critically. Simply ‘offering’ these supposedly dialogue-based participation formats is not enough, as this interview quote illustrates:

Nobody who wants to keep his job raises his hand in a Town Hall meeting at the UN to criticise something – then you’re gone! Of course, you can develop all these fancy tools [...]. But if the underlying culture is not in line with that, then no one will use these tools!

Even if internal criticism is not actively suppressed in the UN Secretariat, there are subtle mechanisms at work that result in staff being unwilling to voice criticism.⁹ But how can this ‘underlying culture’ be described? First of all, there evidently is a great deal of criticism from within among UN staff. The staff I interviewed expressed dissatisfaction on various issues, such as the management reform efforts of Secretary-General António Guterres (‘the process was a disaster’), the working atmosphere for women within the Secretariat (‘I can’t even remember how many times I was sexually harassed’), or the large discrepancies in dealing with the different levels of the hierarchy (‘Apartheid’). Besides this general dissatisfaction, the interviewees also expressed multifaceted criticism regarding substantive peacekeeping issues—whether with regard to the Action for Peace reform (‘more appearance than substance’), recent attempts to increase the proportion of women in peace operations (‘aimless activism’), or the currently dominant focus on performance evaluations in

⁹ This applies not only to criticism but also to ideas from staff in general: ‘We have, for example, a “good ideas box” in our office where you can simply throw something in when you have an idea. [...] I don’t know if anyone has ever put anything in there. Officially, this box still exists, but I don’t think any idea has ever been implemented – if there ever was one.’



peacekeeping ('a farce').¹⁰ But these observations alone do not describe a criticism culture—the crucial question is how this internal criticism is dealt with. In short: in the UN Secretariat, criticism from within is rarely seen as a resource, but primarily as a threat. Some staff members even refer to an 'anti-criticism culture', stating that expressing criticism is in no way rewarded:

Criticism is clearly not rewarded; it's rather negatively perceived. [...] It's not appreciated. To build a successful career in the UN, you need to shut up. That's what I would say.

[The UN Headquarters in] New York is a place for people who have learned to say 'yes'.

Other interlocutors are somewhat more ambivalent in their assessment and emphasise the important role of leadership¹¹ and the differences between departments.¹² Interviewees' descriptions of the harsh way in which criticism is dealt with are nonetheless striking, as the following quotes from two different interviews show:

Open criticism... Phew, that's basically suicide.

Whoever sticks his head out here gets it cut off.

This staff perception has implications. Although communication between colleagues is very polite and friendly on the surface ('love, peace, and harmony', as one interviewee ironically put it), trust in others in the organisation seems to be weak:

You survive in this system by finding people you trust, and by working with them. And with the rest, it's nothing but lip service.

Obviously, these observations do not apply equally to all departments, missions, or units in the UN Secretariat. Even within the UN peace and security pillar, there is substantial variation, as the recent study by the Office of Internal Oversight (IOS 2021) on the 'organizational culture in UN peacekeeping' has shown. Future, more fine-grained analyses may thus be able to identify different 'criticism (sub-)cultures'. Nevertheless, most of the themes identified here seem to have some general validity; in my view, the differences between the subunits are more a matter of degree than kind. This intuition is supported by the internal 'UN Staff Engagement Survey 2019',

¹⁰ This manifold criticism by employees is not surprising: it is an open secret that not everything runs like clockwork at the UN, to put it mildly. This is clearly illustrated by anonymous reports from insiders (cf. *The Guardian* 2016), 'drop-out stories' from former high-ranking UN employees (cf. Banbury 2016), as well as critical media coverage (cf. Lynch 2020a). While these criticisms often refer to the overall UN management or to very specific scandals (especially regarding sexual abuse), I am particularly interested in the internal criticism of and within the peace and security pillar in the UN Secretariat. With regard to UN peacekeeping, there are also numerous indications that staff members are dissatisfied with their own organization and how it operates. Lise Howard, for example, speaks of a 'deep disagreement' (2019: 16) and Séverine Autesserre observes 'considerable frustration' (2014: 201) among peacekeepers.

¹¹ As one interviewee put it: 'In my current team, my opinion or my criticism is definitely not asked for. [...] But I have also had different experiences. I think it depends extremely on your supervisor.'

¹² 'There are some departments – not necessarily my department – but some departments where people are extremely scared to speak up.'



which gives us reason to assume that the interview quotes presented above are not just the opinions of individuals: of the almost 19,000 UN staff members surveyed, only 31% agreed with the statement that ‘In the UN Secretariat, it is safe to challenge the status quo’. The number is even lower for mid-career professionals (P4–P5, 20%) and early-career professionals (P1–P3, 9%).¹³ Similar evaluations can be also found in the literature. James Jonah and Amy Hill, for example, refer to a ‘culture of excessive risk aversion’ (Jonah and Hill 2018: 221; for similar results, see Junk et al. 2017: 3) in the UN Secretariat. Interestingly, in a report to the UN General Assembly, Secretary-General António Guterres himself identified the Secretariat’s culture as a problem, criticising it as being ‘characterized by mistrust and risk aversion’ (Guterres 2017a: 18–19). Although the existing literature does not explicitly focus on criticism from within but rather examines processes of organisational learning more generally (cf. Benner et al. 2011; Junk et al. 2017), it nevertheless reinforces the suspicion that staff lack the trust in the UN Secretariat to openly voice criticism.¹⁴

The fact that there might be good reasons for this lack of trust is most clearly demonstrated by the repressive way whistleblowers have been treated in the UN.¹⁵ Even if these are undoubtedly extreme cases, it is very likely that they have a signalling effect, which also inhibits the expression of less radical criticism. Even though, in recent years, the UN has developed formalised procedures (such as an anonymous whistleblower hotline at OIOS), those interviewed remain very sceptical about these measures:

We do not have good whistleblower protection here. Every whistleblower I’ve seen has been fired and disappeared. [...] If you look at the prominent cases, they all got their asses kicked.¹⁶

All in all, it becomes clear that the existing criticism culture is not in line with the established learning infrastructure in the UN Secretariat. Although, on paper, many

¹³ The results of this internal survey were leaked to *Foreign Policy* (Lynch 2020b). The survey also provides other insights into the culture of the UN Secretariat. For instance, it is striking that only half of all respondents agree with the statement ‘People at all levels in the UN Secretariat are treated with respect’. See also the recent OIOS study on the ‘organizational culture’ and the ‘unhealthy work environment’ in UN peacekeeping (2021: 8).

¹⁴ One reason often mentioned in my interviews is the lack of trust in colleagues due to the fact that they are sometimes seen primarily as delegates of their country, not as ‘real colleagues’: ‘There is this a joke about Chinese people working at the UN always having two flags on their desks – one from the Communist Party and one from the UN. And I think that’s accurate.’

¹⁵ Whistleblowers express a form of criticism that comes ‘from within’ but is directed outward and has an external target audience. Since the focus of this article is on the handling of internal criticism within IOs, whistleblowers are not examined in detail. However, they can be seen as an (extreme) example of what happens when voicing criticism internally no longer seems possible.

¹⁶ These observations are consistent with various newspaper stories describing how UN officials were penalised for drawing attention to problems (cf. Lynch 2011, 2013). One issue that was raised several times by the interviewees in this context is the handling of cases of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). The UN has been dealing with this issue for a long time. The fight against SEA has now officially become a ‘top priority’ for the Secretary-General, who has formulated a ‘zero-tolerance’ strategy to sexual misconduct (Guterres 2017b). A full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this article (for an excellent reconstruction of the ‘culture of silence’, see Daugirdas 2019). However, it is worth noting that my interviewees also expressed sharp criticism in this respect: ‘In the context of SEA, things are clearly



formats and processes in which self-criticism could be practiced and critical discussions could take place do exist, the Secretariat's criticism culture prevents either of these things from happening in practice ('We do not learn our lessons, we only document them', as one interviewee put it). This phenomenon is well captured in the following interview quote:

In my view, it is important not only to write a Christmas email to your troops or subordinates once a year, but to really build channels where critical discussions and participation can take place. This is something that has probably been taught in management courses for a long time, but which has still not fully arrived in the organisational culture of the UN. [...] That's what is really missing: an internal criticism culture! It is not enough to just say on paper 'yes, that's a good idea'. You really have to live it and you have to take away people's inhibitions to be an active part of it.

The—admittedly very pointed—description in this section shows that internal criticism is far from being treated as a resource in the UN Secretariat. Criticism from within does exist among UN employees, but is rarely discussed openly. From the perspective of my interviewees, the existing internal evaluation processes suffer from major weaknesses and the few dialogue formats offered can hardly be taken seriously. Even if there is no active suppression of criticism, (more or less) subtle mechanisms can be observed which prevent internal criticism from being voiced: the expression of criticism is generally not rewarded, to put it mildly, and internal scandals are covered up.

But why is this the case? Why is it so difficult for staff to express criticism, despite the fact that criticism from within should be seen as an indispensable resource within the organisation? Why is there such a discrepancy between the impressive learning infrastructure and the repressive criticism culture in the UN Secretariat? The next section offers theoretical answers to this question, which are then empirically examined and illustrated in the fourth section.

Theoretical argument: why expressing internal criticism is difficult in IOs

Voicing criticism is difficult in any organisation. According to a recent study surveying more than 8,000 employees of private companies, almost half of all staff members (44%) do not dare to talk to their superiors about problems in the company (DGB 2019). These numbers show that being able to express internal criticism is anything but a given: openly expressing dissent often takes courage, since superiors

Footnote 16 (continued)

most blatantly sat out and covered up.' Or as another interviewee put it: 'Nobody will believe you. We all know that if a female employee says "my boss touched me the wrong way", she's gone the next day.'



frequently see internal criticism not as a resource but rather as a ‘personal attack’ and thus a threat.¹⁷

However, criticism from within can also present a threat beyond the individual level: internal criticism can destabilise the organisation from within. While too little internal criticism can inhibit processes of learning and change in organisations (see above), too much internal criticism can become a problem as well (cf. Morgan 2006: 194). If organisations are only preoccupied with themselves and get caught up in constant internal disputes, they will sooner or later become paralysed. Less reflexivity, in contrast, can provide a ‘sense of certainty that allows organizations to function smoothly’ and save them from the ‘frictions provoked by doubt and reflection’ (Alvesson and Spicer 2012: 1196). In that sense, too much conflict and criticism from within is a real threat to the stability of organisations and their ability to act.

While these general difficulties regarding internal criticism apply to almost all organisations, IOs have to deal with at least three additional complications, which will be explored in the following. The barriers discussed below apply to IOs in particular, but not exclusively. Parts of the discussion may thus also be relevant for other types of organisations, such as NGOs, national development agencies, or public authorities. Furthermore, it must be noted that IOs vary greatly in their organisational design and culture—and that it is therefore very difficult to make generalisations. What is described next certainly does not hold true for every single IO. My argument is rather that IOs generally have three features which can make it particularly difficult to deal with criticism from within: (1) contradictory demands and organisational hypocrisy; (2) external pressures and fragile authority; as well as (3) internal pressures and contested self-identities.

Organisational hypocrisy: necessary discrepancies between talk and action

The first reason why internal criticism faces such difficulties in IOs is that criticism from within can expose their (necessary) organisational hypocrisy. Compared to private companies, IOs often encounter very 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 (e.g. the ‘multiple audiences’ of the UN—Daugirdas 2019: 226). For Nils Brunsson, ‘hypocrisy’ is the answer to the question of how organisations can deal with such contradictory demands. He defines this organisational hypocrisy as a necessary ‘difference between words and deeds’ (Brunsson 2002, xiii)—as it is precisely the inconsistency between talk and action that allows organisations to fulfil contradictory expectations: ‘The organization meets some demands by way of talk, others by decisions, and yet others by action—thus to some extent satisfying three conflicting demands’ (Brunsson 2002: xiv).

The functionality of organisational hypocrisy for IOs has been addressed in several studies. By decoupling formulated principles from practical action, IOs ensure

¹⁷ Therefore, it is necessary to actively create conditions that encourage staff members to articulate internal criticism. An interesting best practice example in this context are the so-called ‘high reliability organisations’. This term refers to organisations that operate in high-risk areas where even small mistakes can have catastrophic consequences (e.g. nuclear power plants). In these organisations, employees who criticise and point out mistakes are explicitly rewarded (cf. Weick and Sutcliffe 2001).



their organisational survival (cf. Weaver 2008; Zähringer and Brosig 2020) and remain capable of action (cf. Lipson 2007).¹⁸ However, these studies usually also point out the ambivalent role of organisational hypocrisy: ‘While organized hypocrisy may be necessary for organizational survival, it may be equally necessary that the organization show its discourse and behavior to be consistent’ (ibid.: 22). Organisational hypocrisy is not a strategy that an organisation can officially adopt: ‘Management books recommending hypocrisy as a strategy would destroy the basis for their own prescriptions’ (Brunsson 2002: xv). Organisational hypocrisy thus only ‘works’ as long as it is not revealed. Against this backdrop, internal criticism that exposes such hypocrisy in IOs becomes dangerous for these organisations. IO employees are particularly familiar with the actual practices of their organisation ‘on the ground’ and are therefore very adept at precisely identifying the discrepancies that exist between this and the official ‘talk’. Accordingly, criticism from within is often directed against these observed contradictions between formulated ideals and actual practices (cf. Christian 2020: 74)—and can thus become a veritable threat to IOs by exposing inconsistencies between organisational talk and action.

External pressure: powerful principals and fragile authority

IOs are not only confronted with contradictory expectations, but also with external pressure from critical observers. This institutional environment can have a negative impact on the internal criticism culture as well. First, to use the vocabulary of principal-agent theory (cf. Hawkins et al. 2006), IOs as agents have only limited freedom to criticise their own principals (member states, powerful donors, etc.). Unlike private companies, IOs do not set their own agenda, but have a mandate: their goals and tasks are determined by member states. For an IO, internal criticism of its own goals is therefore always also potential criticism of the member states that formulate this agenda—and actors within the IO administration may therefore shy away from it.¹⁹ Second, recognising that IOs—even as agents—still have a considerable degree of autonomy, their power is based to a large extent on the authority ascribed to them, which is always fragile since it depends on the consent and acceptance of

¹⁸ Lipson illustrates this mechanism using the example of UN peacekeeping: ‘Organized hypocrisy can enable the UN [...] to manage irreconcilable pressures that might otherwise render them incapable of effective action and threaten organizational survival. Decoupling of talk and action can permit the UN to satisfy contradictory demands from its environment, allowing it to act [...] in ways that are necessary to the success of peace operations in the field but inconsistent with norms to which the UN is expected to conform’ (Lipson 2007: 23). In concrete terms, this debate focuses on the contradiction between the three traditional principles of peacekeeping (consent, impartiality, non-use of force) and the operational requirements of ‘robust’ mandates (see also Laurence 2019).

¹⁹ In this paper, member states are to some extent understood as ‘external actors’. However, it is difficult to draw such a distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ in IOs. Member states are often very actively involved in the various IO bodies and make important decisions that affect the administration (e.g. in the 5th Committee of the UN General Assembly). However, the focus of this paper is on IO administrations, on international bureaucracies (e.g. the UN Secretariat). From this ‘internal perspective’, member states are ‘external actors’ with respect to the criticism culture. Nevertheless, this study makes it clear that in future work, the complex interplay between an IO administration and its member states regarding criticism from within needs to be considered in a more nuanced way (see also endnote 22).



other actors (cf. Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 20; see also Reus-Smit 2007: 159). External criticism that calls this ‘delegated’, ‘moral’, or ‘expert’ authority (cf. Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 22–24) into question is thus a major threat to IOs. Both the institutional setting and the fragility of IOs’ authority can therefore affect the way in which internal criticism is dealt with: the pressure of powerful principals as well as the ‘fear of [...] public opinion’ (Autesserre 2014: 210) have consequences for the handling of criticism from within because actors within the IO constantly have to worry that internal criticism could be leaked²⁰ and damage the organisation’s reputation: ‘so long as derogatory information stays hidden, it cannot cause reputational harm’ (Daugirdas 2019: 224).

This preoccupation with potential reputational damage can also impact the organisation’s own evaluation programmes, which almost all IOs have now developed. Hal Culbertson distinguishes here between two different ‘paradigms’ of evaluation: while a ‘learning’ focus aims at improving future actions, the dominant focus in IOs is often on ‘accountability’, and this is primarily geared toward assessing (and punishing) past actions. Here, too, internal criticism becomes a threat—and is therefore often avoided: ‘Organizational staff [...] who understand evaluation in terms of accountability may skew or avoid disclosing information that could be important for learning’ (Culbertson 2010: 70). This is closely linked to the phenomenon of ‘self-censorship’ (Daugirdas 2019: 239): given the external pressure, IO employees may sometimes deliberately keep their criticism to themselves in order not to destabilize the organization any further or even threaten its existence. Such an approach, exemplified by the motto ‘rather a bad UN than no UN at all’, is quite conceivable and has already been addressed in some studies (cf. Barnett 2002). All in all, the external pressure many IOs face—and the corresponding fear of critical leaks to the outside—can thus negatively affect internal criticism culture.

Internal pressure: conflicting goals and contested self-identity

However, internal criticism is not only a threat to the organisation because it could be leaked and provoke external criticism. Internal criticism can also destabilise the organisation from within by raising doubts among staff members about their work and mission. Individuals require a ‘stable sense of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991: 54), and the same applies to organisations (cf. Weick 1995: 20). But compared to private companies, IOs often have very contradictory identities:

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

²⁰ The list of such leaks from IOs is indeed long (see e.g. Kleinfeld and Dodds 2020; Lynch 2020b; Stoakes 2016).



IOs have ‘multifaceted identities’ (ibid.: 210) and IO employees must thus constantly deal with contradictory principles and dilemmas (see also the section above on ‘organisational hypocrisy’). Sarah von Billerbeck states that IO staff members therefore often struggle with the legitimacy of their own organisation, and that IOs need practices of self-legitimation to maintain ‘the cohesion and stability’ of their ‘institutional identity’ (ibid.: 208). These self-legitimation activities (‘narratives, internal communications, and symbols and events’—ibid.: 213) must be understood as a necessary ‘way of developing, defining, and (re)confirming’ (ibid.: 207) the IO’s identity. In this context, internal criticism that challenges these self-legitimation practices—pointing out discrepancies and ‘putting the finger on the wound’—becomes a threat to the internal stability of IOs. Billerbeck argues that the greater the ‘identity incoherence’ of an IO, the greater the need for self-legitimation (ibid.: 208)—and we could add: the greater the aversion to internal criticism, given its ability to (further) destabilise IOs from within.

In summary: internal criticism is ambivalent—it can be both a resource and a threat to IOs. Its suppression or avoidance may thus not only be dysfunctional for the organisation (impeding organisational learning processes) but also functional (protecting external reputation and preserving internal stability).²¹ In the following, I will empirically investigate and illustrate the theoretical arguments presented in this section, again drawing on insights from my interviews with the UN Secretariat staff.

Empirical analysis: external pressures, self-protection, and organisational hypocrisy in the UN Secretariat

Based on my interviews and in line with the arguments outlined above, I explore three specific reasons for the UN Secretariat’s weak criticism culture. (1) Criticism is suppressed due to a widespread fear of leaks resulting from external pressures. (2) Criticism is avoided as a strategy of self-protection in the face of (inevitable) failures. (3) Constructive criticism is difficult to express in settings where organisational hypocrisy is necessary.

Criticism suppression: the fear of powerful principals and public opinion

With reference to the literature discussed in the third section, the perceived impossibility of criticising member states is indeed seen as a major reason why internal criticism faces particular difficulties in the UN Secretariat. The employees I interview

²¹ Even though they do not explicitly deal with criticism from within, Wolfgang Seibel and colleagues (2017) describe a very similar ‘classic dilemma’ with regard to organisational learning processes: ‘Breaking up deeply rooted belief systems could be needed for learning, but might also at the same time destroy identities and consequently weaken the commitment of organization members. This represents a classic dilemma or organizational learning. [...] Changing cognitive frames, thus, is both a prerequisite of substantial learning and a potential threat to organizational stability’ (Seibel et al. 2017: 24).



make clear that they are well aware of the ‘limits of criticism’ and that the positions of (powerful) member states are always taken into account:

The structure of our organisation forbids criticism of the member states, especially in areas where member states themselves are active in operations, such as in peacekeeping.

There is an immense fear in the UN Secretariat of stepping on member states’ toes.

This, in turn, has an impact on the internal criticism culture, as there is a widespread fear within the organisation that internal criticism of member states and their agendas could be leaked:

Even before you send an internal email, you ask yourself: who might be offended if the mail is forwarded to someone else? [...] UN staff usually assume that whatever they write will somehow find its way to the member state being written about.

This general phenomenon is reinforced by the current geopolitical situation. According to one interviewee, the UN currently perceives itself as a ‘threatened institution’ that is ‘under fire from many directions’. This has consequences for the internal criticism culture, as there is now even more emphasis on anticipating the interests of (powerful) member states:

There is a form of ‘self-censorship’, a kind of ‘anticipatory obedience’.

Due to the current political situation, there is a clear internal directive that all our proposals must be realistic: realistic in the sense of ‘in line with political realities’ – not necessarily in terms of what is realistically feasible or appropriate in the field.

My interlocutors emphasised that the general aim is to avoid all potential disagreements with member states. There are ‘good reasons’ for this, not only from the organisation’s point of view but also from the perspective of the individual employee, as Kristina Daugirdas points out: ‘Picking fights with member states is not generally a good way for UN officials to advance their careers within the organization’ (Daugirdas 2019: 247). Instead, there is a strong ‘organizational imperative to maintain a reputation for cooperativeness with member states’ (ibid.) —leading UN officials to suppress damaging information about these states (cf. ibid.: 239; for a very similar case at the World Bank, see Weaver 2010: 379). This phenomenon is also frequently reflected in my interviews:

The typical example: there was an attack on a camp, and the battalion from Bangladesh was asleep. But I can’t put that in my report.



There are many cases where underperformance [of certain troop contingents] has been identified but has not been reported in that way.²²

Instead, problems are often covered up ('one simply paints varnish over it') and criticism is expressed—if at all—only very 'vaguely'.²³ This internal self-censorship is further exacerbated by the fear of public criticism. There is a constant concern within the organisation that internal criticism could be leaked to the press and trigger public outcry, a mechanism that also weakens internal criticism culture:

There is no 'error culture' in the UN Secretariat. Internal criticism is always very difficult in the UN because of the external pressure ...or rather the fear that this or that will become a headline again.

One interviewee describes it as a 'tug-of-war': UN employees are torn between the desire to 'be honest and self-critical' and the goal of 'protecting the organisation from reputational damage'. Accordingly, external pressure does not seem to be beneficial to the internal criticism culture in the UN, as Benner and colleagues point out: 'the constant perception of urgency and crisis [fosters] defensiveness against [...] internal deviance or criticism' (Benner et al 2011: 31; cf. Antal et al. 2017: 174). This is also consistent with Daugirdas's thesis that reputational concerns are not always a good 'disciplinarian' for IOs (2019: 221; for similar findings concerning 'accountability' cf. Culbertson 2010).

Criticism avoidance: self-protection in the face of inevitable failures

Internal criticism, however, is not only suppressed because of the fear that it might be leaked and provoke external criticism. Criticism from within is also collectively avoided in the UN Secretariat because people simply do not like to talk about the (inevitable) failures of their own organisation (cf. Billerbeck 2020: 211; see also Alvesson and Spicer 2012: 1209). According to my interviewees, internal discussions tend to be rare and critical questions are often rebuffed by colleagues:

When you question something, you often get the answer: 'Don't be so philosophical.' Sometimes they really muzzle you.

I have to be honest: the learning products we produce are mainly about 'good practices' and everything that works well... Open reflection about what is not going well is usually not part of it.

²² One thing that does happen from time to time is that UN staff members raise their criticisms through 'other channels': they use their contacts with individual member states, and informally ask them to address the criticisms that they themselves cannot bring up. As one interviewee put it: 'We use member states very strategically to put pressure on our own bosses and to put pressure on certain parts of our department. For example, we've often gone to the Americans and said, 'Can you please call General XY and put pressure on him?' But we have to be very careful about this, of course, because General XY wouldn't really welcome it if he knew we were initiating it.'

²³ Birgit Müller (2013: 1) speaks in this context of a 'veil of harmony' in IOs. Following Müller, 'the dissolving of conflict in a discourse of harmony' must be seen as a 'recurring practice of international organizations' (ibid.: 16; for very similar findings, see Neumann 2012; Nair 2020).



Internal criticism of any kind of poor performance by others seems to be especially difficult within the UN Secretariat. This aversion to criticism of non-performance can be individually motivated, as some people do not want to be exposed to (potentially painful) criticism. Without criticism from within, incompetence of individual staff members is more difficult to detect:

I would say that it suits many people perfectly that their own performance is not scrutinised any further.

At the same time, the avoidance of internal criticism can also be part of a collective protection strategy in an organisation that is confronted with contradictory expectations. As discussed in the third section, many IOs ‘are compelled to violate principles or behaviours appropriate to one side of their identity in order to comply with those appropriate to another’ (Billerbeck 2020: 211). Accordingly, IOs can never satisfy all external demands equally; they always also have to get it wrong. In order to cope with these inevitable failures (and the resulting frustration), IO employees need a kind of self-protection mechanism—either in the form of self-legitimation practices (*ibid.*; see also Laurence 2019: 257) or in the form of collective avoidance of internal criticism:

In our organisation, things are rarely discussed critically. Most staff members just don’t have that much interest in criticism.

Dialing down the really critical discussions... This is definitely something that is taking place in the system.

Naive and cynical criticism: the difficulty of criticising a hypocritical organisation

While the main focus above was on possible reasons for (1) the suppression and (2) the avoidance of internal criticism, in the following, I take a slightly different perspective and explore a specific difficulty of expressing constructive criticism within the UN Secretariat. In my view, there is another reason why criticism from within faces such difficulties—and this is due to a particular characteristic of the organisation itself: constructively criticising a necessarily hypocritical organisation from within is difficult. As pointed out in the third section, the hypocrisy of an IO can be a source of internal criticism. At the same time, perceived hypocrisy of their own organisation tempts employees to engage in two specific forms of criticism, which—even when they are expressed—tend to remain ineffective. One could be described as naive, and the other as cynical criticism.²⁴

If, instead of understanding organisational hypocrisy as a simple separation of talk and action, we see it as a necessary ‘counter-coupling’ (cf. Lipson 2007: 10) of the two, it becomes clear that complaints about the discrepancy between words and deeds—or the demand to reconcile these two elements completely (‘We should stop saying one thing and doing another’)—must be described as naive criticism. The

²⁴ This distinction was inspired by Sebastian Schindler’s work on naivety and cynicism (cf. Schindler 2020).



strong internal criticism of the ‘split personality’ (cited in Billerbeck 2020: 210) of the UN is a good example of this. UN staff criticising organisational action because it is not in line with the formulated ideals and principles run the risk of demanding something that the organisation simply cannot implement if it wants to continue reflecting and meeting the contradictory demands with which it is confronted. Internal criticism that calls for the gap between talk and action to be completely closed can thus initiate ‘dangerous’ reforms:

Successful implementation of reforms intended to ensure consistency between organizational talk, decisions and action (i.e. mandates of peace operations and actual field operations) could threaten the survival [of the UN]. (Lipson 2007: 22)

Countermeasures suppressing this form of internal criticism thus appear to be quite functional from the perspective of the organisation. At the same time, many employees of course recognise the difficulty of reconciling words and action. They are ‘well aware of all the things that cannot be changed from within’—as one of my interviewees put it—and therefore hold back criticism.

Another form of criticism that can arise among employees in response to perceived hypocrisy of their own organisation is cynical criticism. This form of criticism also identifies the discrepancies between ideals and practices, but at the same time a priori assumes that the reason for this lies solely in the moral depravity of the organisation and its leaders. The following interview quote is a good example of this cynical criticism:

When high-ranking UN officials express something idealistic, it is only rhetoric, it is blah blah blah, it is ‘talk’ that is only adopted depending on what is currently in vogue. [...] It is a theatre; it is just a game for them.

This form of criticism also tends to have no consequences, since in a defeatist manner it does not demand change, but simply attributes the inconsistency between words and deeds to an unalterable lack of political will and moral integrity on the part of the actors involved. Thus cynical criticism also falls short because it excludes alternative explanations from the outset: instead of asking about the structural and systemic causes, problems are personalised and the UN and its leaders demonised. Ironically, this cynicism can become a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Reichers et al. 1997: 48): it prevents structural reforms from being initiated and problems from being solved—thereby reinforcing its own origins.²⁵

UN employees that are not aware of the fact that a certain degree of discrepancy between talk and action is constitutive of their own organisation thus run the risk of voicing naive or cynical criticism. But even if they are aware of it, expressing

²⁵ In a way, this creates a vicious circle: cynicism leads to defeatism—and it is precisely this defeatist ‘giving up’ that subsequently reinforces the reasons that led to cynicism in the first place. According to one interviewee, this phenomenon can be observed in the UN Secretariat: ‘From time to time you hear colleagues saying: “What we are doing here is total nonsense. But nobody wants to hear that. And that is why we are just getting on with it now, because we have the money for it and the member states want it.”’



constructive criticism remains extremely difficult because the common line of reasoning—‘Walk the talk!’—only applies to a limited extent in an organisation such as the UN.

Conclusion: suppression of criticism as a survival strategy?

This article started with the puzzling observation that although internal criticism is understood as an indispensable resource in organisational learning theory, expressing criticism from within in practice seems to be very difficult in IOs. The anecdotal evidence in the IO literature that led to this assumption was supported by the findings of my case study of the UN Secretariat. The empirics showed a considerable discrepancy between the formal learning infrastructure and the internal criticism culture: despite the fact that, on paper, there are many formats in which self-criticism could be practiced and critical discussions could take place, the actual criticism culture prevents this from happening in practice. To answer the question as to why it is apparently so hard to voice internal criticism in IOs, I developed the argument that criticism from within is ambivalent. It can be a resource for, but also a threat to IOs: internal criticism can endanger an IO’s external reputation as well as destabilise the organisation ‘from within’. Based on this theoretical understanding, I then empirically examined three specific reasons for the repressive criticism culture in the UN Secretariat: (1) suppression of criticism as a result of a widespread fear of leaks due to external pressures; (2) criticism avoidance as a strategy of self-protection in the face of (inevitable) failures; and (3) the difficulty of expressing constructive criticism in settings where organisational hypocrisy is necessary.

What is thus propagated and practiced in the UN Secretariat is basically a form of ‘learning without criticism’. In this sense, the well-established learning infrastructure serves primarily to provide external legitimation (‘look, we are learning’) and occasionally enables technical optimisation of existing processes; while at the same time the repressive criticism culture protects both the external reputation and the internal stability of the UN Secretariat by suppressing broader political discussions. This dominance of technical/functional learning over political/principled learning²⁶ is reflected in the management vocabulary used (‘lessons learned’, ‘best practices’) and supports earlier findings from critical IO research (cf. Ferguson 1990; Louis and Maertens 2021).

The findings of this study have implications for future research. An explicit engagement with the phenomenon of criticism from within, as outlined here, seems useful for acquiring a deeper understanding of the inner workings of IOs—both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, because the literature on organisational learning in the UN and especially in UN peacekeeping is ‘still nascent’ (Antal et al. 2017: 162).²⁷ A focus on internal criticism could offer a compelling perspective on this important case. Future analyses should strive for systematisation: when it comes

²⁶ Cf. the distinction between ‘problem-solving’ and ‘critical theory’ (Cox 1981).

²⁷ However, see the following exceptions: Howard (2008); Benner et al. (2011); Hirschmann (2012).



to dealing with criticism, are there differences between various departments or hierarchy levels in the UN Secretariat? Or between headquarters and field missions? Are there successful, positive examples of dealing with criticism from within appropriately, and what do they entail? Is there rather a suppression of criticism ‘from above’ or an avoidance of criticism ‘from below’, and how might these two phenomena be connected? And finally: what are the actual consequences of the existing criticism culture in the UN Secretariat? These and other empirical questions need to be answered.

A focus on criticism from within could also enrich several strands of the IO literature theoretically—including the ongoing debate on legitimation practices of and within IOs (cf. Dellmuth et al. 2019; Billerbeck 2020) or the discussion about conditions of organisational learning and change within IOs (cf. Benner et al. 2011; Hanrieder 2014; Junk et al. 2017). In addition, an explicit focus on internal criticism could offer a new and promising departure point for analysing the agency of IO employees—especially if the focus is not only on ‘learning leaders’ (Antal et al. 2017: 172), but if internal criticism is understood more broadly as a ‘social practice’ (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Celikates 2019) which can be exercised by ‘ordinary’ employees as well. In this way, a theoretical engagement with internal criticism could prepare the ground for a critical analysis of the ‘conditions of critique’ (Celikates 2019: 127) in IOs. In the sense of a ‘pragmatic critique’ (Schindler and Wille 2019: 1018), such an approach provides an opportunity to bring the actors’ own possibilities for reflection to the fore.

With respect to policy implications, one crucial question remains: is it all hopeless? Is it perhaps simply impossible to use criticism from within as a resource in an IO such as the United Nations? This is not what the results of this study suggest. Yes, internal criticism can pose a threat to the UN and a simple call for a more open or permissive criticism culture would not do justice to the complex dilemmas the organisation faces. However, I am convinced that the suppression and avoidance of internal criticism observed is not a feasible survival strategy either—at least not in the long run. The UN is facing serious challenges and must therefore use all available resources ‘to make itself relevant’ (Barnett and Finnemore 2018: 74). One of these resources is its own staff. The UN should therefore pluck up the courage to make greater use of its own criticism from within.

How this can be achieved remains to be answered. One thing is clear: voicing internal criticism is demanding and challenging—and must therefore be organised. Brave ‘exceptional individuals’ (Autesserre 2014: 43) are undoubtedly important, but their influence remains limited so long as they are lone warriors. Thus, leadership, senior managers, and rank-and-file employees must work together to actively create conditions that encourage the expression of internal criticism—both in terms of the general criticism culture and with regard to innovative structures and formats.²⁸ For example, more secure and ‘closed rooms’ might be necessary to

²⁸ According to some interviewees, DPET is trying to initiate such a cultural change. Nevertheless, processes of cultural change like this take time, because they require a broad consensus that goes beyond the approval of the ‘learning experts’ in DPET.



provide a space in which the discrepancies experienced by employees can be openly described and criticised—and in which, being aware of the existing and ultimately irresolvable dilemmas, they can discuss together how best to deal with them. Even if IOs cannot free themselves from the fundamental external contradictions and, consequently, a complete harmonisation of talk and action at all levels does not seem possible, this does not mean that IOs do not need criticism from within. Although staff know the limits of possible change,²⁹ it remains necessary for them to criticise organisational action—and to adjust it, where possible, to the formulated ideals. An appropriate organisational way of dealing with internal criticism should therefore become another ‘procedural norm’ (Dingwerth et al. 2019: 240) for IOs.

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²⁹ As one interviewee put it: ‘It is part of organisational learning to learn how to deal with these non-changeable imperfections.’



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