Abstract

Fournier and Grey (2000) suggest that those inhabiting the contested terrain of Critical Management Studies (CMS) share a commitment to identifying inequality and subordination in organizations and to the associated possibility of emancipation, however this is conceived. Despite their additional claim that one crucial distinction between critical and non-critical management studies is the ‘philosophical and methodological reflexivity’ of the former (Fournier and Grey 2000: 19), our review indicates limits to this reflexivity in CMS’s empirical practices – indeed, we argue these may even be counter-productive with regard to its political allegiances. To encourage wider discussion of these issues, we provide a tripartite framework of understandings of research ethics drawn from within and outside the management academy, and interrogate the opportunities and limitations of each for enriching CMS research.

Keywords: Critical Management Studies, emancipation, methodology, reflexivity, research ethics

Introduction

In their well-received exegesis of Critical Management Studies, Fournier and Grey (2000) emphasize its multi-faceted nature and unpick the resultant internecine feuding, while also outlining three commitments which adherents of this pluralistic project might nonetheless share. These are non-performativity, whereby CMS does not take management as a desirable given, seeking to pinpoint the inequalities and problematics that management-as-discourse (re)produces; denaturalization, whereby CMS seeks alternatives to prevailing organizational ‘imperatives’ like globalization and competition; and reflexivity, whereby CMS not only adopts an unorthodox constructivist take on the organizational realm, but also seeks to justify this in ways its mainstream counterpart does not. Fournier and Grey (2000: 19) summarize by arguing that ‘At a basic level, CMS is a political project in the sense that it aims to unmask the power relations around which social and organizational life are woven.’ They also suggest that, despite internally conflicting configurations of power relations, an abiding CMS tenet is the possibility of emancipation from the iniquities of those relations.
Our analysis takes off from this characterization, but we concentrate here on what Fournier and Grey call reflexivity. We argue for the re-imagination of the empirical practices of the critical management academic, so as to more fully surface the emancipatory potential of CMS (however this is understood) and to avoid it inadvertently reproducing subordinating social relations. In social science, such discussions are typically situated within the arena of research ethics and focus on questions such as how we should relate to our informants before, during and after the research encounter, and therefore what our ‘role, status, responsibility, and obligations’ might be ‘in and to’ the society we are investigating (Schwandt 2003: 311). Hence it is within the context of CMS research ethics that we locate our discussion. Let us put some more flesh on the bones of our central problematic.

Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 1) define ‘critical research’ as an alliance between two ‘quite diverse intellectual streams’: Critical Theory and postmodernism on the one hand and qualitative research on the other. Importantly, they also claim these two streams have not integrated particularly well under the ‘critical’ umbrella; for instance, where empirical research has espoused ‘mainly conventional ideas about qualitative method and then add[ed] specific elements from critical theory without the latter making a strong impact on the full project’ (Alvesson and Deetz 2000: 2). For these authors, then, the promise of critical empirical research, rather than critical theorizing using data from orthodox qualitative empirics, has not been fully realized.

In pursuing these arguments, one of us has averred in previous publications (Wray-Bliss 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004) that neo-positivist research practice within CMS sits uneasily with – indeed might contradict – the field’s emancipatory commitments. Using his own and others’ work for illustration, Wray-Bliss identifies how subordinating power relations between ‘knower’ and ‘known’ may be reproduced in the research relations and representational practices characteristic of CMS scholarship. Relatedly, Bell and Bryman (2007) diagnose a broad neglect of research ethics in the mainstream and critical management academies alike. Management as a discipline, they suggest, tends to import ethical codes formulated for other areas of social science, which face different situations and tensions. At the same time it appears to rely on the individual researcher, who often has little training or institutional support in this regard, to deal with ethical issues as they arise. For CMS scholars in particular, however, this apparent inattention to research ethics may evoke a deeper historical ambivalence towards the idea of ethics itself. A detour through the orientations to ethics in CMS’s multiple philosophical influences – here taken very loosely to be Critical Theory, feminism, poststructuralism/-modernism and, more recently, postcolonialism – should help to illuminate this claim.

In their different ways, these critical traditions have each challenged the Kantian (/ Platonic) project of producing a universal ethical code, highlighting the sectional interests and exclusions this endeavour masks. These re-readings of Kant’s ethical philosophy are also helpfully summarized in Jones et al. (2005). For Marxist-inflected Critical Theorists, for instance, universalist ethical prescriptions naturalize unequal class relations and respect for private property, (re)producing an alienating and atomized subjectivity (e.g. Marcuse 1994).
For feminist writers of various hues, the privileging of apparently abstract and
depersonalized ethical reasoning and associated qualities like ‘duty’ and ‘just-
tice’, has facilitated the historical exclusion of women from the category of eth-
cical subjects (e.g. Kristeva 1987; Dworkin 1992; McNay 1992; Held 1997;
Shildrick 1997). Among postcolonial commentators, Said (1978) argues that the
specific knowledge systems of non-western peoples are marginalized by ethical
universalism, such that they can be understood as ethical subjects only in the
terms of western discourse.

What then do these critical traditions seek to do instead? On the one hand
there have been attempts to formulate an alternative and emancipatory universal
ethics. So first generation Critical Theorists like Horkheimer (1974, 1993;
also see Adorno 2000) argue that rationalist Kantian morality, under capitalism,
hands responsibility to the individual for resolving the tension between self-
interest, required to survive in a market economy, and collective welfare. But,
suggests Horkheimer, no such resolution can be effected by the ‘isolated moral
subject’ (Hoy and McCarthy 1994: 24): this requires structural responses like
much-improved communal decision making. Individuals cannot bear responsi-
bility for ethical conduct until society is more fairly organized. Similarly, for
Habermas (1984, 1987) Critical Theory’s task is to develop an intersubjective
universal ethics via public debate, in which all affected have the same opportu-
nity to contribute, all are upfront about their intentions and power inequalities
are rendered null and void for the duration.1 Bakhtin (1990, 1993), although not
a Frankfurt School fellow traveller, offers the cognate argument that focusing
on individual ethical responsibility as universal duty deflects the ethical gaze
from a properly collective concern with ‘answerability’ for systemic inequali-
ties. Feminist scholars have, relatedly, responded to what they see as the mas-
culinist universality of conventional ethical formulations by constructing
alternative ‘feminine’ ethics using notions like care (Gilligan 1997), friendship
or mothering (Ruddick 1992).

For other feminist commentators (e.g. Benhabib 1992; Butler 1997; Shildrick
1997), however, any attempt to articulate a universal ethics is dangerously total-
izing. This neo-Aristotelean dismissal of ethical universalism is also evident
elsewhere. Marx, for one, agrees that universalist ethicists privilege self-
determination over existing structural inequalities, and so ignore actual social
conditions – but this leads to his rejecting any codifiable ‘ethics of duty’
(Brenkert 1983). Adorno and Horkheimer offer a related but more aesthetic cri-
tique in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1979), where their sensibilities are
arguably darker (How 2003) – and much less neo-Kantian – than in their other
work. Their key argument centres on the ethically pacifying effects of the cap-
italist culture industry, the sense in which it deadens our critical faculties for
imagination and reflection. Thus, they argue, we cannot expect any individual
agent to undertake their own moral ‘schematizing’.

Drawing inspiration from Nietzsche’s (2007) historicizing and politicizing of
morality, the poststructuralist Foucault also questions the generalized ethical
codes characteristic of western modernity. He suggests that ‘The search for a
form of morality acceptable by everyone[,] in the sense that everyone would
have to submit to it, seems catastrophic to me’ (Foucault, cited in Flyvbjerg
However Foucault (1988) does afford the individual some agency here, suggesting that a measure of freedom lies with their engaging in their own ethical project, reflexively and dynamically fashioning a mosaic-like subjectivity from the many discourses they are suspended within. But for Foucault’s feminist critics, including those otherwise sympathetic to his work (e.g. McNay 1992), even this tentative possibility of ethical agency has heroically individualist, masculinist overtones.

Based on this necessarily lightly sketched review of CMS’s antecedents, critical scholarship seems to view the idea of ethics in complex and variegated ways. Perhaps the one thing which clearly emerges is that further exploration of research ethics within CMS is unlikely to bear fruit if conceptualized as a process of imposing conventional, pre-defined codes. What we suggest is needed instead is something akin to Alvesson and Deetz’s (2000: 2) call to rethink critical management research methodologies. To this end, we outline a threefold framework of articulations of research ethics, informed by previous work in the management academy, by feminist scholars and in postcolonial and participatory research. These we call: (i) ethics as ‘hurdle’; (ii) ethics as seeking out silences; and (iii) ethics as central warrant for research. Under these headings we outline the relevant conceptualization of research ethics and its uptake within the critical management arena, as well as exploring the opportunities and limitations of each as regards CMS research practice. Our aim is to provide CMS with further impetus for considering how our political commitments might be enhanced by more attention to research ethics and to the impact that empirical work can have on our stakeholders – especially the disenfranchised groups with whom we are typically concerned.

Three Conceptualizations of Ethics

1. Ethics as ‘Hurdle’

This lens – for us the research ethics orthodoxy – represents ethics as a series of barriers to be ‘leapt’ at a specific stage in any project. It understands ethics as compliance with rules and emphasizes the avoidance of harm to respondents. As Christians (2005: 147) avers, the ‘hurdle’ lens originated in widespread doubts about the ‘beneficence’ of research, generated by post-World War II revelations that science was profoundly implicated in Nazi ‘medical experiments’ on concentration camp internees, as well as the Manhattan Project. Latterly, social science endeavours like the US Army’s attempt to quantify and predict popular unrest via Project Camelot caused similar distaste. Thus Christians (2005: 147) refers to the concomitant appearance of ‘[v]igorous concern for research ethics … and the development of ethics codes’.

An apposite example is the British Sociological Association’s Statement of Ethical Practice (n.d.: paragraph 1d), which states that researchers should ‘attempt to minimize disturbance to those participating in research’. Similar recommendations exist in the codes of practice developed by the American Psychological and Sociological Associations, the British Psychological Society
and the American Academy of Management. The ‘hurdle’ lens has been further institutionalized in the requirement for academics to seek approval for their research from a university ethics committee or Institutional Review Board. In the UK this is *de rigueur* in disciplines like medicine, and is surfacing more regularly in the social sciences – prompting Bell and Bryman (2007) to argue that management scholars need to proactively develop their own ethical codes rather than have codes from elsewhere foisted upon them.

The most common hurdles that researchers are required to clear here are (i) securing informed consent; (ii) not subjecting respondents to duress; (iii) implementing respondent validation; and (iv) ensuring confidentiality and/or anonymity. But explicit evidence of CMS attention to such requirements seems patchy: we have not come across many self-identified critical management texts where the research design is signalled as having been approved by an ethics committee, nor have we seen much indication of adherence to any ethical code of practice. Indeed, coverage of methodological issues in empirical CMS publications tends to be minimalist *per se*. At times a few lines of text or a note are seemingly enough to ‘deal’ with methodology, and these foreshortened discussions are typically limited to technical discussions of methods, length of time in the field, number of interviews conducted, etc.

In order to illustrate this, and in lieu of a strategy allowing us to claim comprehensive coverage of the CMS ‘canon’, we surveyed the top 25 most frequently downloaded articles in *Organization*, arguably the CMS journal with the largest readership, as of February 2007. Of the four analysing primary empirical data, two critical realist papers – Hesketh and Fleetwood’s (2006) appraisal of the ‘scientific’ approach to linking HR activities with enhanced bottom line organizational indicators, and Leca and Naccache’s (2006) revisiting of the ‘agency–structure dilemma as regards ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ – provide just a few lines of methodology, covering only the aforementioned technical details. So Hesketh and Fleetwood conducted 70-plus interviews with senior HR professionals in Europe and the US (page 679), whereas Leca and Naccache’s case study is based on 46 qualitative interviews and secondary data (page 636). Korczynski’s (2003) paper on front-line staff’s ‘communities of coping’ as a mechanism for dealing with abrasive customers and Kärreman and Alvesson’s (2004) exploration of organizational control in a ‘knowledge-intensive firm’ offer fuller methodologies. However, again these are limited to technical detail – e.g. four call centres were involved in Korczynski’s research, and Kärreman and Alvesson conducted 52 interviews plus observation, and consulted organizational manuals. Korczynski (2003: 73–74) does acknowledge the limitations of his approach, but confines himself to discussing problems of ‘proof’ in qualitative research and the atypicality of call centre work.

Presuming the reader accepts this limited attempt to substantiate our argument that CMS research is often methodologically technicist at best, its lack of reference to established ethical hurdles is surprising. If CMS’s *raison d’être* is a critique of problematic social praxis, then careful attention to how its researchers conduct themselves seems crucial to us. Relatedly, ethnography, variants of which represent the favoured CMS methodology and have been promoted as central to an emancipatory agenda (Alvesson and Willmott 1992), is
described by Fine et al. (2003: 178) as depending on ‘human relationships, engagement and attachment’, such that our research subjects are rendered especially vulnerable to ‘manipulation and betrayal’ as a result.

One interpretation is that following ethical rules is part of a taken-for-granted background to CMS research, so integral in fact that none of us feel the need to talk about it. Certainly one of us reports abiding by the rules of respondent validation and anonymity in several earlier publications (e.g. Brewis 2004), but not her negotiation of informed consent – although she has always started her data collection this way. Still, for us to be reassured that such ethical hurdles are being routinely jumped prior to CMS research being published, might we not expect that the institutional arbiters of quality and rigour – like journals’ submission guidelines – would require authors to mention this in their argumentation?

Taking four quality European journals in which CMS research is frequently published – Organization Studies itself, Journal of Management Studies, Organization (discussed above) and Human Relations – our review of their instructions for authors reveals several expectations: e.g. that submitted articles are rigorous and coherent, contain theoretical and/or empirical insights and are formatted in ‘house style’. But nothing is said about demonstrating adherence to the ethical rules outlined above. Indeed, although Human Relations’ guidelines allude to the BSA’s Statement of Ethical Practice, authors are also asked not to dwell over-much on methodology because ‘an overly long explanation of why particular norms and standards have been chosen detracts from discussions of substance’ (emphasis added). Our survey of reviewers’ guidelines also reveals a lacuna when it comes to research ethics, although space does not permit elaboration here.

The broader point is that CMS academics may be trusting their colleagues to behave ‘properly’, as opposed to asking for evidence that they have done so. Bell and Bryman (2007) worry this may be misguided, given the lack of systematic attention to research ethics in management research training. Further, if such instructions reflect and shape the priorities of the relevant academic community, perhaps we just don’t take the most prevalent conceptualization of research ethics particularly seriously. After all, CMS scholars are partly responsible for (re)producing the institutional environments in which we labour – and this includes the journals where we publish. This is not to argue for what one of our reviewers calls ‘a new CMS ethics police’, or (again borrowing their phrasing) excessive ‘proceduralism’ in this regard – or that any of us are actually riding roughshod over the ethical basics. It is rather to suggest that the less we explicitly reference our adherence to these basics, or indeed discuss our methodological practices per se, the more they recede into the background such that empirical praxis may indeed come to be seen as lacking ‘substance’ or importance when compared to theoretical insights.

But it is also true that the ‘hurdle’ approach to ethics could become a rather problematic proxy; that is, the belief that all we need to do to produce ethical research is follow the relevant protocols. To return to our introduction, there may be a false universality in these protocols about which CMS should be cautious. Our first question, then, is whether informed consent is something that we can...
simply ‘get out of the way’ at the beginning of the research process, through formal agreement with respondents. Fine et al. (2003: 177) suggest not. They argue that using this procedure with certain informants demands extreme care, referring to women claiming welfare benefits who often signed the consent form without even reading it. While this may signal that informed consent has been achieved, Fine et al. aver it could equally speak to these women’s experiences of being at the mercy of complex bureaucracy – and it is often these sorts of respondents in whom CMS is interested. Moreover, when those being studied are the very individuals implicated in the abuses of power which CMS seeks to unveil, seeking their consent may conflict with the researcher’s political commitments.

Understandings of what constitutes respondent duress are also scarcely clear-cut, and Wray-Bliss (2003) elsewhere raises the possibility of duress even in self-consciously ‘anti-oppressive’ research. He explores how encouraging a particular respondent to speak to sensitive issues of workplace conflict and resistance, which they clearly felt unsafe discussing with a relative stranger, could be regarded both as ‘good’ critical interviewing and as potentially abusive. Further, Wray-Bliss indicates that, because of CMS’s lack of explicit engagement with research ethics, reflection upon such potentially problematic power relations would normally be excluded from the published text.

Turning to respondent validation, we concur with Hollidays’ (2000: 518, following Skeggs) suggestion that ‘discursive frameworks make interpretation from a critical perspective impossible for some respondents. The feminist practice of having respondents confirm one’s interpretation is by no means a guarantee of “truth”.’ The social status still enjoyed by western academics implies that some respondents might find it difficult to challenge a researcher’s representation of them. A perhaps less disenfranchising route could be envisaged via some version of Heller’s (1969) group feedback analysis (GFA), designed to validate responses in questionnaire-based enquiries into attitudes. GFA in a CMS context might involve a discussion where respondents considered the researcher’s initial interpretations of qualitative data – as long as these were produced to maximize accessibility, including explanations of any technical terminology, and the problems of gathering respondents together and unequal group dynamics could be tackled. That said, we have been unable to uncover evidence of such practices in CMS scholarship – our own work included.

Finally, should we always maintain anonymity? Ontologically we might query this protocol, given its foundations in the Enlightenment belief in ‘a sacred innermost self [as] essential to the construction of unique personhood … [such that] invading persons’ fragile but distinctive privacy is intolerable’ (Christians 2005: 145). But another issue is whether critical researchers owe this guarantee to all respondents. As one of CMS’s ‘forefathers’, Marx had no compunction about naming names or specifying which organizations were doing what to whom, as another of our reviewers puts it. The chapter entitled ‘The working day’ in Capital, for example, tells the story of Mary Anne Walkley who died in 1863 after a 26 and a half hour shift for society dressmaker Madame Elise (Marx 1967). But if a CMS researcher had promised anonymity to Madame Elise’s contemporary counterpart, what is the correct course of action in this regard?
So these ethical protocols may not be unproblematically universalizable. Here we can also invoke Bauman’s (1993) more general critique regarding code-based formulations of ethics, and his alternative conceptualization of the never-ending uncertainty that we have done enough to meet our limitless ethical responsibility to the other. By abridging this to some form of code, we risk replacing ethics with something more like law. Our autonomy and responsibility may thereby be reduced, and the face of the other may disappear altogether from our moral consciousness. Although the thesis that ethical rules necessarily lead to amorality is highly suspect (ten Bos 1997; Bell and Bryman 2007), this cautionary note against abbreviating ethical responsibility to legalistic obedience also applies to the notion of research ethics as a process of following predetermined codes. We certainly have no pat answers to the dilemmas raised above – instead we raise them to encourage more explicit CMS reference to the protocols of consent, duress, respondent validation and confidentiality and anonymity as well as reflecting on their attendant ambiguities. Indeed it is these ambiguities which suggest that CMS scholars need to look further afield.

2. Ethics as Seeking Out Silences

This understanding of ethics retains avoidance of harm as its focus, but is broader than the previous formulation in its depiction of ethical responsibilities as spanning the research process and its emphasis on continual attention to the potentially silencing or colonizing effects of the resulting text (Spivak 1990; Opie 1992; McLaughlin and Tierney 1993; Wray-Bliss 2002a, 2004). This lens draws our gaze back to consider why certain topics are initially deemed important, and forward to reflect upon the socio-political consequences of the research text in the world. It decries any notion of ‘a perfect pluralism where all interests have access to relevant channels where they can argue their case’ (Jackson 1995: 572).

To elucidate, let us first invoke the make-up of the management academy and CMS as a subset thereof. It is dominated – numerically and hierarchically – by white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied men (Parker 1995: 560; Knights and Richards 2003: 216–217). If we take Weber’s proposition that our biographies influence our choice of research topics and how we seek to excavate them seriously, then this academy may well perpetuate particular silences because of its narrow constitution. Indeed, according to Bologh (1990), Weber himself is a case in point. She suggests that Weber’s conflicted relationship with his mother and his absorption of upper middle class values like duty and honour, among other things, can be detected in the themes explored in his adult writings.

So, if management research reflects its author’s interests, the choice of subject and eventual analysis will reproduce the sectional interests and experiences of the circumscribed membership of our academy. Griseri (2002: 144–145) proposes that, because the vast majority of management researchers are Northern in origin and/or domicile, we have no real interest in issues like the ‘economic imbalance’ of the global North/South divide. Financial regulation of the global market is by contrast a key interest, and thus a key research preoccupation. Similarly, Walsh and Weber’s (2002: 406–408) meta-analysis of the 1700-plus
empirical articles published in the *Academy of Management Journal* and the *Academy of Management Review* between 1958 and 2000 indicates that recent mainstream scholarship focuses overwhelmingly on management concerns around ‘job performance, productivity, profit, and efficiency’ (p. 406). The orthodox management academy can therefore be argued to represent the interests of this one organizational stakeholder – silencing others.

This conclusion matters. Preston and Young (2000, following Appadurai) discuss the ways in which texts function both as ‘mediascapes’ – offering accounts of parts of the world to those with no direct experience of them – and ‘ideoscapes’ in their constructions of ‘the way things are’ there. So, as Smith (1990) and Knights (2006) also aver, texts don’t just communicate local worlds to a wider audience: they also help to create new or shore up existing knowledge and social relations, becoming a form of common sense.

This second conceptualization of ethics further bids us recall that, even when marginalized groups are studied, texts are frequently constructed such that respondents’ voices are subordinated to the presumed authority of the researcher. Tactics include use of the third person and the corollary sense of the ‘view from nowhere’; careful selection of corroborating data; mobilization of exclusionary expert language or over-complex forms of expression; and routine citing of authors’ expertise in biographies (Said 1978; Calás and Smircich 1988; Woolgar 1988; hooks 1989; Opie 1992; Stanley and Wise 1993; Wray-Bliss 2002a; Grey and Sinclair 2006). Such devices elevate the researcher’s interpretations over those of respondents and other ‘non-expert’ readers of the text, implicating it in processes of domination; and this disenfranchisement seems to us to be particularly significant for researchers (including many CMS scholars) studying those less able to influence how they are publicly represented.

The likelihood here of any assumption that we have at a specific juncture in our investigations ‘done enough’, ethically speaking, is therefore reduced. Rather this second lens requires us to remain aware of the persistent potential for silencing and/ or appropriation in our texts, stemming from the constitution of the management academy, the topics we select as interesting and our research praxis itself. And CMS could, with some justification, understand itself to embody this ethics rather more convincingly than the mainstream, given that its non-performativity, denaturalization and reflexivity already challenge some of management research’s historical silences (Parker 1995: 60). Indeed there are plenty of CMS critiques of the orthodoxy in this regard. These include Mir et al.’s (2003) postcolonial ‘provincialization’ of accounts of organizational control, one conclusion of which is that scientific management’s exhortations regarding the separation of conception and execution, say, turn on the unacknowledged appropriation of indigenous knowledge.

Cooke (2003), likewise, discusses the denial of slavery in theories of the emergence of management. His review of historical evidence about slave-worked Southern US plantations shows how these were characterized by, *inter alia*, work study and productivity measurement – which very much chime with management technologies past and present. Further, Clegg et al. (2006a: ch. 6) point to the resounding silence of mainstream organization theory on the abusive total institutions of the last century or so. The Holocaust, unsurprisingly, is
chief among them, but organizations dedicated more to the ‘marking of life’ than the ‘creation of death’ are also discussed, such as the German Democratic Republic and, more recently, the Coalition prison Abu Ghraib in Iraq. As Clegg et al. aver, ‘In a science devoted to understanding how organizations do what they do, the[se] organizational crimes … remain largely a black hole, a vast empty space, a void of intellectual nothing, an absent presence’ (p. 181).

However, Mir et al. and Cooke suggest that CMS may likewise be interpreted as reproducing such problematics; that it is not being reflexive enough. Frenkel and Shenhav’s (2006) discussion of CMS’s use of postcolonial theory draws similar conclusions. They argue that what has been done so far is laudable, but needs to move beyond Said’s Orientalism to acknowledge hybridity as theorized by Bhabha – how colonizers have been affected by the colonized, as well as the reverse. Importantly, Frenkel and Shenhav state that Bhabha does not neglect ‘the asymmetrical power relations between the colonizer and the colonized’ (page 858), but instead acknowledges the ways in which the latter may have resisted or threatened the former’s dominance over them.

Other auto-critiques include Prasad and Prasad (2000, 2001) on workers’ resistance, where the authors criticize CMS representations of these individuals’ agency as begetting self-authorizing and other-subordinating knowledge hierarchies. Wray-Bliss (2001, 2002b) argues that certain senior CMS researchers have represented employees as unwitting collaborators in their own oppression, trapped by their own self-defeating subjectivities which only the ‘expert’ CMS researcher, after a brief stint in the field, observes with clarity. Importantly, the second of these papers also produced a spirited riposte by one of its targets, with Collinson (2002) arguing that Wray-Bliss can be accused, for example, of oversimplifying the ambiguities of workplace resistance; romanticizing a sexist and predatory articulation of working-class masculinity; and underestimating the extent to which the researcher is always ‘dependent on the continuing goodwill of the researched’ (p. 45).

These auto-critiques (and responses) remind us of Benton’s ‘paradox of emancipation’, which he sees as particularly characteristic of socialist scholarship. This is the difficulty of trying to marry a commitment to ‘collective self-emancipation with a critique of the established order which holds that the consciousness of those from whom collective self-emancipation is to be expected is systematically manipulated, distorted and falsified by essential features of that order’ (Benton 1981: 162). Perhaps we should expect to find this paradox in CMS, given the long shadow Marxism casts over our project. However, it nonetheless exemplifies our argument that CMS may inadvertently reproduce (at least in part) the very power relations it simultaneously seeks to unveil/overturn. As Benton puts it, ‘No matter how well-intentioned the observer, this is still other-ascription of interests, and not self-ascription’ (1981: 167).

Bauman’s conceptualization of the modern western intellectual as ostensibly rational adjudicator between knowledge claims, making explicit what others suffer in ignorance, is also pertinent here. For Bauman this intellectual ‘legislator’ does not in fact fulfil ‘a noble dream of bringing the light of wisdom to the confused and oppressed’ (1987: 80). Instead their elevated social status derives
from an elitist belief that somehow those who ‘commune with reason’ have the right to speak for others. Contrastingly, his conceptualization of the ‘interpreter’ intellectual asks us to function as intermediaries or translators between different claims – especially for those who usually lack a public voice – while constantly being aware of the fragile status of any declaration of ‘The Truth’.

To summarize, while some CMS scholars have promoted attention to the accounts of marginalized groups, at the same time few of the strategies for producing less disenfranchising textual effects – e.g. emphasis on positionality, vulnerability, contradiction, standpoint, reciprocity and voice (Lincoln 1995; Bell and Bryman 2007) – are clearly evident in the bulk of our empirical research. The tendency may still be one of reproducing respondents as passive, subordinated, known; and the researcher as agentic, superior knower. Perhaps we need to take how we write more seriously, with greater insistence on the use of ‘lay’ language – as well as considering the use of popular, more readily available dissemination channels (Parker 2002). These tactics Heller (1986: 4–5) describes as ‘building bridges between researcher and user’, where ‘user’ is understood as anyone affected by the research. Perhaps we also need to consider producing texts which emphasize our partiality as opposed to seeking to provide an exhaustive account of the social (Knights 2006).

Our final conceptualization of research ethics, however, goes further still, understanding the researcher’s central task as seeking not just to articulate but also practically change the marginalized status of certain research participants.

3. Ethics as Central Warrant for Research

Building on lens 2, this third perspective explores the ethics of research in terms of the potential for a more explicitly positive engagement with respondents. Scholarship here becomes ‘relational research’ (Lincoln 1995: 287), acknowledging and valuing connections between researcher and researched; and between the academy and its social context. A twofold challenge is envisaged to the subordinate status of participants in critical research – as oppressed members of society and pawns in the process of knowledge construction (Freire 1970).

This body of research philosophy and practice – referred to here using the catch-all term ‘participatory’ – is highly eclectic (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005: 562). Still, its inspiration derives from the observation that certain groups of people – e.g. indigenous communities – are always the researched. Hence social science knowledge is implicated in sexist, racist, colonial and homophobic relations of power. As Bishop (2005: 110) points out, for example, research on the Māori people typically perpetuates claims about ‘the “inability” of Māori culture to cope with human problems and propositions that Māori culture is and was inferior to that of the colonizers in human terms’. Moreover, one conventional assumption about the investigator–respondent relationship – even, arguably, in our second lens on ethics – is that information flows one way (Harvey, cited in Johnson and Duberley 2000: 139–140). The respondent shares their knowledge, beliefs and experiences but no such disclosure is expected from the researcher.
In participatory research, however, a relational ethic predominates, so that focus, methodology, findings, recommendations, implementation, assessment and dissemination are *negotiated* between academic/s and participants. There is also often an emphasis on the data as co-created, such that social reality is not seen as ‘preontologically available for the researcher to study’ (Kincheloe and McLaren, cited in Bishop 2005: 125). The idea is to democratize research such that the researcher/researched dualism becomes, if not exactly meaningless, blurred so process *and* output benefit all those involved. This is research in the ‘first person plural’ – research as ‘everybody’s business’ (Fox 2003: 97).

Further, the goals of participatory research are explicitly transformative – unmasking and *confronting* subjugation; reclamation of subordinated knowledges; changing social relations in the research milieu; informing public policy to benefit the research participants, etc. Reminiscent of Marx’s 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, this approach seeks to move beyond theorizing the world towards improving the life situations of the disadvantaged or excluded (Griseri 2002: 177). Kemmis and McTaggart (2005: 599) list various concrete outcomes, including improved water supplies in Bangladesh, improvements to Australian nursing practice and campaigns for literacy in Nicaragua.

Another central issue is that the research outcomes must be useful to the particular community taking part. It has been suggested, for example, that non-indigenous researchers should only undertake research among indigenous groups at the latter’s invitation: what eventuates is research by the marginalized, for the marginalized, with the assistance of others only where the marginalized deem it necessary (Calás and Smircich 2003; Fox 2003; Bishop 2005). In such endeavours the researcher is there to serve the respondents, based on a non-utopian, pragmatic sensibility oriented to the material specifics of the situation. Thus participatory research also entails the recognition that any project is necessarily ‘local and contingent … [and] constitutive of difference …’ (Fox 2003: 87), that its value lies in its applicability to the setting rather than any measure of external validity or the production of a One Best Way, to recall our earlier critique of universalist ethical prescriptions.

A necessarily short list of examples includes Killion and Wang’s (2000) research with homeless and vulnerably housed African American women. The six participants took photographs to reflect their living arrangements, and discussed them with each other and the researchers, revealing commonalities of experience and facilitating alliances among the group. This research provided the basis for a feasibility study of cooperative housing arrangements between the two cohorts. Elsewhere, Wang and colleagues discuss how the Flint Photovoice project in Michigan allowed younger participants to voice concerns about violence in their neighbourhoods to policy makers, and helped to secure public funding for violence prevention initiatives (Wang et al. 2004). We can imagine similar attempts by CMS scholars to collaborate with, say, employees in order to challenge specific aspects of their organizational lives.

Participatory research therefore attempts to satisfy Guba and Lincoln’s (2005: 207–209) criteria for evaluating qualitative research: fairness, so ‘all stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices should be apparent in the text’ (p. 207); ontological and educative authenticity, so participants’
awareness of their situation and that of others around them is enhanced (although this ‘educational’ function requires sensitivity to avoid Benton’s paradox of emancipation); and catalytical and tactical authenticity, so participants are encouraged to take action on their own behalf, seeking help from the researcher if desired. It also echoes Flyvbjerg’s (2001) summation of Aristotelean ‘phronetic’ research as asking ‘Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done? … Who gains, and who loses? Through what kind of power relations? What possibilities are available to change existing power relations? And is it desirable to do so?’ (pp. 130, 131), as well as his insistence on collaboration throughout and the polyphonic nature of whatever results (pp. 132, 139).

However, lest we get carried away, we should be equally mindful of the tensions associated with participative enquiry. First, it is important not to romanticize disenfranchised social groups: these communities, like any others, are riven with power differentials related to ‘gender, economic class, age, language and religion’ (Smith 2005: 87; also see Heller 1986: 7). Thus some within them are much more likely to be heard than others. Second, difficulties may arise when negotiating findings – even as avowedly critical researchers, we cannot ‘presume common experience or perspective’ with respondents (Kelly et al. 1994: 38). Some may well prove to be ‘talented ventriloquists for a hateful status quo’ (Fine et al. 2003: 190).5

Third, Mir et al. (2003) critique the call in parts of the management control literature to include all stakeholders in organizational conversations, given that ‘The debate between the Ogoni tribe and Shell in Nigeria is unlikely to be resolved by dialogue’ (p. 61). Clegg (1995: 570) makes a similar observation about the various stakeholders in the Australian mining industry – aboriginal groups, green groups, trade unions and shareholders – and Flyvbjerg (2001: 139) evokes the possibility that such interchanges descend irrevocably into ‘a shouting match … in which the loudest carries the day’.

As one of our reviewers pointed out, the ultimate goal of collaboratively changing oppressive circumstances might also be severely compromised where this requires identification of marginal groups in order to effect policy changes. Imagine, for example, the difficulties entailed in joint research with illegal immigrants working in a London sweatshop, where anonymity is likely to be a key concern for the respondents. Additionally this reviewer quite rightly identifies a contradiction between Guba and Lincoln’s call for ‘fairness’ in qualitative research and the problems we discussed earlier relating to respondent validation and power differentials. Finally this reviewer suggests that participatory research may in fact become a triumph of ends over means, as social-change-for-the-better as ultimate goal comes to obscure any collaborative shortcomings in the research process itself. In other words, only the first half of the Freirean contract is fulfilled as researchers focus on the quickest and most assured route to what they assume will benefit research participants.

Having explored the above conceptualization of an ethics of reciprocity as the central warrant of research, and established some attendant problematics, we turn to its uptake in critical management research. The mainstream management academy, as we have established, sees the value of its research as residing to a significant extent in the service it provides for managers. As Voronov and Coleman aver, following Deetz, ‘The aim of such research often is to help managers
achieve their goals, such as overcoming resistance to change or attaining maximum productivity’ (2003: 171). But we do not see the same evidence in CMS of attempts to embody service to the disenfranchised groups with whom we are usually concerned. Instead, as Fournier and Grey (2000) suggest, we tend to focus on whether we should engage with management so that it can be transformed into a more emancipatory set of practices – or whether this always risks co-optation into the performative managerialist project (see, for example, Adler 2002; Walsh and Weber 2002; Zald 2002; Clegg et al. 2006b; Parker 2006; Phillips 2006; Willmott 2006). And, although Voronov and Coleman (2003) identify participatory research as a constructive way forward for CMS, their overall conclusion is that it can thereby be rendered more ‘practical’ for mainstream management academics, managers and consultants.

We agree, then, with Fournier and Grey (2000: 26) when they state that ‘CMS has barely begun to consider engagements with the managed, … with trade unionists, with women’s groups and so on who might arguably be a more obvious constituency for such an endeavour’. After all, a shift towards more participatory research practice in CMS – or at least a more concerted attempt to discuss its pros and cons – should facilitate a related shift from critique to conceptualizing concrete alternatives, and thus bring us closer to achieving our emancipatory objectives, whatever these might be.6

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to encourage further empirical reflexivity (Fournier and Grey 2000), and therefore more attention to research ethics on the part of critical management researchers, given our emancipatory commitments. We explored three not necessarily incommensurable understandings of research ethics: (i) ethics as a series of discrete hurdles that the researcher must jump to be ‘free’ to proceed with their research; (ii) an ethics calling on the researcher to attend to the ever-present potential for silencing effects in their choice of topic, analysis and dissemination of results; and (iii) an ethics defining the contribution the research makes to changing the subordinate status of participants as its central warrant. We also considered the extent to which CMS embodies these lenses, and the pros and cons associated with their further uptake.

We have consciously not recommended one particular formulation of research ethics for CMS. Given our own critical sensibilities, we regard ethics as at its best – and perhaps only worthy of this appellation – when it is the product of an individual’s socially located and other-directed praxis. Seeking to legislate in any way would also neglect the (positively) heterogeneous make-up of the CMS ‘community’. We do acknowledge, however, a nascent legislative agenda in our writing; that is, our encouragement of more explicit reflection on and culpability for the research ethics underpinning CMS scholarship. We define critical research as properly unceasing in its exploration of these complex issues, the better to embody our various political agendas, and we would envisage such exploration as evidencing a good deal more engagement with the ethical frameworks discussed here.
This brings us to a final point for reflection; why CMS appears not to have seriously engaged with such formulations of research ethics. Our thoughts here are brief and speculative: a more convincing answer would require a further article – at least. Our working assumption is that CMS’s lack of obvious attention to ethics is itself a product of an ethico-political stance, rather than the outcome of neglect or expediency. Here we return to our introduction, and recall the ambiguous place of universalist ethics in a variety of critical traditions: that such an ethics has been rejected as another piece of the jigsaw of pacifying and atomizing capitalist culture, masking sectional interests and privileges; that it individualizes and diffuses collective answerability for systemic inequalities; and that it may deny particular groups any claim to a position of moral autonomy.

Thus it is entirely understandable that critical scholars might be wary of articulating (or worse still being handed) a research ethics for which they were to be held accountable. With regard to our third lens in particular, this could be seen as an unbearable and paralysing burden of individual responsibility for righting systemic wrongs encountered in the research process – whether we understand these to be the politics of the capitalist labour process in organizations (Martinez Lucio and Steward 1997), the managerialist and positivist legacy in management research, or even the historically constructed, alienating divisions between researcher and researched (Wray-Bliss 2003; Smith 2005). An argument could be made, in light of this, that CMS research ethics are best left as some kind of unarticulated, uncodified and therefore crucially unmanageable ‘impulse’ (Bauman 1993) or individual aesthetic project (Foucault 1988), the better to resist future, or further, incorporation.

We have some sympathy with this position, and would very much welcome work from other CMS scholars articulating the basis of a principled rejection of the kinds of research ethics we explore here. However, we are also aware, as our earlier discussion of CMS’s philosophical influences highlighted, that the critical traditions from which we derive our inspiration are by no means unanimously or uniformly opposed to the concept of ethics. Further, our second and third lenses on research ethics draw explicitly upon feminist, postcolonial and Marxist traditions – as of course does CMS. Accordingly, when there is this heterogeneity of perspectives and diversity of conceptual and practical engagements with ethics elsewhere than in CMS, we find ourselves disturbed by our own community’s uncharacteristic homogeneity in its lack of reflexive engagement with research ethics.

Notes

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1. Interestingly, Kant would conceivably take issue with this re-rendering of ethical universalism, given its emphasis on rationalism and communication.
2. See Boje (2006) for a perceptive development of Bakhtin in a critique of the Academy’s code.
3. Its subtitle is The Critical Journal of Organization, Theory and Society, and its 2005 Web of Science Journal Citation Reports impact factor was 1.28.
4. Ironically Knights is one of the ‘senior CMS academics’ critiqued for his self-authorizing prac-
paper that ‘I have come closer here to practising what I have preached concerning the idea of 
being in the text as a self-reflexive, embodied subject rather than representing the world as a 
detached observer.’

5. As one of our reviewers suggests, this also means that respondents’ ‘self-ascription of inter-
ests’, following Benton, should not necessarily or inevitably be taken as carrying more weight 
than commentary by CMS academics in this regard.

6. It would be remiss of us not to mention, as prompted by one of our reviewers, the activities of 
the Association for Accountancy and Business Affairs (n.d.), who number five senior CMS aca-
demics among their seven trustees and whose objectives are to open up for public scrutiny ‘the 
narrowness of public choices … the way organised interests have colonised the public space to 
advance their narrow interests … the excesses of insolvency practitioners, audit failures, lack 
of democracy at work, poverty wages … [and] the “visible hand” of accountancy practices in 
losses of jobs, investments, savings, pensions and environmental degradation’.

This it achieves via the publication of ‘pamphlets and papers to advance alternative analysis and 
policy reforms’ and organizing workshops on subjects like tax justice. AABA is entirely 
non-commercial and funds itself from ‘donations, subscriptions and the sale of publications’. Its 
emancipatory sensibilities, attention to the conventionally disenfranchised and desire to facilitate 
material change are all thus very clear indeed. However, it is worth noting that participatory 
research of the kind we outline here does not appear to be a central AABA activity.

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