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Doing Organizational Ethnography - Movement, Relations, Agency - Introduction to The Special Issue Part Two

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Ethnography and storytelling

As we stated in the first part of the special issue, the most important reason for doing organizational ethnography is probably its ability of giving corporate subjects the possibility of speaking (Jørgensen, Henriksen and Dembek, 2015). Embedded in this statement there is the possibility of resistance. This resistance is not a negative force, but is simply associated with the power to speak, which characterizes agency as Hannah Arendt declared in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998). The ability to speak, to tell stories, to alter and change them in order to support, transform, resist or just give meaning to corporate actions are more specifically what characterizes political being. Storytelling thus makes a significant contribution to organizational ethnographies.

In one way lived stories incorporate organizations as they are lived and enacted in practice. Strategies, structures, technologies, systems, architectures, procedures, routines and so forth do not mean anything without being enacted in practice as lived stories. This means that it is through stories that organizations become vibrant, dynamic and alive. They are also where power is actualized in practice. Organizations can be conceptualized as a dispositive – e.g. as a heterogeneous network of control technologies in which are embedded discourses and ideas about what the organization is, where it should move and the principles about which it is to be managed (e.g. see Foucault, 1980, Jørgensen and Klee, 2014). However, power relations and where power becomes concrete in dispositives, always rely on processes of subjectification (Agamben, 2009), which are where storytelling comes in. Lived stories – as where subjects always create themselves – both actualize power and are also lines of escape (Deleuze, 1992).

Therefore, storytelling implies critical inquiry and resistance to more established rationalities or narratives. Such usage has a long history in social science studies in general, where narratives and stories are seen as giving voice to more differentiated and marginalized groups of people. This is however done differently. On the one hand, narratives and stories are perceived as means for mobilizing and raising the voices of the oppressed against the establishment, which in the modern world is accused of speaking a rationalist discourse. In this way narrative and stories are presented as alternatives to formal rationality and are thus opposed to a logo-scientific way of knowing (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 22; Bruner, 1996).

This opposition between rational-scientific modes of knowing and storytelling is perhaps most clearly unfolded in Walter Benjamin's classical essay *The Storyteller*. Benjamin mourns the decline of storytelling, which is replaced by a rationalist and capitalist discourse, where impersonal information is cherished over experiences that are passed from mouth to mouth (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 83-84). With the decline of storytelling in favor of rationality as the recognized way of knowing we also lose moral reflexivity and the form of whole being, which were associated with storytelling. Instead, work becomes increasingly characterized as labor, where modern (wo)men are only engaged in impersonal ways and where a split has occurred between an individual and his/her laboring body (e.g. Arendt, 1998; Boje, 2008; Tally, 2001). In this perspective, the decline of proper storytelling is thus associated with an increasing rationalization of society. The latter is accompanied by a transformation of the economy from being based on local craft-arts towards the mass manufacturing factories of the industrial age to the corporation of today.

However, it is worth noting that the dominant concept of the separation between modern rationality and moral reflexivity in contemporary capitalism is being challenged as inherently impossible to be maintained (e.g. Sandel, 2012; Cray, 2013). This point is more aligned with the other way that storytelling is being used as a form of critical inquiry. In this second way, rational-scientific modes of knowing can be understood as important parts of how stories unfold in organizations and other parts of society. In other words, stories do not stand in opposition to logo-scientific ways of knowing, but are instead inevitably entangled with these forms of knowing. The stories of the corporate subject are thus in part techno-scientific stories in such a way that our ways of seeing, acting, telling are inevitably entangled with the professionalized society or the knowledge society and relies heavily also on technologies and systems for structuring how stories are told and what effects they have.

In any case though both ways of using storytelling are critical and are aligned with minorities, marginalized and oppressed against imperial, colonial, established and often "white" and "male" dominations. The weapon is of course again stories of practical life, which inevitably tell more varied and multiple stories than professional discourses and technologies do. They unfold in the face-to-face dialogic meeting with "real" subjects dealing with "real" problems and matters of concern (Henriksen, Nørreklit, Jørgensen, Christensen and O'Donnell, 2004; Latour, 2005). Why do we use the problematic term "real" here? What it implies here is that people speak and become real through their speech. It is a precondition for using storytelling as an effective weapon against the establishment, because storytelling by its very nature represents truth as conversation, which requires many different voices and points of view (Tony Morrison, quoted in Tally, 2001, p. 14).

The stories in this second part of the special issue are all except one produced in conversation with diverse actors in the field, who are beyond the voices of the establishment. This is supplemented by one article, which discusses the role of power and dialogue in organizational ethnography. In the article *Acculturative Stress: Untold Stories of International Students in the U.S.* Marcus Valenzuela, Sergio Palacios and Melissa L. Intindola tell the stories of international students in the US. They concentrate on the phenomenon of acculturative stress. The article presents the results of an ethnographic study spearheaded by an international student sensitive to these acculturative stressors at a large land grant institution in the Southwestern United States. The article contributes to the literature by providing insights on how sources of acculturative stress are produced, how we can understand prevailing symptoms and what the implications for higher education institutions are.

In the article *Rada at Play*, Zrinka Mendas explores the concept of dominance in traditional rural and remote island communities in the Zadar island archipelago in Croatia. These communities struggle with geographical remoteness; island depopulation, irregular ferry connections, lack of entrepreneurship, unemployment and poverty. The article focuses on one type of behavior, namely dominance and is concerned with two questions. How does dominance reveals itself, and what is its significance in practice? Findings show that dominance reveals itself as *rada*, signifying the approach of bonding the members into the island community.

In the article *Always Be Closing: Experiencing and theorizing time and wage in a UK call center*, Frederick H. Pitts reports on the author's experience of working in telesales. Through a call center, the case study company sells home improvements. The article describes the everyday organizational life of the telesales unit. Using this autoethnographic experience, the article analyses the organization of work-time in call centers. In particular, the article probes how commission constitutes a form of piece-wage. This piece-wage assists the manipulation of working hours. It does so by masking their extension. To understand this, the article applies the conceptual tools of Marx's *Capital*. Marx directs attention to how capitalists organise time in the pursuit of surplus-value. The autoethnographic account explores the application of this to call-center work. Flexible working arrangements and zero-hour contracts extend work-time. A pay

framework based around commission and performance-linked piece-wages conceals this. It suggests that traditional forms of capitalist domination- the contract, the wage, time organization- are highly relevant to the call-center context.

In the article *Embodiment, Engagement and the Strength of Virtual Communities*, Aleksandra Przegalinska is concerned with Second Life, which is the one of the strongest currently known type of cultural, collectively negotiated constructions of virtual reality. In the article, she makes an attempt to discuss how certain Second Life communities remain strong despite the mediums overall decay. She mainly focuses at the relationships of the members of these successful communities with their avatars putting forward two categories: embodiment and engagement. She supports the argument on case studies of three significant and dynamical and fantasy communities in Second Life: Goreans, Furrries and Tinies. She draws the conclusions that avatars created within such communities also share particular common traits: they possess features that allow for stronger narrative and/or embodied identification. Secondly, “strong” communities usually put a lot of emphasis on managing communication and interaction among their members.

As a final contribution, Lars Bo Henriksen investigates the question of power in ethnographic studies in the article *Organisational Ethnography and The Question of Power*. With an outset in an approach called the actor-reality approach (Henriksen, Nørreklit, Jørgensen, Christensen and O’Donnell, 2004), he shows that such methods are able to capture the ever-important question of power. This is done through an analysis of the Gadamer-Habermas debate concerning the question of power. The results of the analysis are then referred to the question of power in debates of ethnographic studies of organizations in general and more specifically to the conceptualizing method.

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