

Beyond complicity: A plea for engaged ethnography

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It seems that no one, including the organizational ethnographer, can escape complicity in contributing to and sustaining inequality and all sorts of injustices in the modern day global village and society. No matter the amount of good intentions towards social justice or ethical considerations about equal development or critical stances towards the inequities in the world today, complicity in the very things that are vehemently opposed or criticized even seems to tie the hands of the socially and politically engaged researcher. Engagement does not automatically make or break one free of complicity. Even the engaged researcher cannot escape complicity.

How, then, can engaged scholarship be legitimated, morally or politically, if everybody seems to be part and parcel of the same oppressive, disciplinary power configurations in society, including its organizations and their management, as postmodern authors such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari argue? How can Pontius Pilate ever have said that he washed his hands of guilt because he was 'not responsible' (according to Matthew 27:24, *Good News Edition*) for the death of Jesus? As Roman governor he could not escape complicity, no matter how much water he used for washing his hands or in what cleansing ritual he partook. So despite his engaged commitment to free Jesus and his resistance of the demands of the crowds in front of him, Pilate still has to be considered as complicit in the crucifixion as the rest of the people on the square ('and so are we', a devout Christian might add, implying that it is not 'presence' alone that makes one complicit). Is there anything to get us beyond complicity after Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil', Derrida's 'contamination of oppositional pairs' or Foucault's attack on the autonomous subject? Is there anything beyond this hegemonic and suffocating sense of complicity-of-all agency?

In this chapter, we would like to argue that it is possible to develop an engagement with *all* players in the configurations of power, which goes beyond complicity in organizations and management practices, and that the practices and approaches in organizational ethnography might hold some promises for just that – promises that rise from the specific relations that organizational ethnographers are able to develop with and within the field while representing and reflecting on this field in their ethnographic writings.¹ However, if there is any chance of engagement, it cannot only be with the less-powerful, such as on

the shop floor. Researchers should, as we already referred to above, also engage with the powerful, with those working at top managerial levels. The question to be answered then is basically how organizational ethnographic research can avoid or neutralize the divisions created in and through power and politics, between the dominant and the inferior. We want to show how the postmodern critique of power has created new opportunities for organizational ethnographers to engage with the less powerful. In order to avoid the antagonism between the powerful and less powerful, we also have to rethink and reflect on our own position as ethnographers in processes of identity politics, that is, our stake in modernist organizational power plays. In overviews of these issues, idealism still remains an essential ingredient of an active engagement through organizational ethnography. Because of his or her particular position in the field, the organizational ethnographer seems ideally suited to reconcile the inherent and persistent antagonisms between the powerful and the less powerful. How this works in detail is revealed towards the end of the chapter, as a logical final step in our argument.

After a more conceptual discussion of the role of engagement in anthropology in general and in organizational ethnography in particular and various approaches to the concept of power, we will illustrate our argument with examples in organization and management from two cases. The first case is a country-specific case of the struggle and search for equity in organization and management in South Africa. The second case concerns the general theme of the emancipation struggle of women in organizational and management practices worldwide. Both cases refer to power and emancipation struggles where it seemed clear who were the underdogs – that is – blacks and women who, almost automatically, deserved sympathy and support in their struggle against oppression and for a more equal distribution of power. Although both cases are based on the authors' earlier ethnographic work, for the purpose of this chapter we present them not as such, but as stepping stones in our suggestion that organizational ethnography can offer us glimpses of an engagement beyond complicity in organizational and management processes.

ethnographic fieldwork and engagement

The critical engagement of anthropological ethnographers with (economic) development issues and the less powerful in societies worldwide is considered a widespread phenomenon, if not a stereotype, in stories told about the discipline (Eriksen, 1995: 243–5 and 191–5; Eriksen, 2006). This stereotype is particularly based on the work of anthropologists from the 1950s onwards. Ethnographic work during those years led various anthropologists to become actively involved in power struggles against (colonial) government officials or in combating stereotyping and ethnocentrism and other forms of racism (Miles, 1989) in society in general (Pickering, 2001; for a concrete example in Asia see, for instance, Saleminik, 1999) and in anthropology itself (see for

example Asad, 1973; Fabian, 1983; Rigby, 1996).² This engagement most often had to do with a rather clear notion of what power was all about and, even more clearly, with a solid moral stance, usually backed by ethnographic work, concerning what it meant to abuse power and more specifically what it meant to be powerless.³ These particular forms of engagement fitted in nicely and matched seamlessly with a modernist theoretical paradigm, in which the Cartesian subject was considered an autonomous, conscious and rational being: engagement in ethnographic work was grounded in the dominant academic critical discourses on power and power relations, based on assumptions brought by the Enlightenment.

But what happened to possibilities for engagement when this modernist endeavour was severely criticized and undermined – deconstructed – by the postmodern disposition also penetrating anthropological and organizational ethnographic discourses and analyses (Jeffcut, 1994), introduced by Marx, Freud and Nietzsche⁴ and later elaborated upon by French philosophers like Lyotard and Foucault? What happened particularly to engagement in organizational ethnography when it became argued that power and its abuses were not rational or even conscious choices made by autonomous subjects, but were driven by the unconscious desires of men? Or that power and its abuse worked through human interactions through the 'banalities' of everyday life, as Hannah Arendt (1973) formulated it, through the inconspicuous, mundane rut of our everyday existence, instead of through recognizable malignant extravaganza? What room is left for engagement when every one of us is considered to be caught in and part of the structures and disciplines of power and its (ab)uses? What if the boundary between abuse and non-abuse of power becomes ever more blurred? What if full-blown complicity seems unavoidable for all of us (cf. Zimbaro, 2007)?

Although philosophical deliberations might have taken centre stage in the launch of postmodernism, it is in the fields of anthropology and organizational ethnography to the actual empirical research being done by (organizational) ethnographers that we now look for answers on how to cope with its consequences in terms of going beyond complicity. It is in the paradoxical situation of the ethnographer, at the same time being both part and not-part of the power configurations in organizations or in society, that complicity can be found (in observing as a participant), avoided perhaps in the rhetorics of writing but also experimented with (to transcend complicity). This latter is made possible precisely because the paradoxical (non-)position and temporality of the organizational ethnographer give room to manoeuvre in alliances being forged, sides taken and representations being constructed.

critical approaches to power

In the past decades, there have been diverse ways in approaching or defining power within the social sciences in general and in organizational studies in

particular (for an overview see Phillips et al., 2006). For the purpose of this chapter we present a discussion on the ways that a postmodern approach to power has influenced the positioning of ethnographic research in the field of organization studies, influencing in particular the possibilities and room for organizational ethnographers to engage with the less powerful. But in order to understand the postmodern critique on conceptualizing power, we first need to explore briefly the critical approaches to power, inspired by Marx and later by Gramsci and, in his wake again, postcolonial theorists like Spivak.

In this critical body of literature power is seen and approached as domination (cf. Morgan, 1997: 301–44). Whereas Marx approached domination as a class-based, visible suppression related to the means of production, Gramsci's focus was on the invisible and taken for granted processes of domination or hegemonies (Hardy and Clegg, 1999). In this line of approach Steven Lukes' (1974) work on power and decision-making processes became especially popular within feminist studies (Brouns, 1993) and within organizational studies (Komter, 1992; Wilson and Thompson, 2001). The fundamental aspect of a critical approach is that power is seen as the cause of injustice and suppression – the latter being manifest or latent that calls for resistance. In this way critical theory became an essential basis for various kinds of emancipatory movements outside and inside organizations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003: 15, 16).

The less-powerful or powerless in the postcolonial tradition were usually called the 'subaltern', a concept derived from Gramsci's 'Prison notebooks' (Hoare and Smith, 1978), which he wrote while in prison during Mussolini's fascist reign in Italy. Although perhaps a crude parallel and comparison, it could be argued that Gramsci was, in a way, an (organizational) ethnographer, who 'participated' (although forced to against his will) and 'observed' (although 'was subjected to' would maybe do more justice to his situation) for a long time in the 'field' (that is, prison). But through his writing he was also a distant observer and analyst, like any good organizational ethnographer. Through his 'extensive fieldwork' among the 'powerless' he could almost not do anything else but empathize with them in and through his description and analysis, in which the powerful were the 'significant Other' – and definitely the 'bad guys'.

In his work Gramsci used the term 'subaltern' interchangeably with 'subordinate': 'Gramsci used the term 'subaltern' to refer in particular to the unorganized groups of rural peasants based in southern Italy, who had no social or political consciousness as a group, and were therefore susceptible to the ruling class, culture and leadership of the state' (Morton, 2003: 48). And: 'Subaltern classes may include peasants, *workers* and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power' (Ashcroft et al., 2000: 215, emphasis added). Postcolonial theory later criticized Gramsci's notions, among other things, as male-biased in terms of considering who could be agents of change. Women were, in general, not considered as an option for Gramsci (Spivak, 1987). What is evident from this theoretical tradition is that it gives rather clear indices and ideas concerning changing things for the better, to empower the powerless and to have a clue of who the less powerful are. It also inspires visions and hopes for a better, more

emancipated (future) world. It gives necessary mass and legitimation to critical engagement; it gives 'a theory of resistance' (Said, 1993).

What binds these approaches to power is their modernist base of departure. Where power is interpreted as domination, it is the belief in autonomous subjects who could use or abuse their power to dominate others, which makes it a modernist approach. One can clearly locate power and discern power structures. Power is seen as something that can be found, pinpointed and consciously manipulated. Power is considered to be a root of human behaviour, with a root system that can be traced among and related to individuals, and with a clearly traceable direction from powerful actors to less powerful actors. Engaged anthropologists at least knew where to start and to whom to direct their protests and emancipatory labour, i.e. power and its abuses were clearly located. But in this way, emancipatory movements also become modernist movements, since there is a belief in the possibility of reversing certain processes of domination through the act of conscious resistance.

The idea that power and its abuses could be located and countered and resisted made the critical approaches vulnerable to the postmodern critique on power. We come back to this discussion later on. We continue here to explore the specific dominant approaches to power in the anthropological discipline and their importance for analysing organizational processes from an ethnographic point of view.

anthropologists' positioning within organizational studies

Anthropology has often prided itself on its involvement with the less-powerful subjects of study (Lamphere, 2003). Through their ethnographic work anthropologists have done their best to become the voice of the voiceless within the societies they researched. This has partly to do with the history of anthropology: 'As a discipline that itself has often been considered to occupy a marginal voice in Western political theory, anthropology offers an ideal point of departure for the radical rethinking of the state that a view from the margins requires' (Das and Poole, 2004: 4). Following Das and Poole we go one step further by suggesting that, given its marginal position, anthropology has the ability to identify and empathize with the 'less-powerful' within the context of its dominant approach to research, 'doing ethnography' (Geertz, 1973). Being among the less-powerful for extensive periods of time during ethnographic fieldwork and trying to understand and describe their life world in ethnographic texts has led almost inevitably to contributions to the critical literature on power, with an emancipatory subtext.

Compared to anthropological ethnographic research in general, organizational ethnography is quite a new field of research (Kamsteeg and Wels, 2004). As such, its focus, compared to other organizational studies approaches, has been mainly on experiences on the work floor and in daily practices, rather

than at the level of management (see, for instance, Kunda, 1992).⁵ This bottom-up approach to organizations provides a unique entry point to observe the processes of inclusion and exclusion on daily bases. For organizational anthropologists and ethnographers it means giving due attention to empowering minorities in organizations, such as women and people of colour, who are often excluded from the core positions and major sources of power. In this way, by providing thick descriptions of processes of inclusion and exclusion within organizations, organizational ethnographies generate a better understanding of these processes, enabling and giving voice to certain forms of empowerment processes.

However what perhaps makes the work of organizational ethnographers more difficult than that of other ethnographers is the matter of context and time. As a rather new discipline within the context of organization studies, organizational ethnography faces the dominant presence of functionalists and instrumentalists who pay little or no attention to power processes within organizations (Martin, 2002). In their attempt to join critical approaches to processes of organization and management (see for examples Forester, 1992; Hirsch and Gellner, 2001), organizational ethnographers have had to re-think the critical notions of approaches to power inspired by postmodern criticism (Crowther and Green, 2004: 129–48).

The postmodern 'Foucauldian attack on agency' (Hardy and Clegg, 1999: 381), in which the power of disciplinary processes involves *all* subjects, leaving little or no room for one subject to be more of 'an oppressor' than the rest, meant a blow to modernist approaches to power and especially the critical approach and emancipation related to it. Where could one start resisting structures of domination? How could one still discern power structures? If power was still metaphorically considered a root, it is certainly not in the modernist sense we described above, but more in the sense of a 'rhizome', as Deleuze and Guattari (1972) describe the postmodern condition (see also Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 3). A rhizome has neither direction nor a single source: a rhizome is a botanical term for a root system that spreads across the ground (as in bamboo) rather than downwards, and grows from several points rather than a single tap root' (Ashcroft et al., 2000: 207; see also Chapter 6 in this volume). The rhizome metaphor was primarily introduced to sensitize people that imperial powers '... operate rhizomically rather than monolithically' (ibid.), as was often implicitly suggested or assumed in the modernist tradition. In this metaphor is the implication that power has no 'master plan' (ibid.), let alone a mastermind. The postmodern critique of the modernist concept of power virtually made engagement impossible. It left engaged ethnographers with empty hands and no particular power or mastermind to resist, except maybe themselves as part and parcel of the rhizome, leaving subjects to reflect on their own roles and positions of complicity in the rhizome.

Before we have a closer look to see if anything can be expected beyond complicity, i.e. engagement in a postmodern context, let us examine two different but related examples of engagement in the world of organization

and management: the struggle for equity in organization and management in South Africa since 1994, when Mandela became the first democratically elected president of South Africa, and women's emancipation. Both cases revolve around issues of representing the professional potential of the Other in organizational practices and how this stereotyping negatively influences the power positions and potential of the Other in organization and management. The South African case is strongly bound to its particular historical contexts of imperialism and apartheid. It makes a clear point about racial or ethnic antagonism, but one might be inclined to dismiss the example as being 'out there' on the relatively isolated southern tip of the African continent. We therefore present a second case that comprises at least half of humanity, to show how fascinatingly similar, but at the same time also contextually different, power configurations affect the complicity and engagement nexus for the organizational ethnographer. The cases are meant to illustrate the following aspects of our argument so far: first, that much of the emancipatory rhetoric in the organization and management literature is still caught in modernist conceptions of power, with clear ideas of who is to blame and what needs to change in order to improve the situation; second, how difficult it is for the organizational ethnographer, within discourses of postmodern conceptions of power, to adhere to a strong and straightforward sense of engagement, doing justice to emancipatory ideals. On top of all this the cases illustrate how relatively easy it is to pay lip-service to these ideals, but how complicated it is to turn them into daily organizational realities.

in search of equity in employment opportunities and management in South Africa⁶

When Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected president in 1994, he often referred to South Africa as the Rainbow Nation, celebrating the complementarities of racial/ethnic and cultural differences (Tutu, 1994; Woods, 2000). Until then South Africa had mainly been associated with its political ideology of apartheid, emphasizing the separateness of racial and cultural differences and, in its wake, policies towards 'separate development' (Sparks, 1990).⁷ The notion of a Rainbow Nation could not be further from the basic assumptions of the apartheid ideology. The political bridge across this gap was sought in the creation of an extensive legal framework prescribing policies of equity and affirmative action in all spheres and types of organizations and management. But as we shall see in the description of the legislative process, this approach to redistributive justice is basically also about essentializing ethnic or particularistic traits. They tried to fight inequality by creating inequality (cf. Snijders, 2007). This means, among other things, that equity policies in South Africa could be interpreted in a way as a continuation of identity politics, firmly rooted in a modernist approach to power, just as we observe in the section below about women's sexual harassment.

In South Africa, the basis for legislation in support of equity policies was laid down in the constitution, which included the fundamental right to equality in the Bill of Rights. The Labour Relations Act (LRA) of 1995 was directed towards curbing discrimination and unfair labour practices in the workplace. The Bill of Rights formed the basis for the Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998. This Act was particularly meant for certain designated employers, mainly in the public domain, like municipalities and other state organs (with the exception of the security and defence services) and employers with 50 or more employees. Besides the issue of equity, the Act explicitly refers to implementing policies of affirmative action (Reddy and Choudree, cited in Holm, 2003: 32). For organizations that were considered non-designated in terms of the EEA, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) was introduced in 2000 (February and Abraham, 2001). Naturally, in the wake of the demise of the apartheid system, much scholarly attention was geared towards racial issues addressed by these acts. However, race was not the only criterion in South Africa for holding a disadvantaged position. The disabled and women were also in a very disadvantaged position in terms of access to jobs and positions of power within organizations, and so were explicitly mentioned in the EEA (Orr and Goldman, 2001).

The reasons for this range of legislation can be interpreted as a mix of strategic and moral considerations. Most people would recognize the ethical demand for affirmative action. At the same time, the historical context of South Africa causes every system and procedure that is preferential on the basis of designated racial or any other socially constructed trait to be looked upon with suspicion, as a new guise for old practices. Such was the case with much of the equity legislation, especially the EEA with its emphasis on affirmative action. One could theoretically argue along the lines we presented above that this approach is rooted in the same modernist view of power as apartheid was. But that shouldn't close our eyes to the practical day-to-day problems policymakers, HRM managers and politicians experience in trying to move an uneven distribution of jobs across ethnic groups (and between men and women, able and disabled persons) towards a more even situation. It is easier to give moral lip-service than to develop a policy that is practically applicable.

In the day-to-day practice of affirmative action in present day South Africa, processes of policy implementation can become rather complicated. Take, for example, the concept of 'equitable representation'. This is not a matter of aggregate numbers on a national level only, but at a regional and sectoral level as well. The outcomes on these different levels might well diverge. To complicate matters further, just human resources management is not only a matter of searching for equity, but also of finding people who are qualified for the jobs. For this purpose employers may make use of 'the pool of suitably qualified people from the designated groups' (Jeffery cited in Holm, 2003: 36). The Department of Labour can provide management with the numbers of suitably

qualified personnel in the country, region or sector. If the particular skills that management is looking for are not available in the skills pool, employers have a valid reason not to employ someone from the designated groups recognized in the EEA: be they, for instance, a black person, disabled, female. It is not unlikely that management won't find the required skills in the designated groups, especially among black candidates, because they were usually denied a good education in South Africa under the apartheid regime and therefore today are not considered 'suitably qualified' (Human, 1996: 46). As a consequence, the pool of 'suitably qualified people' is not large, and there certainly was not a large pool immediately after 1994. Skills development is therefore an important issue for the Minister of Labour, which has been taken up in the Skills Development Act (Von Holdt, 2003: 304).

A rather recent example from the Western Cape shows just how unequal the situation still is. A provincial treasury macro-economic report from November 2003, presented and discussed at the Western Cape Growth and Development Summit, showed that nearly 500,000 people were unemployed in 2002, with the highest proportion among blacks (40 per cent). Furthermore, unemployment had been on the increase for the previous seven years, except among whites. 'Only 3.5 per cent of blacks found jobs, compared with 92 per cent of whites, 81 per cent of Asians and 54 per cent of coloureds' (*Cape Times*, 14 November 2003). Laurine Platzky, deputy director general of the Western Cape's Economic Development and Tourism Department, is quoted in the same newspaper article as having said, 'As the economy grows we will attract more people with and without skills. At the same time, *there are not enough skilled people for our new and growing industries*' (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

Taken together, the various interpretations of what equitable representation exactly is and the limited pool of suitably qualified people make for a rather complicated practical implementation of affirmative action policies. When managers have to report on their 'reasonable progress' in implementing equity policies – another requirement of the EEA – these complications have to be answered for in a report legitimizing the course of action chosen with regard to affirmative action and equity. Such reporting requires a balancing act between morality, instrumentality and business sense.⁸

The October deadline for the annual employment equity reports always creates stress, both for the managers who have to write them and for the Department of Labour which has to monitor progress in the field. In 2003, a local newspaper in KwaZulu Natal quoted Snuki Zikalala, speaking on behalf of the Labour Minister Mcebisi Mdladlana, as saying, 'Companies will be given no mercy at all. Those who did not submit [reports] will be liable to a minimum fine of R 500,000 and if they continue not complying with the law, we could even recommend prosecution of the company' (*The Witness*, 3 October 2003). By mid-October 2003, only some 30 per cent of South Africa's companies had submitted their employment equity reports (*This Day*, 17 October 2003). Despite the fact that black and white business

organizations united on 11 October 2003 at a ceremony in Sun City under two bodies – the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of SA (Chamsa), and Business Unity SA – affirmative action and equity policies remain tough nuts to crack (*The Witness*, 13 October 2003). With the history of apartheid still fresh in their memory and the sheer size of the transformation in business that South Africa required, its bitterest opponents refer to affirmative action as 'apartheid-in-reverse' (Adam cited in Holm, 2003: 12) – that is – a continuation of apartheid with other people in power.

It seems that we can conclude with some confidence, even on the basis of this relatively short introduction to the theme of equity in South Africa, that the arena of the debates is highly politicized along modernist approaches to power: power and power abuses can be clearly detected and traced to a source. In terms of engagement this discussion and debate is modernist because it is 'easy' to distinguish between 'good' and 'evil', to fight the perpetrators and stand with the oppressed. Engagement is at least 'easy' in a moral sense that is abstracted from everyday realities, although it is highly complicated in the everyday routines of organizational and management life. But, all participants – freedom fighters, apartheid loyalists, intellectuals, politicians and so on – were at one stage part and parcel of the same apartheid system, the same configurations of power. Now that apartheid is officially abolished, South Africans in organization and management are all still in the same configuration together, all play their parts and were and are, in that sense, complicit. All are caught, as Derrida describes it, in the "contamination" of oppositional pairs' (quoted in Sanders, 2002: 9): 'When opposition takes the form of a demarcation from something, it cannot ... be untouched by that to which it opposes itself', and therefore '[o]pposition takes its first steps from a footing of complicity' (ibid.). In other words, all were participating in the same system and so are in a sense 'guilty' of the misdeeds of that system; all were caught in the apartheid system's Foucauldian disciplinary power configurations.

Fair enough, one could say, but this is such a specific case, in such a specific part of the world, that it cannot possibly serve as an example of similar patterns in other circumstances. Let us then complement this case with an example that is on the one hand completely different – women's emancipation in organizational and management settings – but on the other, strikingly similar in its effects in terms of power configurations and the paradoxical role of the organizational ethnographer in terms of engagement and complicity.

emancipation of women in organization and management

The great impact of modernist approaches to power within organizations has let us believe for a long time that 'natural' processes within modern organizations would result in selecting the most qualified person for the job. This selection of a perfect match for the organization was assumed to be neutral in the

case of gender, race, ethnicity, or every other category. In this way, the notion of a 'norm employee' (that is, the employee who is considered to represent the norm) has often been related to the quality and availability of an assumed 'disembodied worker', a worker without gender or ethnicity. Yet, Acker (1992) shows that this seemingly neutral notion of a 'disembodied worker' is anything but gender neutral. The claim of availability, for example, has a gendered layer to it, since the combination of work and homemaking and/or childcare typically means less availability for work and is thus, a deviation from the assumed norm. Other scholars (Gowricharn, 1999; Hoetnik, 1973) have shown that the notion of the norm worker, in addition to being gendered, also has ethnicity. The construction of the norm is influenced by cultural images of desired physical traits within organizations and their management. These images contribute to processes of inclusion and/or exclusion within organizations in which some have easier access to (more) powerful positions than others. Thus, it is not accidental that there are men of dominant ethnicities who occupy top positions, while women and ethnic minorities face glass ceilings in their careers within contemporary organizations.

It is in the context of the above described framework that the emancipation of women and later of minorities within organizations gained importance. It became clear that there is nothing neutral and 'natural' within organizations when it comes to power (see Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Kanter, 1977; Komter, 1990). In her book *The feminist case against bureaucracy* (1984), Ferguson shows that whereas 'bureaucracy' may seem to include difference (in this case *worsten*), its homogenizing and monopolizing language actually dominates all individual actions and perpetuates inequalities. Wilson (1996) argues that those considered as the 'founding fathers' of organization theory – Weber, Maslow and Taylor – have been gender blind in their work. The theories developed by these thinkers presented themselves as concerning generic workers, yet in reality they were about men, ignoring gender relations and women altogether. Workers were reduced to men only, yet neutrality was claimed at the same time. Some years later Stephen Linstead commented on Wilson's observation regarding the 'founding fathers' by claiming that it was not that these theoreticians were blind to gender issues but that they suppressed them consciously in line with the modernist- and rationalist-dominated frameworks of their time. So-called

... Scientific Management was, if anything, a theory of knowledge, part of a project of instrumental rationality, a means of appropriating knowledge wherever it was distributed. From this perspective, individual characteristics, including gender and ethnicity, are irrelevant to the function of management. (Linstead, 2000: 298)

Another possible argument is that to a certain extent, the biases of the founding fathers could be understood since the majority of workers at the time were male. But it is the representation of workers as male-only over the years

since the 'founding fathers' published their works that is remarkable and maybe even shocking. What we can learn from this discussion is that power matters, be it the power of taken for granted or of conscious suppression, and that it is essential to realize that organizational processes are loaded with certain manifest and hidden forms of inclusion and exclusion, of which scholars need to be aware.

But realizing that power exists within organizations is one thing; approaching and dealing with (abuses of) power and powerlessness is another. Just to make clear how women's complicity in their own suppression seems to obstruct changes towards a more equal and fair treatment in organizations, we briefly look at the issue of sexual harassment in organizations. In her influential work, Kanter (1977) shows how certain manifestations of power – such as controlling, territorial, and other bureaucratic behaviours – are reactions to the feeling of powerlessness. Powerlessness corrupts, she states. In an interesting article, Wilson and Thompson (2001) link sexual harassment within organizations to the three dimensions of power discerned by Lukes (1974), of decision-making; the power that prevents conflict from becoming visible; and the deeply rooted notion of power through which the status quo appears as naturally given. With this last dimension of power, Lukes comes quite close to Gramsci's notions of hegemonic power. In Lukes' view power is about domination, and he notes different kinds of domination. In the first, power is about visible domination. From this perspective, sexual harassment is seen as yet another example in which men in power treat women (the powerless) as their objects. Women's fear of resistance to power is related to their vulnerable position within the organization. In the second kind of domination, power is present through defining and controlling agendas, in this case making sure that sexual harassment does not become an issue at all. Not having access to formal and informal centres of power, women do not dare to raise the issue, out of fear of not being taken seriously. The third dimension is the power of the broader patriarchal structures at work. It is the invisibility of this structure which makes the practice of sexual harassment acceptable and somewhat natural: 'At the interpersonal level it is not a conspiracy among men that they impose on women ... It is a complementary social process between women and men. Women are *complicit* in the social practices of their silence' (Smith, cited in Wilson et al., 2001: 72, emphasis added).

The example described above shows the importance of Lukes' dimensions of power for women's emancipation: when power is multidimensional, emancipation needs to be multidimensional as well. Formal and informal networks of power need to be developed to enable women to create strong collective identities and claim a voice against 'old boy networks'. Women also need to be empowered through an awareness of their position in order to oppose and resist the dominant patriarchal structures. In this way emancipation has predominantly been about 'identity politics' in making gender identity the main point of a collective struggle of women as victims, against

injustice and male dominance. Power and dominance were traceable and had a source that could be pinpointed – in short a modernist approach to power. Recently, this approach has been criticized from a Foucauldian perspective. In this approach, power is not something to be possessed either by men or women, but it is present within social relations and incorporated into the practices of daily life. Power in a Foucauldian approach is not a zero-sum game in which some are powerful and others are only victims (Wilson and Thompson, 2001: 74). It is not so much the power of domination that deserves our attention, but the power of discourse. The power of discourse works through all human (inter)actions, which renders any kind of active opposition at the same time part of the dominant discourse, rather than something 'outside of it. All are considered part and parcel of the same disciplinary power configuration that also leads to the unintended consequences of actions. Within the configuration of disciplinary power everybody is complicit in a way, which explains the backlash caused by certain organizational activities related to emancipation and emancipatory policies. In the case of affirmative action for women, it is not just 'angry white men' who reject it, but also the people who have been beneficiaries of affirmative actions themselves.

One unintended consequence of affirmative action programmes has been that they compromise or even negate a serious assessment of professional quality. For this reason, many women and people of colour in power themselves often deny that they owe their position to affirmative action, since stating this openly may seem their own disqualification. According to Acker (2006: 456), this unintended outcome has been on the rise ever since affirmative action policies became a prominent feature of organizational and managerial life in the 1980s; since then affirmative action programmes have increasingly become matters of bureaucratic paperwork, due to a decrease of activism against inequality, both inside and outside organizations.

Another backlash comes from the fact that the presence of women in power positions has not necessarily contributed to creating more inclusive organizations. Placing more women in management positions is not enough to break the patterns of domination, according to Ferguson (1984). What is required, in her view, is the rise of an alternative voice, one based on the experiences of women themselves; only that will challenge the patterns of power that dominate organizations and societies. According to Ferguson, the dominant discourse of today is not the language of women, even when women speak it. Adopting the same discursive practices, women often only reinforce the discourse of the dominant men. In a similar vein identity politics as a source of opposition seems to be ineffective since it builds upon the dominant form of essentializing practices, resulting in the reinforcement of boundaries between 'us' and 'them', instead of breaking them down.

What is left of emancipation and engagement for organizational ethnographers when our actions are solely to be understood within the power of

discursive practices? Based on our two cases on South Africa and women, one might wonder if anybody can escape this prison of discursive discipline. Are we all trapped in an eternal and guilt-ridden condemnation? Has emancipation become an ideal of the past, only possible if linked to a modernist conceptualization of power in which 'good' and 'bad' can be clearly distinguished? What room to manoeuvre is still left for engagement in and through organizational ethnography?

engagement in or beyond complicity?

If, as the postmodern critique of power suggests, everybody is part of the same disciplinary configuration up to his or her neck, and therefore considered complicit in its very existence, what room is left for the organizational ethnographer's engagement with the dominated? For us, complicity does not necessarily imply an end to an engagement with the less-powerful in organization and management, neither does it mean a sudden death for the ideals of emancipation in and through organizational ethnography. Nor does it have to imply or give organizational ethnographers the sense that every intervention and change in organization and management is *a priori* doomed to be drowned, so to speak, in the collective swamp of discursive practices within organizations. What is needed is a rethinking of the notions of agency, change and intervention within organizations.

Organizational ethnography could play a crucial role in the task of rethinking all this, given its status as a discipline in the margins of academia (cf. Das and Poole, 2004). Organizational ethnographers might be ideally positioned to accept complicity, rejecting the arrogance of 'being on the moral high ground' close to the less-powerful alone, and reflecting upon their positions through and within discursive practices. Embarking on this reflective journey might launch a contribution towards rethinking the consequences of the postmodern critique of modernist conceptualizations of the concept of power, along with reconceptualizing processes of engagement in organization and management. Let us explain how this could be done by returning to South Africa for a moment, before suggesting a direction towards moving beyond complicity in and through organizational ethnography.

On the basis of the notion of the 'banality of evil', the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa argued, with an eye toward creating breathing space for those charged as accomplices, that the recognition of complicity implies 'not washing one's hands but actively affirming a complicity or potential complicity', which then could lead to 'a heightening of personal responsibility' (Sanders, 2002: 3; cf. Judt, 1998). Not in any way referring to the example of South Africa, ironically enough, Janssens and Steyaert (2001) provide perfect examples for this perspective. From the context of organization and management practices, written in the spirit of the French postmodernists, these authors propose possible

strategies and tactics for organizational ethnographers to translate their personal engagement and sense of responsibility in an unjust world, and move beyond complicity. In their conceptualization of what they call the 'praxis of difference', Janssens and Steyaert discern three levels (personal, interactional and societal), with three tactics related to each level (summarized on Janssens and Steyaert, 2001: 235–6). The first level concerns how to perceive the Other ('alterity', primarily based on French philosophers like Serres, Lyotard, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and feminist writers like Kristeva and Hill Collins); the second, how to try to communicate with the Other ('dialogue', primarily based on Bakhtin's work); the third, how to fit multiculturalism into a democratic framework within society and its organizations ('democracy', primarily based on the work of Giddens and Urry). We limit ourselves here to a discussion of those tactics in the context of organizational ethnography, related to answering the question of how people could perceive the Other, in order to suggest how engagement beyond complicity could be envisioned in ethnographies of organization and management. We add a fourth tactic to those of Janssens and Steyaert, drawing on the learning experiences of doing research in organization and management in the context of South Africa.

moving beyond complicity through organizational ethnography?

The first tactic Janssens and Steyaert suggest in relation to 'alterity' is, following Serres, 'to step aside', meaning to step into the margins of power in order to create space for one's own voice from the perspective of difference, rather than conforming to the dominant norm. This distance and distancing from 'the centre' could create novel ways of, and space for, relating to the other. By giving away one's position, one at the same time 'gives way' (ibid.: 106); one does not have to protect or defend one's space. Constantly 'giving way' creates a *perpetuum mobile* which prevents people from becoming 'tied' into positions of power (Serres in Janssens and Steyaert, 2001: 106). Constantly stepping aside is like dancing; and dance becomes the metaphor not only for giving way, but also for creating a new meeting ground that is devoid of the antagonisms of power.

This links to the second tactic – 'creating safe spaces' from where people can build their self-esteem and self-definition in order to be able to resist the power processes linked to Othering. Here, Janssens and Steyaert follow feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins, who argues that 'creating safe spaces' proposes a different kind of resistance, compared to identity politics. In Janssens and Steyaert's view, resistance through identity politics is always a reaction to 'the centre', automatically becoming part of the dominant power structure of 'the centre' itself (in the words of Derrida, opposition becomes 'contaminated' by the centre). 'Creating safe spaces' as resistance, by contrast,

introduces a clear distance from 'the centre' (preventing 'contamination' through resistance), through which participants get the chance to position themselves through difference.

The third tactic is to develop yourself into someone able to listen to the Other, in terms of trying to 'becoming other' (Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Janssens and Steyaert, 2001: 122). The formulation has strong associations with Geertz's (1973) 'doing ethnography', which is also basically about developing a heightened sense of empathy for the Other. This paralleled with the ethnographic approach is probably no coincidence. The ethnographic approach seems ideally positioned to reflect on the possibilities of engagement beyond complicity. What follows is why we think organizational ethnography can move beyond complicity.

The core notion of ethnographic work is to become engaged with the research setting. In this becoming-part-of, the research process and the researched enable the researcher to develop an in-depth, multi-layered understanding of processes of interaction in the field. The idea of being both a participant and an observer often makes researchers so much a part of the process that they even become contaminated with the complexities involved in that process. This is the risk posed by any kind of engaged research in which the balance of involvement and distance is constantly shifting. However, the organizational ethnographer's 'chosen' engagement also provides reflective space for researchers, almost forcing them to be challenged by the unexpected observations entailed in the research process itself. In this bottom-up, emic approach there is space for a deeper understanding of the views and experiences from the field because they are embedded in the connections and interactions in the field. In this way, the constructed binaries of otherness are not taken as a point of departure, but rather the situations and realms in which people actually meet and in which various forms of otherness intersect and have to be reconciled in the process and on the spot. Binary oppositions are situationally reconciled. The point of departure for the organizational ethnographer is the situational logic of acting, or 'the layered, complex and ambiguous configuration of rules that enter the game through the acting of actors in a specific (organizational) arena' (Glastra, 1999: 76; author's translation).

The bottom-up, engaged nature of ethnographies of organizations enables us to observe the complexities of the processes of inequality in organizations beyond modernist binaries like powerful versus powerless. Making complicity visible within the research process helps to spread the responsibilities for change, as the burden of complicity and the responsibilities that come with it are carried by all. In this, we are particularly inspired by postcolonial approaches in which the aim is not to deny 'the brute features of domination of power' but to provide 'a more sophisticated, nuanced, and complex reading' of power in organizations (Prasad, 1997: 288).

What is still missing, though, is an association with the powerful (cf. Koot, 1995), which we argue is a *sine qua non* condition for the development of

an engagement beyond complicity. It is here that we want to add a fourth tactic, reconciliation. Without going into detail (for a critical reflection see, for instance, Soyinka, 1999), it can be argued that an active pursuit of reconciliation between the less-powerful and the dominant powers is an almost logical follow up to the three tactics described earlier. Engaging with alterity cannot come full circle without an active 'tactic' to stick to Janssen and Steyaert's wording: towards reconciling the two 'assumed' antagonists, i.e. the less-powerful and the powerful. When power is placed within the discourse, then the 'discourse produce[s] (and naturalize[s]) the subjectivities' of both the powerful and the powerless. Reconciliation comes after a recognition and admission of complicity: reconciliation does not deny complicity. Through reconciliation all participants in the power configuration, both powerful and powerless, are able to move beyond complicity. In that way, reconciliation fits the postmodern discourse on power.

It is here that the example of South Africa's experiences with an active pursuit of reconciliation through the TRC is relevant. The dominant powers of this world all look in amazement and admiration to South Africa, where after so much antagonism under apartheid, reconciliation is propagated instead of revenge. Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu have become icons of the process. This is not to say that in South Africa the antagonism between the powerful and powerless is over, or that South Africa has become a multicultural utopia or the Rainbow Nation it was proclaimed to become (see for instance Sparks, 2003). But it did show the world how extreme antagonism, through an active policy of reconciliation in which admitting complicity was part of the process, has 'given way' to 'safe spaces' in which the (once) powerful and the (once) less-powerful created an opportunity to listen to the multivocality of the situation. It is therefore rather odd to observe that they haven't proceeded with this active pursuit of reconciliation on a state level in the sphere of equity policies in organizational and management practices, but have (re)turned to the old modernist stances of identity and power politics.

For the organizational ethnographer, engagement in and beyond complicity is possible through taking a more active responsibility for contributing to a more just world and trying to reconcile antagonisms in power configurations. The possibilities to do so can perhaps best be seen on a continuum reaching from the pole of an active mediating role in the power configurations in organizations and management, to the opposite pole of explicitly contextualizing ethnographic analysis in a reconciliatory discourse in the resulting ethnographic texts. Instead of using a combat-like discourse suggesting 'struggle', 'fight' and 'justice', organizational ethnographers could write their texts more explicitly in words that promote and evoke reconciliation. The organizational ethnographer is ideally positioned to do this because of his or her temporality in the field and paradoxical status between belonging and non-belonging. Temporality means that the ethnographer is not likely to become fixed in the power configurations: it gives the organizational ethnographer room to manoeuvre. The 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1969)

position of the organizational ethnographer results in a structural liminality,¹⁰ which is a primary asset in the postmodern condition, as it enables manoeuvring within existing organizational power configurations and exploring and experimenting with possibilities for reconciliation (such as the 'safe spaces' discussed). The liminal position makes the organizational ethnographer just informed enough to be 'acceptable' to all stakeholders, without being associated permanently with one or another party within the power configuration.

In this fashion, engagement beyond complexity seems to be an option after all. It requires more ears than opinions; more ideals than solutions; more patience than activism; more humility than arrogance; more thinking than talking; more reading than writing; more doubt than certainties; and more feeling than rationality. Complexity requires engagement, and the latter can be informed by the specific characteristics and position of organizational ethnography.

notes

¹ What we argue in this chapter should not be confused with what is coined by Van de Ven (2007) as 'engaged scholarship'. Van de Ven defines this concept 'as a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (...) in studying complex problems. By involving others and leveraging their different kinds of knowledge, engaged scholarship can produce knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when scholars or practitioners work on the problems alone' (2007: 9). We argue that organizational ethnography offers possibilities for engagement that moves beyond complexity, instead of operationalizing 'engagement' as (multi- and interdisciplinary) participation.

² In this chapter we won't deal with the otherwise very informative debates and reflections around engagements (and complexities) in the actual practice of ethnographic fieldwork in the context of changing 'zeitgeists' (especially the role of the anthropological discipline in the European colonial enterprise (complexity) and later decolonization (engagement)). For a critical and reflective comment on Geertz's extensive fieldwork, particularly in the 1950s–60s in relation to the uses of complexity in 'doing ethnography', see Marcus, 1997.

³ In this chapter we will not go into arguing, morally or otherwise, why organizational ethnographers should be engaged, or why (political) engagement in the social sciences matters at all. This falls outside the scope of this chapter. For this type of discussion see for instance Van der Stoep, 2005, on the work and engagement of Pierre Bourdieu (as we also base our argument in this chapter to a large extent on the influences and inspiration of French intellectuals).

⁴ For more on this see Braddott, 1994.

⁵ Detailed ethnographic accounts of management have also been published, see for instance Watson, 1994; Koot and Sabelis, 2000.

⁶ This section is based on earlier work presented in Spierenburg and Wels (2004), which condenses into an edited volume four extensive ethnographic accounts, based on students' ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa on issues in organization and management related to equity.

⁷ We assume a general knowledge among our readers concerning the history of apartheid in South Africa, and we will therefore not go into that aspect of historical contextualization in this chapter. For those interested see Ross, 1999. For a largely political and economic contextualization of the promise and performance of post-apartheid South Africa, see for instance the trilogy by Allister Sparks (1990, 1994, 2003).

⁸ Especially because the 'primary' and only criterion to be chosen into the illustrious *Business Times* (Top 100 Companies in South Africa) is the question of which companies have earned the most wealth for their shareholders (...). The winner is the company that earns the most for its shareholders in terms of share price growth, normal dividends, special dividends and bonus shares' (*Sunday Times*, 9 November 2003): equity is not even mentioned!

⁹ The reference is to Prasad's sentence: 'The discourse of colonization needs to be seen as having worked simultaneously to produce (and naturalize) the subjectivities of both the colonizer and the colonized' (1997: 289).

¹⁰ Victor Turner's work actually deserves closer scrutiny in the context of specifically organizational ethnography, as a follow up to the ideas in this chapter (especially his ideas on liminality in relation to some core concepts we explored briefly, like power relations in postmodern perspectives, complexity and reconciliation).

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