Access, Ethics and the Critical Researcher

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the implications of negotiating Critical Management Studies (CMS) oriented ethnographic research access on the possibilities of following research ethical codes and remain coherent with CMS principles at the same time. By doing that we seek to contribute to the CMS literature which tends to under analyse the ethical aspect of its research practices and OS where formal ethnographic research access has attracted very little theoretical scholarly attention. In addition, we also aim to contribute to broader debates about qualitative research practices by highlighting the ethical implications that can be associated with conditions of establishing formal research access. Rather than calling for a new, revised code of ethics, we appeal for a more open and honest debate about the pragmatic realities of critical, organisational ethnographic research.

1. Introduction

Even though discussions about research access has been present in qualitative research for some time (e.g. Brown et al, 1976; Gray, 1980; Hornsby-Smith, 1993;Feldman et all, 2002; Harrington, 2003; Maggin, 2007; Crowley, 2007), in depth scholarly analysis about the negotiation of formal access is barely present in many Organization Studies (OS) ethnographic accounts (Bruni, 2006b). Where present, it tends to be left 'behind the scenes' (Gellner & Hirsch, 2001), relegated to short appendices or prefaces (see Kunda, 1992). This is surprising as the process of negotiating formal access is well known to be rather difficult, with famous anthropologists such as Boas and Malinowski having failed attempting to get access during their careers (Morrill et al, 1999). Access is a concern in all types of field research (Johnson, 1975; Andersen et al, 1995) and can be surrounded by particular difficulties in research involving work organisations, where its negotiation can be very intricate due to the unwillingness of many institutions to open their doors and their "secrets" to outside scrutiny (Smith, 1997, 2000; Bryman, 1988; Buchanan et al, 1988; Gellner & Hirsch, 2001, Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Bruni, 2006b). Gatekeepers might be concerned that research reports could expose company practices to the wider public or be used in legal proceedings against the company (Smith, 2001: 226). At the same time they might not perceive any benefit in taking part in in-depth, long-term research, given the demands of such research on organisational time. Problems of access seem to be particularly difficult for researchers following a critical perspective – "why should corporate managers allow a valuable resource – time – to be used against their own and maybe company's interest?" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000: 193).

Furthermore, taking its lead from medicine and health sociology, social science has increasingly concerned itself with the ethical defensibility of its research methodology and methods, leading to the development in the last 40 years of prescriptive codes of ethics intended to protect the rights of human subjects in research (Beauchamp et al, 1982). These codes, enshrined in the guiding principles of institutional review boards (IRB) and independent ethical committees, have a major impact on the nature of research undertaken within universities and research institutes in the US (Wright, 2005; Rambo, 2007) and increasingly worldwide. The development and refinement of codes of ethics has been welcomed across social science by some as a sensible and helpful set of guidelines (e.g. Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Bell & Bryman, 2006; Connoly & Reid, 2007) while others are increasingly voicing their concerns specially in relation to how such codes tend to be adopted by IRBs (e.g. Nelson, 2004; Gunsalus et al, 2007; Koro-Ljungberg et al, 2007; Tierney and Corwin, 2007).

Our aim in this paper is to analyse the implications of negotiating Critical Management Studies (CMS) oriented ethnographic research access on the possibilities of following such

codes and remain coherent with CMS principles at the same time. By doing that we seek to contribute to the CMS literature which tends to under analyse the ethical aspect of its research practices (Wray-Bliss, 2002; 2003; Collins & Wray-Bliss, 2005) and OS where formal ethnographic research access has attracted very little theoretical scholarly attention (Bruni, 2006b). In addition, we also aim to contribute to broader debates about qualitative research practices by highlighting the ethical implications that can be associated with conditions of establishing formal research access.

To do that, we first highlight the key principles underlining ethical codes in social research and the increasing impact of research ethics upon social science and OS in particular. We then consider the relevance and centrality of ethics to CMS and the particular challenges of ethnographic research in this tradition. After that, we discuss how the question of ethnographic access is usually addressed. Drawing on the experiences of one of the authors as ethnographer in a newspaper printing site in the UK, we then discuss the practical and ethical implications of the struggle to gain and maintain research access while maintaining a clear ethical direction in line with the ethnographer's critical commitments. We conclude with some reflections on the usefulness of codes of ethics in providing guidelines in such situations, which are arguably common to social research more broadly. Rather than calling for a new, revised code of ethics, we appeal for a more open and honest debate about the pragmatic realities of critical, organisational ethnographic research.

2. Research Ethics and the Social Sciences

In an attempt to deal with ethical concerns since the horrors of experiments conducted by Nazi doctors during World War 2, professional bodies, universities and sponsor agencies have developed codes of ethical conduct, building principally on the Nuremburg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki and in the United States on the Belmont Principles. The Nuremberg Code was established in 1947 as a direct response to the atrocities of Nazi doctors' and represented an attempt to formulate general and basic standards for human experimentation (see Childress, 2000). The Declaration of Helsinki, developed and adopted in 1964 by the World Medical Association, tried to establish a better balance between research subject's interest and the need for scientific investigation which was undermined by the Nuremberg Code (Bell & Bryman, 2006). The Belmont principles (i.e. respect for persons, beneficence and justice) provide the philosophical underpinning for US federal laws that govern research involving human subjects. It also has strong influence on Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations in US universities (see Ilgen et al, 2003). The roots of ethical concerns in research can therefore be seen to originate in medical and health sciences and were only more recently incorporated by social research.

While codes of ethics have had a presence in social sciences for some time, their application to OS in the US and Europe is an emergent phenomenon (Bell & Bryman, 2006). Most ethical codes and debates in social research tend to focus on 3 broad principles: *informed consent*, *the right to privacy and confidentiality,* and *protection from harm* (see Van Maanen, 1983; Punch, 1986; Taylor, 1987; Cassell & Jacobs, 1987; Fontana & Frey, 1994).

The first of these, *informed consent*, was a key concern of the Nuremburg code, and requires research subjects to be accurately informed about the research so that they may make a clear and conscious choice about whether or not they wish to take part (Beauchamp et al, 1982; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Davies, 1999). It is usually argued that exceptions to that principle, such as in the case of covert research, may only be justified where the sensitive nature of the research focus (i.e. criminal or covert activities) would otherwise preclude effective investigation (Fine, 1993; Punch, 1994; Adler & Adler, 1994; Calvey, 2000). *The right to privacy and confidentiality* requires that people's identities and research settings must have their privacy protected during and after the study (Punch, 1994; Adler & Adler, 1994), and that confidentiality must be guaranteed to subjects, groups and/or organisations under

scrutiny (Bell & Bryman, 2006; Fetterman, 1989). *Protection from harm* relates to any damage that a research subject or setting might suffer as a consequence of taking part on the research (Kelman, 1982; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Vanderstaay, 2005). Although physical harm is not a common consequence in ethnographies, other forms of harm can occur once the research findings are published. Even when pseudonyms are used, personal and organisational reputations can be undermined (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, Punch, 1994).

In the US, where IRBs hold significant influence, but also increasingly in Europe and elsewhere, compliance with these three principles is frequently obligatory for the institutional approval of a research proposal. More generally, though, these principles, specially when deployed by IRBs, tend to assume that they are unproblematic, common-sense, and essentially 'good' rules, that must be accepted and followed by the vast majority of researchers as vital to guarantee respect towards research subjects, which can and should be implemented unproblematically by an effective and conscientious researcher, their application is depicted as straightforward (see Fetterman, 1989; Silverman, 1999; Gill & Johnson, 2002; Bell & Bryman, 2006, to name but a few) regardless of the epistemological position of the researcher, and where ethical dilemmas arise in the field, such principles are intended to offer an appropriate solution (see Taylor, 1987; Vanderstaay, 2005). Codes of conduct have thus been defended as desirable to all organisational researchers, including CMS inspired scholars (Bell & Bryman, 2006); a position we intend to interrogate in this paper. In this way, such research ethical principles are grounded on a rather essential universalistic and prescriptive view of moral and, as such, they are increasable considered "as universal 'benchmarks' of ethical behaviour" (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007: 316). A consequence of this is that they might be hegemonically imposed on the researcher reducing its autonomy and responsibility (cf. Koro-Lujungerg et al, 2007).

While ethics, defined in diverse ways, have some relevant to most field of OS, it might be argued that certain epistemological traditions in this field are more concerned with ethical issues than others (see Parker, 1999; Adler, 2002a; Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007). In particular critical perspectives in OS have developed a body of knowledge that can be seen an essentially ethical endeavour as we will discuss in the next section.

3. CMS, Ethics and Power

While ethical questions are implicitly of relevance to all branches of social science, some sense of moral challenge to the societal *status quo* is unquestionably central to the emergence of critical thought about organisations, ranging from anarchists (e.g. Mikhail Bakunin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon), utopian socialists (e.g. Henry de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen) and communists (e.g. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels). In the past 40 years, critical analysis in OS has developed as a distinct research tradition, first through mainly Marxist perspectives (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Marglin, 1974; Antony, 1977; Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979; Thompson, 1989) and more recently incorporating post-modernist thought (e.g. Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Hassard & Parker, 1993; Chia, 1996; Calás & Smircich, 1999). In this context, Critical Management Studies (CMS) has emerged over the last 15 years as a movement that attempts to encompass different critical traditions in OS. As a consequence, CMS research is far from a unified and coherent body of knowledge due to the diversity of epistemological traditions it draws upon, such as different forms of Marxism and post-Marxism (Thompson, 1989), Critical Theory (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996), critical realism (Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2004), post-structuralism (Calás & Smircich, 1997), feminist perspectives (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004), post-colonialism (Prasad, 2003); environmentalism (Forbes & Jermier, 2002), Foucauldian studies (McKinlay & Starkey, 1998), to mention but a few. As most of those traditions follow different epistemological stances it is no surprise that, in Adler's words, 'too few of us (in CMS) would ever be able to agree on anything much' (Adler, 2002, p. 388). As a consequence, internal debates have been taking place regarding the nature of critique in

CMS (e.g. Jermier & Clegg, 1994; Boje et al, 2001; Hassard, Hogan & Rowlinson, 2001, Calás & Smircich, 2002), whether CMS aims to produce more "human" and ethical management practices or is against management altogether (e.g. Parker, 2002, 2006; Clegg et al, 2006; Willmott, 2006; Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007), the potential exclusion of other critical voices by CMS (see Bhom & Spoelstra, 2004; Ackroyd, 2004; Wray-Bliss, 2004) and structuralist and post-structuralist positions on issues of power in the workplace (see Parker, 1999; Willmott & Knights, 1989; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995).

Despite this ongoing debate, it has been argued that there are also unifying characteristics common to most or all CMS positions (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Grey, 2005; Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007). Parker (2002) argues that when someone claims to do critical work in OS, she/he is saying something about her/his political identity (that it is broadly left-wing/liberal) and is expressing distrust for conventional positivist methodology. Similarly, Fournier and Grey (2000) and Grey (2005) advocate that critical research in OS organises itself around three core propositions: *non-performativity* (being unconcerned with the development of knowledge aimed to increase organisational efficiency and not seeing management as a "desirable given"); the *de-naturalisation* of what is usually taken for granted (e.g. hierarchy, profit, efficiency) and *reflexivity*, the commitment to interrogate one's own research claims.

Fundamentally, then, CMS does not find mainstream management to be either "intellectually coherent and/or ethically defensible" (Willmott, 1995: 36). Its 'mission, therefore, is to challenge the oppressive character of management and organisation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Adler, 2002); to maintain a critical stance towards instrumental reason (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996); to oppose dominant power, ideology, managerial privilege, and hierarchy (Grey, 2005); and to analyse relations between power and knowledge, especially showing how forms of knowledge that appear to be neutral reinforce asymmetrical relations of power (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998). In this sense, critical approaches to OS are strongly linked to some conception of ethics; not only because it is largely motivated from an ethical position but also because the possibility to name the behaviour of others' as problematic (Collins & Wray-Bliss, 2005) is the main condition of possibility for critical research (Latour, 2005). As a result when critical research makes assertions about the oppressive or exploitative character of managerial or organisational practices, an implicit or explicit ethical judgment is made.

Thus, analysing issues of power tends to be a central topic in CMS-oriented research. Given the movement's epistemological diversity, power can be theorized in distinctive and sometimes conflicting ways within CMS research. However, a dominant theme in recent CMS work draws on a Foucauldian notion of power to focus on how power relations are constituted in specific organisational settings (e.g.: Willmott & Knights, 1989; Townley, 1994; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998; Hodgson, 2002). Foucault (1975; 1978 and 2000) largely rejects the association of power with repression and constraint and instead describes power relations as polyvalent, capillary, strategic and productive, enabling certain possibilities while rendering others more difficult. In Foucault's own words, "the exercise of power is a 'conduct of conducts' and a management of possibilities" (Foucault, 2000: 341). This is the notion of power we adopt in this paper, particularly when considering the researcher's location and her/his constitution within, through and in furtherance of particular relations of power.

As critical perspectives in OS typically rely on ethnography as a research strategy (see: Roy, 1952; Beynon, 1975; Burawoy, 1979; Kondo, 1990, Kunda, 1992), the next section will explore what might constitute a CMS inspired ethnography.

4. Ethnography and CMS

Ethnography can be defined in different ways: as a particular kind of fieldwork activity, as an intellectual paradigm or as a narrative style (Bate, 1997). It "yields empirical data about the lives of people in a specific situation" (Spradley, 1979: 13) and involves "the ethnographer

participating, overtly or covertly, in people's activities for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995:1). Pioneering ethnographic research in OS followed realist wisdom (Marcus & Cushman, 1982; Van Maanen, 1988; Van Maanen, 1995), based on the assumption that reality exists "out there" and that the role of the ethnographer is to preserve a non-intrusive presence in the field, acting as a neutral observer (Sanday, 1979; Marcus & Cushman, 1982; Van Maanen, 1988). Later, such work was supplemented but not supplanted by ethnography drawing on symbolic interactionism (Pondy et al, 1983; Gagliardi, 1990), in which the interpreter has a more explicitly active role, as an authorial voice in translating and transforming discourses into written texts, and it is argued typically privileging her/his experience over the native's. In such work, heterogeneous elements are usually suppressed given room to an integrated portrait of institutional foreground against a coherent cultural background (Jeffcutt, 1994; Linstead, 1993).

From the 1980s onwards, post-modern inspired critiques stormed ethnography, challenging the totalising gaze of the ethnographer, her/his ability to impose interpretation and thus how the "native" was represented in ethnographic accounts. Such critiques have undermined the researcher's ability and ethical 'right' to create textual order via the suppression of dissonant voices. In place of absolute and authoritative accounts, it is argued that knowledge generated via ethnography must be an enactment of multiple voices and realities (see Marcus & Cushman, 1982; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Clifford, 1988; Marcus, 1994), and should draw attention to issues of text, language and authorship in ethnography (Van Maanen, 1995; Marcus, 1997; Atkinson et al, 2001). The post-modern challenges have influenced not only anthropology (see Marcus, 1997) and the concerns of critical ethnography (see Thomas, 1993; Marcus, 1999) but also OS (see Jeffcutt, 1994; Linstead, 1993; Watson, 2000; Banerjee & Linstead, 2004; Bruni, 2005 among others).

Such tendencies have had major implications for critical perspectives in OS, given their traditional reliance upon reflexive, qualitative methodologies such as ethnography (e.g. Beynon, 1975; Burawoy, 1979; Leidner, 1983; Linstead, 1985; Kondo,1990). Due to the epistemological diversity of CMS-inspired research, it is impossible to provide a clear cut and generic definition of what constitutes critical ethnography in OS. However, common characteristics one would associate with CMS-inspired ethnographic research might include exploring the ongoing performance of power relations, regimes of truth, domination and resistance; describing and analyzing hidden issues, agendas and assumptions; a scepticism towards "value free" facts; a concern with reflexivity; a sensitivity to the political concerns underpinning research; and a preoccupation with deprived and powerless groups; and, therefore, a focus on the possibility of social change (see Thomas, 1993; Jordan & Yeomas, 1995; Marcus, 1999; Foley, 2002; Forester, 2003).

5. Practicalities of the Trade: Ethnography and Fieldwork Access in Organisations

Ethnography has an important and distinct presence in Organisation Studies (OS), where it has been vital to developing a deeper understanding about the world of management, organisations and work (Van Maanen, 1979; Rosen, 1991; Bate, 1997; Smith, 2000; Barley & Kunda, 2001). The uses of ethnography as a research strategy in OS have led to ongoing epistemological debates about representation, language and truth claims (Rosen, 1991; Jeffcutt, 1994; Linstead, 1993; Jones, 2000) and to an extent, concerns with ethical debates around ethnography. Less frequent, however, are academic debates associated with ethnographic research practice. In fact, many writers have divided ethnography into different phases (Van Maanen, 1995; Denzin, 1997, Bryman, 2001), One consequence of this has been to focus attention upon the reflexive ethnographic moments (such as analysing empirical material, or writing ethnographic accounts), where ontological, epistemological and ethical dilemmas arise and need to be properly addressed. This enhanced focus is largely to the

detriment of the practical moments, which are seen as theoretically unproblematic and technical, to be dealt with managerially and pragmatically (see Fetterman, 1989; Van Maanen, 1995; Bryman, 2001). For instance, although writing fieldnotes has attracted attention in ethnographic research, it tends to be treated as a practicality about which experienced scholars can advise novice researchers (see Emerson et al, 1995), and even post-modern inspired critiques have not challenged or questioned those practicalities (Van Maanen, 1995; Marcus, 1997). In such moments, by implication, it might be argued that following a clear ethical code is sufficient to deal with ethical dilemmas here, as ontological and epistemological issues are not at stake.

As an example of a practical step in ethnography, some research textbooks have tried to provide some insights into dealing with the access problem (Bryman, 1988) by offering advice on strategies intended to secure access. Examples of such strategies are: *forms of impression management* (Johnson, 1975; Agar, 1980; Fetterman, 1989; Silverman, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Feldman et al 2002), *obtaining bottom-up access* (Silverman, 1999), *being non-judgemental* (Silverman, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), *establishing a contract* (Silverman, 1999), *using researcher's personal and institutional networks* (Agar, 1980; Bryman, 1988; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Gill & Johnson, 2002); *minor forms of deception* (Johnson, 1975; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), *gaining access progressively* (Johnson, 1975);*develop and nurture relationships with important actors* (Bryman, 1988; Fetterman, 1989; Feldman et al, 2002); *the effective management of gatekeepers* (Morrill et al, 1999); *get a senior scholar to sponsor the research and get access* (Andersen et al, 1995); *become a change agent* (Gummesson, 2000) and *covert research* (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Moreover, to have some sort of reciprocity from the researcher to the organisation studied (e.g. offering feedback sections, training, etc) is not only presented as an access strategy, but also as a good practice (Brown, et al, 1976; Bryman, 1988; Ram, 2000; Gill & Johnson, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Silverman, 1999) or even as an ethical obligation (Bell & Bryman, 2006). Once access is granted, the problem is converted into an issue of 'managing' the fieldwork process and relations (Silverman, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Gill & Johnson, 2002; Feldman et al, 2002). Even an entrepreneurial approach has been advocated to address fieldwork contingencies (Ram, 2000). The pressures resulting from the perceived danger of losing formal access are rarely addressed. In so doing, the underlining idea in general accounts about acquiring and keeping access is that the successful deployment of the correct set of strategies and management of certain aspects by the researcher will eventually grant and maintain access. As a consequence, it is portrayed as a neutral and operational task, with little or no ethical consequence (beyond debates about the moral validity of employing covert research strategies e.g. Bulmer, 1982).

Portraying access in this manner reflects an assumption that the researcher has significant control over the field, and attributes too much agency to the researcher and too little to the researched. This reinforces the idea of research subjects under the control of the researcher (with the right managerial qualities) a notion that has significant ethical consequences for critically-inspired research (Wray-Bliss, 2003). This also often implies that organisations remain stable during and after the negotiation of access, depicting organisations as singular entities with a unified will (i.e. to allow or deny access). As discussed below, the ethnographer tends to be swiftly disabused of this misconception faced with the realities of conducting research in any work organisation. Moreover, this kind of guidance is implicitly underlined by an instrumental rationality which also sets dilemmas for critical researchers intent upon challenging and critiquing this form of instrumental reason and action.

The intention below is to address this tendency by underlining struggles and ethical challenges faced by one of the authors in his attempts to gain and hold onto access for

ethnographic research, and at the same time to maintain a clear ethical stance derived from his critical perspective, given the pragmatic complexity of a non-untypical research encounter.

6. The Struggle for Formal Access: A Confession

In February 2005, one of the authors of this paper (who in keeping with the traditions of the confessional ethnographic tale (Van Maanen, 1988) will henceforth be referred to as "I") started negotiations to get formal access to carry out fieldwork within the offices of a British newspaper. My main research aim was to conduct a full time CMS oriented ethnography looking at the impact of organisational change on individuals working in an industry in decline, the newspaper industry (Meyer, 2004). Attempts to get research access involved directly three distinct but interconnected organisations: RedPaper[1], FailCo and OneCo. RedPaper is a regional newspaper that was moving production from one printing site, FailCo to another, OneCo. Even though I first gained entrance to RedPaper, I eventually ended up conducting ethnography at OneCo eight months after I started looking for access. I conducted this ethnography while 4 out of the 9 OneCo presses were being replaced at a cost of £45 million, a cost shared by OneCo and RedPaper (to the great relief of OneCo as they were at this time under threat of closure due to overcapacity in the industry). Throughout this period of negotiation, I took detailed fieldnotes after every relevant event (e.g. meeting, phone call conversation, informal chat, etc.), and the account of access negotiation below is drawn from these fieldnotes.

My attempt to gain formal access to conduct fieldwork began with two meetings with the editor of RedPaper in March, 2005. In these meetings, I explained my interest in conducting ethnography at RedPaper newsroom and he replied he didn't see any problem, asking that I should write a one page proposal for the approval of the RedPaper Managing Director (MD). Although I sent the requested proposal immediately, it was not until July 2005, after months of almost daily (and increasingly desperate) telephone calls to the editor's Personal Assistant (PA), that I finally secured a meeting with the editor and the MD where they granted me access. They also insisted that before I started, I should be given an overview of the various departments of RedPaper, and it was during this tour that I was taken by RedPaper's Production Director (PD) to visit the OneCo and FailCo printing sites.

In August 2005 I finally started observing activities in the RedPaper newsroom at the beginning. However, after one week in the newsroom, I was asked to see the editor and the MD again. Although very friendly, they explained that there was a new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at RedPaper who was proposing some deep changes in the organization that would create discomfort and they were not willing to have an outsider documenting this process. To my deep disquiet, the editor stated his position;

> "You can only do interviews. You will need to send all questions you will ask people in advance. I will select the questions you can ask and the people you can speak to. I will want to see all your interview transcripts. My lawyers will read your final report and you will need to sign a confidentiality agreement"

Extremely worried, I replied I could not accept this due to methodological and ethical constraints - these new conditions of access made my research aim impracticable and I had no viable alternative subject organisation in this industry. The MD asked if I had any other idea and I said that I might research the printing side of the business, where other significant changes were taking place. They agreed to this and ended the meeting saying that the MD and I would meet on the next day to discuss details of this.

However, the next day never came. For another month, I kept in touch with the PD explaining and demonstrating my anxiety and visiting his department regularly under the pretext of making some initial observations. In this time I again phoned the MD's PA repeatedly without any reply from the MD himself. Finally, in September 2005, the RedPaper PD

contacted me to say he had the 'all-clear' from the MD to provide research access at their contracted printing sites, and he was willing to help.

I then submitted a new proposal suggesting a 9-month research project analysing changes in the RedPaper hired printing facilities, covering FailCo and OneCo. The PD said he would arrange access, but made it clear that it would be very difficult at FailCo; as relations between RedPaper and FailCo were poor and "they might think you are spying for us". Things now moved very quickly; the PD confirmed I could not research FailCo but arranged a meeting with the MD of OneCo and advised me on what to say at this meeting. I felt he was clearly driving the research towards OneCo where the new presses were being installed. He suggested that to increase my chances of access at OneCo, I should offer training in change management to OneCo managers. I was unhappy at the prospect of delivering training, but decided to do whatever was necessary to get access as by now I couldn't afford any more delays.

Finally, by late September 2005 I had a meeting with the RedPaper PD, the OneCo MD and the OneCo Senior Production Manager (SPM). It took no more than 15 minutes. After seeing my proposal, the MD assured I could stay there for as long as I wanted and that everything would be open to me because his company had "nothing to hide". He asked me to make two presentations about my research before I could start, one to trade union representatives and another to OneCo managers, to address concerns about my presence, to underline my independence and to show that there was no hidden managerial agenda behind my daily observations. No mention was made about offering training to OneCo managers. Also, I would be allowed to use the data gathered for academic purposes, provided that I agreed to protect the anonymity of the company and of individuals and to give a feedback session presenting my research findings. I saw no ethical issues at this stage as was confident I had considered the necessary ethical safeguards while negotiating formal access. However, as I left the access meeting extremely happy, the RedPaper PD said "it will be very good to have you here (…) you will be my eyes and ears in this project, you will be our man on the ground". I was deeply unhappy about his remarks, but I decided at this point to keep quiet to see how things would develop, in the belief that anything I said at this point could only endanger the precarious research access I had barely established, and with the intention of dealing with this situation as and when it arose.

One week later, I met the trade union representatives. During this meeting, the MD made it entirely clear that this was a process of communication rather than consultation, and that the research would take place regardless of the representatives reaction. Once I finished explaining how I would work, the SPM said rather aggressively: ""This is to shut you up and show that we are not afraid of having an outsider observing what we do. We have f**king nothing to hide". In the meeting with OneCo managers, the MD made it clear that helping my research was agreed between RedPaper and OneCo, that again this was a process of one-way communication and that all managers should provide whatever information I required. The SPM firmly highlighted the point that I had complete access. In both meetings I stressed very clearly that all information I gathered would be confidential, used solely for academic proposes and no names would be disclosed to anybody under any circumstances.

At this point, then, formal access might be seen to be secured, information provided and organisational consent gained, although as widely recognised, this process continues throughout the research project. The next section will deal with the specific requirements of the three ethical principles cited above: *informed consent*, *privacy* and *confidentiality rights*, and *protection from harm*, in light of the ongoing process of access negotiation. A key focus is the close link between formal access and ethical concerns as well as the problems involved in following ethical guidance for social research.

7. Access and Ethics in Practice

The difficulties associated with informed consent in ethnographic research are well known (e.g. Punch, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Adler & Adler, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Davies, 1999), and the notion of consent proved very problematic in this research. I was introduced to OneCo by RedPaper whose investment was securing OneCo's future and which was also owner of two presses being commissioned at the printing site. Later, while in the field, OneCo senior managers confirmed to me that I was only allowed to stay there so as to keep OneCo's good relationship with RedPaper. Once formal access was granted by the OneCo MD, this left little leeway for other parts of OneCo to refuse consent, as shown above in the meetings with trade union representatives and OneCo managers - a command had been issued by the MD and had to be followed. Taking advantage of established hierarchical structures of control, the selfsame structures that my CMS-oriented research aimed to critique, seemed an inauspicious way to start the study.

With this in mind, I was very concerned to secure informed consent from individuals as the research progressed. Practically, this proved very difficult in any meaningful way; it is difficult to secure informed consent from 35 people on a construction site, or from 10 busy managers at the outset of each meeting. After few weeks in the field, a customary response to requests for consent was "F*ck off mate, you always ask this sh*t. Of course I agree, pal". When I attempted on one occasion to ask same question to everyone present in a meeting, I was politely told to shut up. Thus specific conditions, both in terms of how organisational access was initially granted and in terms of practical realities of the field, made informed consent a much less meaningful concept.

In terms of privacy and confidentiality rights the situation was no more straightforward. By assuring formal access with total openness, in theory the MD undermined any possibility of preserving individual privacy from the researcher's scrutiny, at least on any work-related issues. When I asked questions about particular situations or individuals, people had total discretion on what to say, but in practice they very rarely chose not to answer, and the extent to which this was in any sense a free choice is clearly debatable. Similarly, confidentiality was complex given the role of the RedPaper PD as gatekeeper; given his comments about my role as "his eyes and ears, his man on the ground", he clearly assumed that by granting me access, I would provide him with insider information about OneCo issues. On the one hand, I strongly felt that by doing so I might be bridging OneCo confidentiality by releasing any OneCo information to a third party (indeed, one of their key customers and investors, RedPaper). However, the PD position was not a clear one; although not employed by OneCo, he had an office within OneCo and sat on the OneCo executive board responsible for the installation of the new machinery.

This situation was clearly very delicate, as the PD and I developed a level of trust in our personal relationship. On several occasions, he disclosed very sensitive information about RedPaper and continued as my supportive sponsor for securing wider access within the organisation. As a consequence, I felt that I owed him something. While I was conducting my fieldwork we had two meetings at RedPaper's headquarters where he asked for what I considered private information about OneCo. On each occasion, I underlined my commitments to confidentiality and the need to follow strict research ethical guidelines. His response was; "Come on, mate. Life is about trade-offs. Your research has to be good for all of us". At the time of the first meeting, I had seen nothing that could be considered any kind of threat to RedPaper's interests. However, as my research progressed, numerous issues emerged; for example, it became clear that some OneCo managers were deliberately allocating some expenses to the installation project budget that were not part of the installation itself, with the consent of the OneCo MD. I felt I could not disclose this to the newspaper PD – and at the same time, I felt very guilty *not* telling him.

Instead, during our meetings we talked about less sensitive OneCo issues, which could not occur without disclosing information I did not regard as confidential. So, although I made careful attempts to preserve OneCo's confidentiality, there is nonetheless the possibility that he elicited from me information he would not be able to get otherwise. I might have asked the OneCo MD what kind of issues I could discuss with the RedPaper PD. However, this I felt would reinforce the impression that I was set up as a spy for RedPaper and would endanger my formal access, not least as the MD might not be aware of these meetings with the PD. Moreover, I felt that the OneCo MD was not entirely happy with my presence in his factory and this might provide justification for him to end my access. At the same time, as both companies were partners in a major capital investment, it seemed to me more likely that such a discussion with the OneCo MD would undermine trust between OneCo and RedPaper and would again be hard to justify both ethically and practically.

In relation to the ethical commitment to protection from harm, the situation again was challenging. While in the field, I routinely witnessed instances of sabotage, bullying and racism. Some forms of sabotage are particularly dangerous when a press is running at 80mph, not only disrupting production (perhaps not of central concern to a critical scholar) but also put other individuals at risk. Racist comments were continuously addressed towards Asian workers and managers, and bullying was widely practiced; for example, I witnessed various acts of bullying from a manager who was at the time under investigation for bullying. I was asked in privacy by a senior manager and an HR officer if I had anything to mention regarding his case and I refused to make any comments on the grounds of the ethical guidelines underpinning my research – my standard response in similar situations. My rationale here was that reporting perpetrators of any problematic act would breach my confidentiality agreement (explicitly guaranteed to trade union representatives and managers in my first meetings) and could cause serious harm to the individuals concerned. This was a paradoxical situation because to protect some people from harm I keep silent about people's attitudes and actions that were clearly harming others.

At the same time, it must be said that my concerns were not only ethical; there was also the instrumental need to keep the research going. I felt that suspicions that I might provide information to senior managers or to workers would undermine trust in me and destroy any possibility of gathering meaningful ethnographic data. For instance, revealing to workers instances when management manipulated internal selection processes, or lied to employees to encourage particular individuals to apply for voluntary redundancy would certainly put my formal access at risk. Thus, recourse to ethical guidelines allowed me to keep quiet and to keep the research relations intact, which seems a rather problematic attitude, especially for critical research aimed at highlighting ethical concerns with this kind of instrumental action.

While the section before has described my struggle to get formal access to carry out intensive fieldwork, this section has focused on the paradoxical situations encountered in attempting to apply ethical principles in light of not-untypical organisational power relations associated with access. In the following section we will develop this discussion and reflect upon the space for ethical action and coherence for the critical researcher engaged in ethnography.

8. Discussions

Getting formal access to carry out this ethnography was very complex mainly due to the political fluidity of the situation encountered; supposed gatekeepers had their influence curtailed when a new CEO was appointed, and other gatekeepers were compelled to allow access as pressure was brought to bear by RedPaper upon OneCo. Contrary to the view of the researcher dealing with a mere practical difficulty (to be overcome by the use of the correct strategies and managerial skills), I felt deeply powerless and forced to exploit all of the limited possibilities available during the process of negotiating research access, including persistence - phoning up to the point of annoyance at times was my only possible influence on

events. In addition, it was clear that organisational gatekeepers actively shaped the nature of access according to their own interests and agendas, with major implications for my fieldwork. In this way, as research access moved from a newsroom to a printing site, the kind of knowledge which could be generated also changed; a set of interviews with pre-selected questions and people in a newsroom creates different knowledge and implies different methodological and epistemological assumptions compared to the ethnography conducted in the printing plant, even where the same research issues are pursued.

In so doing, organisational power relations regarding formal access were continually shaping my research possibilities at the same time that the process of negotiating formal access posed very important questions about the research aims and objectives, the approach that was being followed, how data would be collected, and threw up considerable ethical dilemmas.

The set of conditions and power relations within the field associated with access also impacted how I deployed what seem to be very neutral and straightforward ethical principles in practice. During fieldwork, situations were much more complex and fluid than any code or principle could predict, especially where ethical guidelines provided an excuse to withhold information in order to keep good field relations and maintain research access. By highlighting the benefit of ethical codes for critical management research, Bell & Bryman (2006) disregard those consequences of its application that can run counter to vital CMS commitments.

In light of CMS main principles discussed before, how can a critical inspired researcher remain silent after witnessing acts of bullying, harassment and racism, or where managers were clearly and deliberately misleading workers? It can be argued that the researcher is not silent because s/he will present academic papers (like this), give lectures, seminars, etc and by doing this they will prevent such acts from happening again (Taylor, 1987). However, by doing this the researcher will typically be communicating to people who may be aware of such situations and who can do nothing in the setting under investigation. Silence to conform to ethical guidelines (and to maintain research access) serves in many cases to allow ethically-problematic events to persist, and this is hard to tally with core critically-oriented research commitments. Moreover, given the lack of impact of CMS on reality (Parker, 2002; Clegg et al, 2006), it is very unlikely that such research will do anything to prevent similar abuses from happening again.

Furthermore, all negotiations to get formal access to carry out this ethnography took place first with powerful actors who used autocratic practices to make this research happen. If it is assumed that inequalities, power mechanisms, exploitation, etc are not *a priori* given in the order of things, but are constantly enacted by diverse sets of practices (Thrift, 2005; Latour, 2005) this research may be said to reinforce unequal power relations and exclusionary practices from the moment of access negotiation. Another sensitive issue in relation to CMS-oriented research is the fact that the main gatekeeper/sponsor was the representative of RedPaper's investment at OneCo. This investment made more than 65 employees redundant and is being used as an excuse to tighter management control over working practices. In this sense, the research also took advantage of a technological change programme that had the potential of creating exclusion, inequality and exacerbating unequal power relations. Even trying to resist to roles attributed to him by powerful gatekeepers, the researcher fulfilled some management expectations and agendas being potentially instrumental to managers' ambitions (e.g. by being a potential 'mule' for the RedPaper PD or by his presence showing the company had nothing to hide) which pose extra concerns to a CMS inspired ethnographer

Most of the literature advocates that the researcher should provide feedback or help to solve particular organisational problems in return for research access. To get access, I was asked to feedback to senior managers my full research findings (which seemed almost attractive in comparison to the alternative of providing change management training). However, providing

feedback to managers is often problematic to a critically-oriented scholar not only because this practice is driven by a clear instrumental rationality assumption and is underlined by the idea of providing information primarily to improve company productivity but also because feedback sessions may create harm to people working for the company where problems relate to particular individuals. Furthermore, they have the potential of disclosing information that would not otherwise be available to senior managers and making them to tighten control and increase application of punishment mechanisms. On the other side, by hiding sensitive information from managers the researcher might not be making a true representation of research findings to managers a condition to getting formal research access. It is also important to mention that feedback tends only to be provided to senior managers, securing their already privileged position and typically exclude other employees involved in the research.

Finally, it is possible to interrogate to what extent the application of common-sense social research ethical principles are in fact problematic, especially when associated with formal access to carry out ethnography following a CMS-orientation. On one hand, I could have followed different paths by, for instances, making OneCo MD aware about my meetings with RedPaper PD, not offering feedback section solely to OneCo senior management (say, asking to have the trade union representatives included in such sessions) or attempting a more inclusive or democratic means of access. On the other, the application of ethical guidelines and ways of getting formal access are always framed by specific events and circumstances when different sort of concerns are at stake and different individuals would quite likely take different actions under the same conditions. This means that ethical codes will always be open to individual's interpretations which make their application always contingent - it is therefore very difficult to differentiate what are idiosyncratic practices or how the researcher should have behaved, even on extreme cases (see Taylor, 1987; Punch, 1994; Vanderstaay, 2005). For this reason, the account given above is as frank as possible, so that such issues may be discussed openly. As Taylor argues, "people who cannot deal with moral ambiguity probably should not do fieldwork because of the internal conflicts it imposes" (Taylor, 1987: 294). One might develop this critique further; some CMS inspired research challenges essentialist and normative ethical views which underpin universal ethical codes (see Collins & Wray-Bliss, 2005; Willmott, 1998). One might further argue that, had current ethical codes associated with getting formal research access been enforced in the past, classical critical research (e.g. Roy, 1952; Dalton, 1979; Beynon, 1975) would never have been carried out; here again, ethical guidance can have the perverse consequence of hiding ethically contentious issues, to not mention the real possibility that following or applying universalistic research ethical principles can actively have on undermining research freedom (Holland, 2007; Tierney & Corwin, 2007; Nelson, 2004), specially of critical nature (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004).

9. Conclusions

We have argued above that all ethnographic stages or 'moments' have epistemological and ethical relevance, and have underlined this by indicating the intertwined ethical and practical implications of getting and keeping formal access to do a CMS-oriented ethnography. Research access, far from being a technical issue or an encumbrance to be overcome at the outset, is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated and often constitutes a constant struggle, determining the kind of knowledge that can be generated by ethnographic research as it is interwoven within power relations and, therefore, continuously sets up the research conditions of possibilities.

The case under analysis indicates the difficulty/impossibility of simply applying the widely-accepted ethical principles, given the reality of power relations in the field and the pragmatic requirements of maintaining access and completing the research project. Where departures from prescribed ethical practice are described above, these we hope are largely explained by

the realities of academic work and studentship within work organisations, and arguably many other locations. This suggests the infeasibility of having a clear-cut distinction between idiosyncratic and ethnographic research practices. The inevitable implication of the (ethnographic) researcher within these power relations calls into question the implementation of generic and universal ethical guidelines, given the necessarily situated nature of action and/or inaction in the field. The paper also suggests that getting access in ethnographic research raises more fundamental questions about a researcher's identity and his/her relation to the circumstances, environment and the 'subjects' of enquiry. For critical researchers, and arguably for all researchers, the manner in which access is negotiated and maintained reflects and forms the ethical aspect of the researcher in action, as s/he becomes implicated in the instrumental manipulation of research subjects. To the extent that getting access and gathering data are regarded as merely practical research stages, there is the clear danger of naturalising problematic research practices, and shifting the researcher's ethical responsibility to abstract ethical guidelines.

Our intention in this paper is not to call for the rejection of ethical guidelines per se, or to suggest that the ethnographer, or the critical researcher constitutes in any sense a general exception to such guidelines. Indeed, it could be argued that similar challenges and ethical quandaries face all sorts of social researchers in the field, whether 'critically-oriented' or not. However, we would argue that there is a fundamental discrepancy between the ethical guidelines and codes of conduct espoused by OS researchers and the pragmatic realities of implementing these guidelines in fieldwork which the field tends to suppress[2]. There is, therefore, a pressing need to continuously engage in a more open discussion of the ethical debates faced by the critically-inspired ethnographer, and social research more widely. This type of discussion may help on addressing the limitations of hegemonic discourses of research ethics and, as such, can help on thinking about alternative modes of engagement with research (cf. Koro-Ljunberg et al, 2007). In particular, this would involve (critical) researchers to constitute themselves through practices of resistance against research ethics hegemonic stances and reflexively analyse their own actions while doing investigations as well as to consider what type of moral and ethical research they desire to conduct (cf. Koro-Ljunberg et al, 2007:1092). These are some essential steps if we are to protect an ethically-defensible form of (critical) organisational research which does not rely on universalistic ethical principles.

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[1] The company names cannot be revealed.

[2] With a few notable exceptions (in particular Van Maanen, 1983; Taylor, 1987 and Vanderstayy, 2005.)