
Ethical discriminations? Representing the Reprehensible

Edward Wray-Bliss. *Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science*. Las Cruces: 2003; Vol. 2, Iss. 3; pg. 1-16, 16 pgs

Abstract (Article Summary)

This paper reflects upon the ‘goodness’ or ‘ethics’ of Critical Management/ Critical Organisation Studies (COS) research practices. I argue that academic representations of others entail an ethical responsibility to the researched, a responsibility that COS is, as yet, insufficiently exploring. Reflecting upon my own research with those who have colluded in discrimination and Stanley and Wise’s (1979) research on obscene telephone callers, I explore the nature and limits of responsibility when researching those who have acted reprehensibly. I end by arguing that COS “owe(s) some responsibility to ‘the researched’ of all kinds, whether we morally approve of them or not” (Stanley and Wise 1993:177).

Full Text (7,723 words)

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INTRODUCTION

This paper¹ reflects upon the ‘goodness’ or ‘ethics’ of Critical Management/ Critical Organisation Studies (COS) research practices. I consider in particular what responsibilities COS’s textual representations of others imply. I do this because I understand the texts that COS produces not just to be isolated epistemological pursuits but to be publicly validated contributions to social knowledge - knowledge that conditions our and others relationships with the researched (Jodelet 1991; Smith 1990a; Palmer 1987) and thus implies ethical responsibilities for the author². As Lincoln writes:

(s)ince the representation of people does indeed act to change their lives, then it is the writer’s obligation to ask hard questions about the morality and the ethics of his or her work. Those questions themselves become a part of the methods used to investigate, and therefore a part of the eventual text. (Lincoln 1993:34)

In section one I review the argument that COS may not always be taking its ethical responsibilities to the researched very seriously (parts of this argument have been made previously in Wray-Bliss 2001, 2002a, b). In section two, I reflect upon what ‘taking these responsibilities seriously’ might mean for COS and its texts. I highlight issues such as reciprocity, not problematising a voiceless researched, sharing the advantages that we accrue from research, and making the methodological basis of our claims to knowledge explicit, as potential markers of developments in our research ethics. In section three, I test the integrity of these arguments by considering whether it applies to relationships with all those whom we research. In particular I consider whether responsibilities may be suspended when researching those who have acted reprehensibly. I then use this question to work through choices I have made in co-authored research on those who have colluded in discrimination. In the conclusion to the paper I use my work-in-progress on discriminators, alongside Stanley and Wise’s (1979) feminist research on obscene telephone callers, to provide a context within which to reflect upon the implications of the issues I have voiced for the development of a critical and responsible

COS.

SECTION ONE: DISROBING AUTHORITY

Even if perceived “authorities” writing about a group to which they do not belong and/or over which they wield power, are progressive, caring, and right-on in every way, as long as their authority is constituted by either the absence of the voices of the individuals whose experiences they seek to address, or the dismissal of those voices as unimportant, the subject –object dichotomy is maintained and domination is reinforced (hooks 1989:43)

Though hooks wrote this primarily as a critique of the academy’s and other ‘experts’ representations of blackness and black people(s), I understand these words to equally apply to Critical Organisation Studies and the researched population it represents. This may initially appear unfounded. COS shows itself to be aware of post-modern and other critiques of positivism and truth, and displays a sophisticated theoretical understanding of methodological and representational debates (see e.g. Alvesson 2003; Geertz 1973, 1983; Jeffcutt 1993, 1994; Knights 1992). However, this theoretical engagement can be somewhat undermined by actual textual practices (Wray-Bliss 2002a). In their texts COS authors still routinely constitute themselves as authorities, purporting to present authoritative knowledge about the researched population. This position is reinforced through textual strategies such the adoption of a depersonalised/ realist narration of research, and the minimal/ technical reporting of methodology.

The depersonalised ‘realist’ form of reporting of organisational research, where the ‘I’ of the researcher and their presence in what they have constructed is effectively written out of the final text, seemingly tells of the acts of the organisation or people studied as they really are, rather than as the (gendered, racialised, and otherwise culturally, historically, and professionally located) researcher believes them to be. As VanMaanen has argued this form of representation more than any other pushes for the impression of authenticity for the text (VanMaanen 1988). By removing explicit reference to the knower from that which is known ‘the narrators’ authority is apparently enhanced, and audience worries over personal subjectivity become moot’ (ibid: 46).

Reinforcing the depersonalised authority of realist research, is the way the research process is conventionally minimally discussed in COS articles. Depictions of the research process typically convey it as an outcome of the unproblematic application of technical methods (triangulation, case study, semi-structured interviews, ethnography) deployed over a specified, and specifically reassuring, period of time and/or number of interviews. Such ‘discussions’ of methodology tend upon examination, to be essentially unhelpful for the purposes of evaluating and interpreting the research presented. From such minimal technical/ temporal descriptions we, the readers, are no more able to decide if the research presented is any more credible than before the ‘methodology’ page (or sometimes endnote) was written. Little or not indication is given about the relationships between researcher and researched. Is there any trust between them that can reassure us that the words the researched let the researcher hear are trustworthy markers of their worlds? How did this trust grow? Does the researcher care whether such trust exists? Is the researcher at all able to claim to accurately or sympathetically represent the people studied? Do they share experiences, views, politics, identities or identifications with the researched? If not why do they believe that they have come to know the researched’s minds or the meaning of the researched’s words and acts? Even these few basic questions of how/ why we claim knowledge of others (questions which themselves are mere markers of much more involved research,

representation, and identity debates, e.g. Aitken and Burman 1999; hooks 1989; Opie 1992; Spivak 1990; Stanley and Wise 1993), are not able to be answered by providing lists of technically sounding methods. Nor are they answered as an inevitable product of a certain number of months in an organisation or interviews conducted. Rather, the more likely function that such perfunctory descriptions of the research process in COS texts perform is to further legitimise the author's voice (VanMaanen 1988). The research process in the conventional one or two page 'methodology' sections is presented as an unproblematic one. Questions of how the authors know what they claim to know are apparently dispensed with early on in the paper with the remainder of the text being 'authoritative'.

An effect of both the depersonalised realist reportage and the reassuringly unproblematic research process is to increase the COS author's apparent 'interpretive omnipotence' (VanMaanen 1988). But what is troubling about this? Assuming that the audience is an academically sophisticated one, conversant in critiques of positivism and truth claims, we could argue that the readership is already aware that the interpretations that researchers make are subjective and research is not really as sanitised as COS texts tend to present it. In other words, it could be argued that these textual ploys do not actually have the effect of fooling us into thinking that the author *is* an authority. Even accepting that this might be true with regard to the relationship between COS author, text and COS audience my argument here is that our texts *still* embody a deeply problematic relationship between author/ researcher and researched.

If we return to hooks' quote above, I argue that through its normalised textual practices COS risks reproducing the subject-object dichotomy between researcher and researched that hooks has linked to relations of domination (see Wray-Bliss in press, for a critique of this domination model, also Collinson 2002). This dichotomy may be depicted as a research relationship where researcher and researched are constructed as independent rather than interdependent. In this (non)relationship the researcher accords to him/herself monopolistic authority to comment upon and critique the lives and voices of the researched. COS research, for instance, tends not to consider it important enough to publicly document how, or whether, this right to critique and have this critique publicly validated has been extended to the researched. Have/ how have the researched been accorded the opportunity to see and critique the ways they will be represented? Nor does COS research overly concern itself with the effects of the research for the researched. Much COS research seems to be written by taking from the lives and labours of one community and producing texts entirely for the consumption of another. The researched are subject to academic critique, but remain only objects in its construction.

Such objectification is further evidenced in the ways we use the voices of the researched. hooks (1989) highlights the absence or dismissal of the voices of the researched as tantamount to domination. Initially, what surfaces in many COS texts *could* appear to be a professional ideology of inclusion rather than absence or dismissal of the voices of the researched that hooks critiques. For example, COS texts routinely include quotes from the people studied, and their quotes are used to develop the author's arguments and conclusions. However, this 'inclusion' has a special quality. Alongside the depersonalised text, excerpts of overheard conversations or on-the-spot interview responses are represented as what 'the researched' really think. While clothing the academic voice in abstraction, theory, depersonalised tone, and numerous edits and refinements to anticipate and ward off the criticisms of peers, COS lays bare the voices of the researched. This further contributes towards making the voices of the researched susceptible to being subordinated to COS's presumed/ assumed authority.

The researched are vulnerable in the sense that their lives, feelings, understandings,

become grist to the research mill and may appear, in goodness knows what mangled form, at the end of the research process. And whatever mangled form it is, its form is unlikely to be subject to control by them (Stanley and Wise 1983:180).

Rendering the researched vulnerable to a seemingly authoritative critique while structurally elevating COS's voice to a position of invulnerability and independence from their critique means that researchers are formally unaccountable to those they represent. We know from the wider social/ political sphere that such a lack of accountability is not the best way to ensure socially responsible practices. COS is no exception. I highlight here two areas of research within COS that could be seen as problematic, namely (i) the ongoing denial of the significance of gender, and (ii) the problematisation of the researched's 'souls'.

The charge that COS research still continues to deny the significance of gender shouldn't be possible given COS explicit awareness of both the importance of gender and the academy's inappropriate history of ignoring or suppressing this (see e.g. Collinson 1992; Collinson and Collinson 1997; Collins and Wray-Bliss 2000; Knights 1997; Knights and Willmott 1986; Linstead 2000; Thompson 1989; West 1990; Wilson 1996). However, a recent example of research co-written by 'leading' COS authors perhaps show that we should still be concerned with the ability of our subject area to continue to produce 'gender-blind' (Wilson 1996) or 'gender suppressing' (Linstead 2000) research.

Callaghan and Thompson (2000) write about employment practices in U.K. call centres, an industry numerically dominated by women employees as the paper makes clear. The paper claims an epistemological warrant as the core of their analysis, the authors see their work as making a "distinctive contribution to the debate by drawing on qualitative, case study evidence" (2000:3). Yet despite their epistemological claim the male authors of this text fail to reflect upon or indicate any awareness of the debates concerning the power-effects of exercising an expert male gaze over a predominantly female population. The authors seem unaware of discussions about how to/ whether to research across identifications and differences, whether gendered, racialised, or otherwise understood. The absence of any reference to such debates suggests that these male authors can apparently know these women researched in a 'neutral' way that renders the gender of both researcher and researched irrelevant.

The denial of the significance of gender continues throughout the text. After acknowledging that 70% of the people working in call centres are likely to be female, Callaghan and Thompson explicitly mention the gender of the researched only twice more in the article. (First, to use the term 'her' when talking about a research subject (page 6). Second, in a quote from a call center manager (page 7) where there is reference to a 'pregnant ladies' need to go to the toilet more which is constructed as problematic for call targets). Consequently, the women research 'participants' are related to not as gendered subjects, but rather as ungendered objects, specimens to the gender-neutral expert gaze. For authors such as Stanley and Wise (1993), a malestream academic discourse that fails to reflect upon or acknowledge the significance of women's gendered subjectivities (i.e. the diversities and commonalities in women's subjective experience of themselves as women) should be regarded as complicit in reproducing a power-relationship that is "obscene because it treats people as mere objects, there for the researcher to do research 'on' " (1993:168).

A second example of morally questionable representations in COS is the practice of problematising the researched's 'subjectivities' or 'soul' (Rose 1989) so as to affirm the COS academic's valued 'critical' interpretive schema. Foucault's writings chart the extension and

morphing of governmentality from an historical, crude, control of the body, to include the construction and colonisation of the self or 'subjectivity' (Foucault 1980, 1983, 1998, 1991, 1992). Foucault's works show how the insinuation of 'subjectivity' into the realms of medicine, prison, religion, and sexuality has functioned to create normalising knowledges about the self, knowledges that may then be used to control, and facilitate the self-control, of subjects. Drawing upon these writings, Rose (1989) has charted the rise of 'subjectivity' as a form of governance in other realms, including that of work. He has argued that "(t)he subjectivity of the worker has thus emerged as a complex territory to be explored, understood, and regulated" (Rose 1989:56). From Foucault and Rose's writings, the subjectivity of the worker may be understood as a central means by which working people become knowable and controllable and come to know themselves in normalising ways (see also Knights and Collinson 1987; Knights and Willmott 1989; Willmott 1993, 1994, 1998). I argue below that we should not exempt the focus in COS upon worker's subjectivity from this process of governance. In particular, I suggest that the focus on 'workers' subjectivity' has performed the valued role of explaining away what for COS would be an interpretively and ideologically troublesome 'lack' of workplace resistance, thereby rendering the voices and actions of the researched academically governable again within COS 'critical' framework.

Though COS is a broad school, and signifies a range of ideological positions, the 'C' (critical) in 'COS' may be understood as an explicit awareness that the workplace can be an exploitative, subordinating, discriminatory, tedious, or oppressive environment (Alvesson and Willmott 1992). In the majority of contemporary (empirical) writings, the 'C' also signifies an understanding that working people will and do find ways to resist these effects (Jermier, Knights, and Nord 1994). Empirical research in COS that 'finds' such resistance functions to validate the understanding that workplaces are oppressive and that working people find them so and thus serves to legitimise COS valued 'critical' stance. If the fact of working people's resistance serves to validate COS (much as working people's resistance has always validated the left) then the converse is also true. The absence of 'effective' resistance is potentially challenging and disruptive to COS. The 'problem' of a perceived 'lack' of resistance is evidenced in texts spanning over a decade of COS (e.g. Burawoy 1979; Collinson 1994; Egri 1994; Ezzamel and Willmott 1998; Gottfried 1994; Knights and Collinson 1987; Knights and McCabe 1998; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992a and b; Willmott 1993).

The use of 'subjectivity' to account for this academically unsettling workplace behaviour starts perhaps with Burawoy (1979) who constructed an 'essentialised' creative subjectivity that could be used to explain what appeared to be consensual acts by workers in the labour process. Burawoy represented workers as resisting the alienating drudgery of the labour process by reframing their work targets as a challenge to 'make out'.

The difference between making out and not making out was thus not measured in the few pennies of bonus we earned but in our prestige, sense of accomplishment, and pride (Burawoy 1979:89)

This construction of 'subjectivity' performed the valuable interpretive function of allowing Burawoy to account for troublesome observable behaviour (i.e. workers willingly meeting production targets) without having to reject his valued ideological beliefs in the oppressive nature of the labour process and the continuity of workers resistance to this. Such an interpretive device may appear to us as a win-win situation in that working people are represented not as management dupes, but as actively choosing to experience their life and labour as creative and satisfying, and the COS author gets their valued 'critical' interpretive/ ideological position

validated further. This may seem far removed from Foucault and Rose's 'subjectivity' understood as a problematic extension of governmentality (although critics have highlighted normalising humanist and essentialist implications in Burawoy's work, e.g. Knights and Willmott 1989; Willmott 1993, 1994). However, in some works since Burawoy this academic 'authority' to decipher other people's subjectivity has morphed into a mechanism with which the researched can be problematised for not resisting as we think they should (e.g. Collinson 1994; Doolin 2001; Knights and Collinson 1987; Willmott 1993; 1994). Rather than question the adequacy of their interpretive/ ideological attachment to valued 'critical' frameworks, or work with the researched to co-construct a shared framework, some COS authors have used their authoritative status in the text to do something quite problematic. They have constructed the notion of workers 'subjectivities'. They have presented as more aware of this subjectivity than workers themselves are. And they have then problematised this subjectivity and those voices and actions of the researched which conflict with their academically valued construction of the 'resistant worker'. As argued before (Wray-Bliss 2002b), though the two contexts are certainly not equivalent, the relationship between knowledgeable researcher and less-knowledgeable researched implied in these representations seems to resonate with Said's description of the relationship between coloniser and colonised, where the colonised are:

a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves. (Said 1978:35)

SECTION TWO: DISRUPTING AUTHORITY.

Having argued that, and provided two examples to show how, the textual authority of COS can be problematic, I consider here ways in which we might conduct research and construct texts so as to disrupt this authority. The question posed by Opie (1992) is useful to bear in mind throughout this section:

(w)hat does it mean to write critically but less authoritatively when the act of writing is so strongly associated with authority and centrality?

From the previous examples of the subordinating authority of COS texts at least four immediate responses are possible, I outline these below. Before doing this, however, I think it is important to stress that it is not my intention to suggest a detailed blueprint of 'proper' ways COS could conduct research. I do not think that there can be such an easy way for us to avoid having the debates and discussions over research ethics that are ongoing in other disciplines, neither is there, nor should there be, a shortcut to COS researchers taking the time to find out what researchers in other disciplines have been doing and saying about these issues. Further, with the tendency of abstract theory to mystify embodied practice in COS (Wray-Bliss 2002a) and in other academic fields (e.g. sociology, Seidman 1992, and feminism, Stanley and Wise 1993), I feel that issues of ethical engagement with the researched need to be explored by COS in its own research practices and empirical texts (e.g. Collins, Wray-Bliss and 'Maria' 2000, Wray-Bliss 2001) rather than solely espoused in theoretical pieces. Finally, I am unconvinced that specifying 'proper' ways to do research (i.e. ethical research 'rules') will improve our active and reflexive engagement with these emerging issues and understandings of research ethics. As Bauman has argued:

Rules would tell me what to do and when; rules will allow me to say, at some point, that I may rest now as everything that had to be done has been done, and thus allow me to work permanently and on all occasions toward such a point of rest which, as I am told, exists

and can be reached. If rules are missing...I cannot gain reassurance by faithfully following the standards I can observe in others, memorize and imitate. (Bauman 1993:61)

So, in the context of these cautionary notes, what might be some of the 'non-rules' of critical but less-authoritative Organisational Research?

First, we could explore narrative forms other than the depersonalised seemingly 'authoritative' realist reporting of empirical material (VanMaanen 1988 for instance explores several other representational forms). Texts could be constructed in ways where the ability of the author, and other academics, to authoritatively know the 'reality' of the researched's experiences is deliberately disrupted (e.g. Wray-Bliss 2001). Such texts take seriously a central message of Smith (1990:24) that "for any actual events, there is always more than one version". Further, as Opie (1992) highlighted

because postmodernist analysis highlights competing voices and raises critical appreciation of the presence of ideology within a text, accepting an interpretation which implies a single or unified representation of an event is problematic, especially since this implies that all participants are similarly located. (63)

Second, to avoid the 'immaculate perception' of the realist tale (VanMaanen 1988) we could seek to make explicit our own social, cultural, and political (i.e. class based, racialised, and gendered) standpoints (Haraway 1989; hooks 1990, 1992, 1994; Lincoln 1995; Stanley and Wise 1983, 1993). Standpoint epistemology would fundamentally challenge 'expert' male author's denial of the significance of their own and the researched's gender, for instance, while still claiming legitimacy for their gender-neutral representations.

Third, we could make more central the question of how we claim to know the lives of the researched. Issues of methodology, understood not as mystifying descriptions of technical method but as the basis upon which we claim the right to represent others, could be foregrounded rather than marginalised. Relating issues of methodology with standpoint concerns above, we could ask of COS research not just what the text and authors epistemological and experiential grounds of legitimacy are, but also what the author's 'practical-moral' warrant is for such work (Seidman 1992). We might ask what mandate we have to publicly expose, and construct our particular knowledge about, others' lives?

Finally, we could take the principled decision not to use(/abuse) our privileged access to publicly validated texts to problematise the voices, lives, even 'subjectivities' of researched people who do not have the opportunity to publicly dissent from our representations of them. Even with the best intentions on the part of individual COS authors, we may need to practically acknowledge our structural position in a social hierarchy where we are accorded the right and opportunity to publicly criticise others who may have no such reciprocal right.

These beguilingly simple, but I would argue ethically significant, changes in our practices are markers of broader far-reaching shifts in understandings of research ethics. These shifts, spearheaded by feminist (Opie 1992; Stanley and Wise 1983, 1993), action researchers (Hart and Bond 1995; Marks 1993; Reason and Bradbury 2001), disability writers (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999; Morris 1991), amongst others (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; McLaughlin and Tierney 1993) remain under-explored by COS (though see e.g. Alvesson 2003; Ellis 2001; Jeffcutt 1993, 1994; Prasad 2001). Lincoln (1993, 1995, 2001, Denzin and Lincoln 1994) has

been instrumental in both developing and documenting these emerging research ethics. Her discussion of researching with the 'silenced' seems particularly relevant to COS (see also contributions to McLaughlin and Tierney 1993). The 'silenced' may be understood as those people

who are the subjects of research (but) have little or no power in the construction of accounts about them, no access to texts, and no avenues into the corridors of knowledge production power (Lincoln 1993:32, my brackets).

As argued above, traditional textual/ representational and research practices of COS can serve to construct the working (class) men and women we normally research as subordinate to ('silenced by') our authoritative voice. To disrupt these silencing effects requires significant re-thinking of the roles of the researcher, the text, and the researched (Lincoln 1993, 1995). Critical academic research needs to be reconstructed to be *accountable to, constructed with, and useful for* the people that we research. Embodying these considerations would necessarily lead to significant changes in the ways COS tends to construct research. For example, we will likely need to explore ways to co-produce our research 'with' those we currently do research 'on' (Reason 1994). This means more than simply claiming empirical validity for our traditionally narrated sole-authored research because we define it as 'participant observation'. It will require instead exploring a fuller meaning of researching 'with' others where what is researched is "dictated as much by the needs and nominations of the studied as by the interests, desires, biases of the studier, or of the current concerns of a funding agency" (Lincoln 1993:34). It will mean researchers jointly deciding with the researched the ways their lives and voices are narrated. And it will mean that "it is the silent who will determine whether or not texts concerning their lives are valid or faithful" (Lincoln 1993:37, also Reason and Bradbury 2001).

Re-constructing research as a process jointly engaged in, jointly produced, and jointly owned would also seem to require that we explore ways to share the privileges that accrue from published research (Lincoln 1995). At times COS seems content as a discipline to 'hope' (Knights 1995) that its research may 'somehow' be useful 'one day' for those whose lives are written about. This may well be true, however in the process COS authors benefit much more directly and obviously from research. Their careers, the attractiveness of their C.V.'s, status, RAE submissions, attendance at conference, and ability to command above national average salaries is (increasingly) a direct product of their research record. It seems a little self-serving then to be content that the benefits of academic research may be felt, if at all, at some far off time in some unspecified way for those whose voices and lives COS constructs its research from when COS researchers cherish the fact of their own more immediately benefit from it. To remedy this inequitable situation would seem to require that COS 'come clean' and share 'the advantages that accrue to us as knowledge producers, especially the claim that we, and not they, are the genuine producers' (Lincoln 1995:285; also Lincoln 1995:284-285, Brown 1993 and Lather 1995). It may be that individually some, several, or many COS authors seek out ways during the research process to share the advantages and privileges that they have. Perhaps they have sought to make their presence useful to the researched as advocates, educators, friends or sponsors. However, even if we have done so, these relations are normally privatised - they do not appear in the text. This means that again COS is unaccountable for its research relations, and does not consider it necessary to open-up responsibility to, and reciprocity with, the researched as worthy of public scrutiny. It seems to me that if COS respects those whom it researches, then it needs to publicly document how it manifests this respect. Perhaps we should even begin to

imagine an academic world in which judgements about promotion, tenure, and merit pay

are made on the basis of the extent of our involvement with research participants, rather than on our presumed objective distance. (Lincoln 1995:285).

I began this section cautioning against seeking rules of ‘ethical’ research, arguing that legislating ‘ethical’ rules or codes is not necessarily the best way to ensure ethical responsibility. If, then, the above research responsibilities are not hard-and-fast rules to which COS must submit, what then might be the conditions under which researchers might justify suspending these ethical research responsibilities?

SECTION THREE: ETHICAL DISCRIMINATIONS?

Here I reflect upon what responsibility researchers might have to those whom they might not feel it would be problematic to ‘silence’. We might find the broad argument above relatively uncontroversial with regard to researching the ‘silenced’. It is perhaps difficult, after all, to argue against the idea that those who have traditionally been denied resources, status, and a voice in how they will be publicly represented and known should be accorded these where possible within a discipline that purports to be ‘critical’. But aren’t there situations where the nature of the research or researched, for instance, means that we can ‘ethically discriminate’ between researched communities that are deserving and those that are undeserving of our responsibility? This question is currently particularly pressing for me because of my ongoing involvement in co-researching a case of sex discrimination. My personal and political identification with the claim and claimant (see Collins, Wray-Bliss, and ‘Maria’ 2000; Collins and Wray-Bliss submitted), means that I find the actions of those who tried to silence and problematise the claimant to be reprehensible³ In a previous paper my concern was to explicitly challenge the silencing of the claimant (‘Maria’) by providing an avenue for her to voice her own experiences of the claim. There I could pursue many of the responsibilities I have highlighted above, as summarised in the introduction to the paper:

Maria has actively participated at all stages of the production of this text, from our/her initial decision to make this public...through to the production of the final written account. And we have participated at many stages with Maria with her struggle to be heard. We have co-constructed this text to enable Maria to represent her experience through this text, and further, for us to direct this to critique The Institution’s attempts to use its E.O. policy to seek to silence and marginalise Maria. This paper is one way that we are engaging with Maria to counter The Institution’s attempts to deny her experiences and prevent her voice from being heard. (Collins, Wray-Bliss, and ‘Maria’ 2000:4)

In a more recent paper (Collins and Wray-Bliss submitted), however, the focus was somewhat different in that I was concerned to represent the actions of, and ethical legitimations employed by, those who actively colluded in and condoned ‘Maria’s’ discrimination and victimisation. I felt that the intention to publicly document and explore how discrimination was perpetrated and legitimised gave a warrant for the work to be produced. Yet I found myself in apparent opposition to the emergent ethical responsibilities of researchers that I have highlighted. For instance, I had no desire for the text to be used to enable the (discriminating) researched to have more voice to problematise and pathologise the claimant. I saw no opportunity to, and did not wish to, engage with the researched to co-construct a narrative that was acceptable to them. I did not wish in any way for these researched to accrue status or privilege through the production of the text. And my anti-discriminatory standpoint in producing the text was in apparent opposition to that of the researched. In short, what emerged was a felt need to make an ‘ethical

discrimination' between researched people (such as the claimant 'Maria') who were deserving of 'voice', 'reciprocity', 'sharing the advantages of research', etc, and those who were non-deserving of my responsibilities in this regard. I suggest that this felt need to ethically discriminate between different classes of researched in terms of those we have these responsibilities towards and those whom we do not might be relevant to COS research more widely. COS authors, after all, write about the silenced and silencers, exploited and exploiters, subordinate and subordinating – and the 'critical' designation seems to signify that while they may morally/ politically identify with some of the researched, they reserve the right to strongly critique others. But (on what grounds) could such 'ethical discrimination' of classes of researched people that are deserving and those that are non-deserving of these responsibilities justifiable?

Perhaps we could justify making an 'ethical discrimination' on the basis of the truth of my research. We, not they, tell the truth about the workplace, therefore we are justified in privileging our voice and silencing/ problematising theirs. In my research on those who colluded with discrimination, this position found additional external validation. My understanding of the 'fact' of discrimination and victimisation was corroborated (Edwards and Potter 1992) by the claimant winning this ruling in law. Such external validation by other (legal) authorities, charged with the mandate to impartially determine only the 'facts' in this case, and given the time, resources, and authority to do just this, was an unusually strong endorsement of the 'truth' of an author's critique in COS. If any COS text could make a convincing case on the grounds of 'truth' for authorising their representations and problematising the voices of those that dissent then this text, backed-up by law, could be it. And yet, though seductively self-serving to an author wanting to make a strong critique of inequitable social relations, this legitimisation wasn't convincing. As Foucault reminds us, truth "is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power" (Foucault 1980:131). A claim to truth is a claim to power, and central to COS, it seems to me, is an understanding that we should be critical of truths claimed by authorities, be they managers, management gurus, apologists for capital, or whoever. To legitimise exempting certain classes of the researched from the responsibilities I have highlighted on the grounds of 'truth', even if this 'truth' received strong corroborating authority, therefore seems unjustifiable.

Perhaps instead, responsibility to the researched might be suspended because certain actions by the researched means they forfeit their right to ethical concern. Certainly, as the 'reprehensible' tag I use to refer to the researched in Collins and Wray-Bliss (submitted) signifies, I found their actions disreputable. I understood these people to have variously victimised and bullied the claimant over the course of the year-plus claim, with very damaging effects (see Collins, Wray-Bliss, and 'Maria' 2000). I might have felt then that there was strong personal/ political justification for exempting these researched from the status of people to whom I owed an ethical responsibility. However, this legitimisation also seems fragile. As Bauman has written, a duty of ethical responsibility is not conditional upon the other having earned it.

Moral stance begets an essentially unequal relationship; this inequality, non-equity, this not-asking-for-reciprocation, this disinterest in mutuality, this indifference to the 'balancing-up' of gains or rewards – in short, this organically 'unbalanced' and hence non-reversible character of 'I versus the Other' relationship is what makes the encounter a moral event. (Bauman 1993:49)

To exempt the researched from the circuit of my moral responsibility because they haven't reciprocated in the way I desire seems remarkably close to arguments legitimising, for instance,

inhumane prison conditions because the prisoners have offended against us. The offending ‘they’ don’t deserve ‘our’ morality because they aren’t good enough to have earned it. Only people like ‘us’ deserve our morality.

A similar argument, with similar limitations, might apply to the attempt to delineate certain ‘classes’ or categories of researched people to whom we might exercise responsibility. Perhaps COS is responsible to the researched when they are workers but not when they are managers, when they are women but not when they are men, when they are ‘silenced’ but not when they have a powerful voice. In the case of Collins and Wray-Bliss (submitted), the researched differentially belonged to managerial and non-managerial classes, both genders, some of the researched had the ability to have their voice heard in academic circles whereas some had limited experience of publishing. In short there was no obvious *a priori* category in which I could have placed and to which I could have pointed to as self-explanatory legitimation for excluding them from my ethical responsibility. Perhaps instead I could have constructed a new category, ‘the reprehensible’ for instance, and then justified excluding them from my ethical concern. But herein lies a concern. Universalising this choice, COS as a discipline, would only have to decide that there is something about each *particular* researched people which they do not like, something that can be used by COS to construct another problematising ‘category’ or special ‘class’ of researched, for responsibilities to the researched to be ever elided and the silencing effects of textual authority to remain unchallenged. And COS has already started to show itself as able to do this by for instance problematising working class men because authors do not like their ‘subjectivity’ or by denying the gender of women research subjects on the grounds that male researchers find it to be irrelevant (see Section One above).

Each of the above legitimations (i.e. on the grounds of ‘truth’, ‘forfeited rights’, and ‘class’) for making ‘ethical discriminations’ between those researched people that are deserving and those that are non-deserving of our responsibility seems flawed. There are doubtless many other legitimations that we could employ and explore. As Bauman (1993: 127) has argued the range of means that may, and have, been employed to evict those who are the object of actions from the status of moral beings to which the actor owes responsibility have been truly enormous. However, despite the legitimations explored here, I feel Stanley and Wise (1993:177) are right to argue that ‘surely we owe some responsibility to ‘the researched’ of all kinds, whether we morally approve of them or not?’ If this is so what are the implications for our valued ability to critique reprehensible or oppressive behaviour and produce critical research? I use the final section to explore an example of research outside of COS that has tried to take these issues to heart, and reflect upon what this could mean for my own COS research on ‘the reprehensible’.

SECTION FOUR: RECONCILING.

In their research on obscene telephone callers, the (above mentioned) feminist researchers Stanley and Wise (1979) were concerned to explore the meanings, origins, and effects of the frequent and recurring obscene telephone calls they were receiving following their inclusion of their home telephone number on literature advising of local lesbian and gay support groups. The existence of the obscene telephone calls in and of themselves were an unsolicited and (obviously) unwelcome violation of the authors’ personal and emotional space. Further, the callers frequently expressed violent sexualised intentions, and several callers made attempts to find out the home address of the authors, thus raising serious concerns over the potential acting out of these expressed intentions. In addition to being personally very disturbing, however, these calls raised wider issues of, for instance, men’s sexual violence, the reproduction of sexism, and women’s experiences of being targets of abuse, issues that the authors felt it was important to research.

Through the course of the calls the threats, hatred, abuse, and very real fears for their personal safety led the authors to experience the callers as ‘nothing but oppressors’:

For us to be confronted with them as voices mouthing the utmost contempt for women – and us in particular – as nothing but holes between legs, as cunts, was to experience them as oppressors and nothing but oppressors. That is, our interpretation of them as such was embedded in the context of the specific series of interactions that took place between us and them and between the two of us. (Stanley and Wise 1979:367)

Such strongly felt personal experiences of the oppressive effects of others actions could, quite understandably, lead the authors to use their access to public texts to present a damning critique of the actions of the callers, while using traditional academic conventions to depersonalise the experience and thereby further authorise their voice. This would have enabled the authors to simultaneously reinforce the power of their critique and render themselves apparently absent and therefore invulnerable (at least in the text) from personalised attacks. Stanley and Wise however, also held a strong feminist research ethic that ‘directly confronts the idea that one person or set of people have the right to impose definitions of reality on others’, implying also that ‘(f)eminist researchers should attempt to avoid the same thing in research situations (*ibid*: 373).

To attempt to reconcile the conflicting demands to name the researched as oppressors yet resist the violence of imposing their reality upon others Stanley and Wise made the decision to integrate themselves and their experiences explicitly within the text. Arguing for this approach in a later work the authors wrote that:

(We) feel that placing ‘us’ in the research as well as ‘them’ does something to even up the imbalance of power between researchers and researched, though it obviously can’t remove it. If they are vulnerable, then we must be prepared to show ourselves as vulnerable too. (Stanley and Wise 1993:177)

This meant, for instance, that the authors named their involvement in the circumstances that surrounded the calls being received, they included their own taped responses to the callers in the transcripts they explored, and they reflected upon their own personal/ emotional experience of the calls and their discussion of these with colleagues and confidantes. In short, they made integral to the paper what had been integral to their experience of being subjected to the calls, namely their interaction or relationship with the callers, with the callers’ violence, with their own emotional response, and with the legacy of this for themselves and their relationships with others. In locating themselves as subject of their research Stanley and Wise produced an arrestingly powerful critique of sexism that tried not to compound the callers’ (sexual) objectification of them with their own reduction of the callers to ‘objects’ of a depersonalised authoritative critique.

Stanley and Wise’s particular ethical/ textual choices are not necessarily going to be applicable for all or even the majority of COS research. However, I have argued that the commitment to attempt to find a way to reconcile responsibility to the researched, including those who may have acted in an oppressive way, with the political academic responsibility to critique oppression, is applicable. Embodying this commitment in COS is likely to be a challenging and open-ended process - as I know through my own struggles to manifest this commitment in research on those who have colluded in discrimination. In that work I made some similar and some different choices to Stanley and Wise (1979). Like Stanley and Wise my felt personal and political responsibility to critique oppressive behaviour meant that I choose to use the text to

critique those actions of the researched that I felt were reprehensible. Also like Stanley and Wise, co-constructing the text, or engaging in other participative strategies, with the researched was impossible. Despite this, I still tried to mitigate against excesses of my representational authority in the ways that I chose to represent the researched. Within the legal and personal/ political constraints that surrounded the case, I made explicit my own experiences of and involvement with the claim. I named my own identification with the claimant, and made unambiguous from the outset my belief that the researched had behaved reprehensibly. Through so doing I tried to make my own standpoint clear so as to undermine power-laden assumptions of the author's impartiality. Having made my own positions and standpoints clear, I attempted to represent the researched's own moral legitimations for their actions, rather than merely demonising them from my position. The decision to do this drew upon Rymes (1995) research into reasons behind the violent behaviour of American high-school dropouts. Rymes argued that we may be more able to humanely understand difference, and less readily dismiss or pathologise, if we consider the narratives through which others make sense of their lives and actions. By documenting the moral narratives the people I researched employed to legitimise their actions, I tried to 'humanise' the representation of them. That is, I tried to recognise in the text the right of others to be represented as moral agents (Bauman 1993), as people expressing and acting out morally reasoned positions, even though these were positions that I vehemently disagreed with. With this came into the representation explicit recognition that the researched, acting within particular contextual constraints, socially constructed the (morality of) their own actions. This lent an indeterminacy to the text, an indeterminacy that enabled me to question both the legitimacy of the researched's moral narratives, and also the authority of my own moral position. This eventually led to the disquieting recognition that my and my co-authors anti-discriminatory ethics were no less discursive, and thereby could claim no more a priori authority, than those of the researched. A conclusion that, while it did not prevent the possibility of constructing a critical text that questioned others' oppressive or reprehensible agency, did serve to begin to undermine the unspoken assumption of the interpretive authority of the author.

I have included the choices made in my COS writing on those who colluded with discrimination here not in any way as exemplary but rather as an example of an attempt to reconcile responsibilities to the researched with a felt necessity to critique. Given that I was grappling with issues of ethical responsibility and agency, the choices I have made are questionable. With issues of ethical agency there is, as Bauman (1993) writes, always more to do. An effect of including the example of my own attempts to meet the responsibilities I have argued for in this paper may be to render my text more vulnerable to criticism than it might have been had I made these arguments only in theory. This is personally unnerving, but then this is kind of the point I've been making throughout - that we in COS need to find ways to disrupt the authority of the author if our texts are to avoid colluding in the silencing of the researched. I have used this paper to argue that we need to take responsibility for this, I have highlighted some of the ways that this may be explored, and I have questioned, and found wanting, some legitimations for not doing so. Finally, from early on I have argued that the emerging ethical responsibilities to the researched should not be thought of as 'rules'. For, as the example of Stanley and Wise (1979) shows there are situations where it may be impossible to critique and still meet each responsibility 'in full'. However, I would also argue that these 'non-rules' need serious, and explicit, justification if we are to break them. For me, COS has no special grounds for exemption.

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¹ Thank you to the editors of this special issue, and also Gill Aitken, Jan Betts, Martin Parker, and those at 'The 2nd Critical Management Studies Workshop', Stoke-on-Trent, 2nd-3rd May 2001, for their helpful comments.

² The editors have asked me, quite rightly, to acknowledge the gaps, fractures, and spaces in this paper. I draw upon discourses such as 'ethics', 'representation', and 'rights' and, though I try to indicate through the text my understandings of these concepts, I do not formally define them. In part, at least, this looseness is deliberate. The paper is meant as a kind of incitement to Critical Organisation Studies to tackle these issues, and the different possible understandings of each of these concepts and concerns, itself.

³ Though I am talking about co-authored work here (Collins and Wray-Bliss submitted, Collins, Wray-Bliss, and 'Maria' 2000), I use the first person singular 'I' rather than 'we' because I am reflecting upon my own understanding of the ethics and reasons behind the representational choices we made in that text.

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People: Wray-Bliss, Edward

Author(s): Edward Wray-Bliss

Publication title: Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science. Las Cruces: 2003; Vol. 2, Iss. 3; pg. 1-16, 16 pgs

Source Type: Periodical

ISSN/ISBN: 15325555

Text Word Count 7,723