Do critical management scholars take responsibility for the performative consequences of their concepts and methods?

Ester Barinaga

review of

Jeanes, E. and T. Huzzard (2014) *Critical management research: Reflections from the field*. London: SAGE Publications. (PB, pp ix + 264, £30.99, ISBN 9781446257432)

Most critical management scholars argue that the value of their scholarship lies in its (alleged) emancipatory potential. The value of their critique, they claim, should be judged based on the extent to which it contributes to raising awareness about the silent and exploitative power dynamics permeating the management and organizational realities that they study. In this awareness-raising resides the potential for social change. It is this emancipatory ambition, this desire to speak back to power, that largely defines the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS). Indeed, it is what unifies the otherwise diverse theoretical approaches and analytical frameworks that animate the field. With this in mind, two questions are central to ask to critical management scholarship:

- If, as these scholars argue, critique is to contribute to emancipation, then what is critique in CMS? Formulated in the pragmatic tone that the editors of the volume adopt, how do CMS scholars actually do critique? What are the scholarly *practices* that constitute the 'C' in 'CMS'?

- Since critique per se does not necessarily constitute a critical intervention in the reality analyzed, what is the value of the critical practices that these scholars engage in? Or, as some of the authors in the volume phrase it, what is the *influence* (the performative consequence) of their critical practices?

While the answers to both of these questions define the character and quality of critical management studies, they are most often left un-answered. Indeed, they often go un-asked. *Critical Management Research: Reflections from the Field* is therefore a much welcomed effort to address these questions. In this edited volume, Emma Jeanes and Tony Huzzard invite a group of recognized senior and younger scholars in the field to consider the character and value of critique by explicitly reflecting on their own practices and experiences as critical scholars. The focus is set on eliciting critical scholarly *practices*, on describing the *doing* of critical research, on developing the *how* of critique.

Such issues typically fall within the territory of method books. Yet, this is no traditional method book. The contributors do not offer standardized recipes for how to conduct critical research. There are no clear guidelines for what is right and wrong; no lists of do's and don'ts. Instead, the editors have allowed contributors to delve into the ambiguities, complexities and contradictions involved in doing critical research. In what this reviewer sees as a wise move, the volume refrains from solving the apparent contradictions confronting the practice of qualitative research; it renounces (and denounces) any effort to impose order either on the research practice being conducted by critical scholars or on the realities they study.

Accordingly, the critical practices these authors suggest all relate to an increased tolerance for ambiguity. To do so, the authors encourage researchers to engage in a constant balancing act between proximity to the research subjects and critical distance; between active engagement in the field and detached involvement; between being open to the variety of perspectives and assumptions in the field and deciding on one analytical story line. As a result of this conscious effort to emphasize the ambiguity present in the field, the authors succeed in offering original reflections on how to deal with (and even nourish!) ambiguity. Here are some of the suggestions put forward by the authors contributing to the anthology:

- **Building surprise into one's research design:** Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg argue that for research to be both interesting and influential, it needs to challenge the audience's taken-for-granted assumptions. They urge critical management scholars to introduce 'assumption-challenging methodologies' into their repertoire and suggest two strategies for doing

so: (a) spotting and problematizing assumptions in the literature, and (b) creating mysteries from the empirical material.

- **Managing the tension between distance and proximity to research subjects:** Qualitative method books typically speak of the risk of 'going native', of the danger involved in getting so close to those studied that one is unable to see precisely what made them interesting in the first place. They also speak of the opposite risk and the need to get close enough so as not to impose one's bias onto the interpretation of the people being studied. Instead of attempting to solve the apparent conflict between being a stranger and becoming native, chapters 4, 5 and 6 each offer a set of practices that can be employed to use this tension constructively. Daniel Nyberg and Helen Delaney discuss the expectations that researchers need to continously deal with throughout their time of fieldwork; Tony Huzzard and Yvonne Johansson explain how different intensities of engagement with the research subjects is required at various stages of the research process; and Mathias Skrutkowski describes his efforts to become a stranger in the organization in which he is a native (as he had been a full-time employee in it for several years) and how both theoretical strange-ness and practical native-ness gained him a vantage point from which to analyse organizational life. In chapter 8, Jon Bertilsson discusses the role of this tension in the conduct of netnography.

- **Using compassion throughout the research process:** In chapter 7, Susanne Ekman convincingly argues for the need for a compassionate approach to qualitative research. More interesting for the researcher who wants to conduct such a critical management study, Ekman offers practical guidance for how to work with compassion throughout the research process, from the formulation of the research question, to the design of interviews and analysis of the empirical material.

- **Overinterpreting the empirical material:** In an effort to go beyond what he calls 'the empiricist straightjacket of the field of CMS' [174], Peter Svensson argues for imposing more layers of meaning to the empirical material than what is justified by it. This is a provocative suggestion, for it goes against the respect to the view of the research subjects that is central to ethnographic research. Indeed, with her emphasis on compassion, it would be interesting to read Susanne Ekman's reaction to Svensson's analytical practices.

The volume does not stop with a set of research practices to use at will when approaching the field, conducting fieldwork or analysing empirical material. Some

of the chapters apply the critical lenses onto the very field of CMS itself and argue that our critical research practices are constrained and shaped by the rules that dominate the academic game. Using a very direct tone, Martin Parker (chapter 12) denounces the institutional logic of universities, publishing houses, and research foundations, shedding light on the power dynamics that decide what and who gets published, cited and promoted. Karen Lee Ashcraft and Catherine S. Ashcraft (chapter 9) take a more pragmatic stance to the rules of the game that dominate the field and offer clear advice as to how to play with those rules in the method section of journal articles. In a chapter for which empirical research has purposely been generated, Emma Jeanes, Bernadette Loacker and Martyna Sliwa (chapter 3) identify collaboration as a current development in the academic game, which introduces the issues of the hierarchy of research relations or the strategic use of collaboration as a promotion strategy into the production of knowledge.

The edited volume is up to date on the questions that the editors have set out to answer and is comprehensive in the answers it offers. Yet, the volume does little to discuss the performativity of the concepts and methods we researchers use in our scholarly practices. With the exception of Hugh Willmott's chapter, the volume ignores the growing insight that the very concepts we use and the practices we engage in do more than enable us to observe the organizational realities we study. Our concepts are no neutral tools to describe some sort of independent reality; our research practices are no neutral techniques to register a reality that is taken to exist outside our offices and previous to our stepping into the field (Law, 2005). Our research practices and theoretical concepts contribute to *perform* the organizational realities that we claim to merely study. In chapter 11, Hugh Willmott touches upon this issue through a discussion of the performative effect of the concept of 'organization'. '"Organization"', he writes, 'is a *concept* that retroactively constitutes what it ostensibly describes.' Yet, he continues, 'despite being a mere concept, […] it clearly can *appear* to reflect the reality of its referent, and so mobilizes action upon this (fetishistic) power' [199, emphasis in original]. In other words, the mere process of studying and writing about something, contributes to make that something. While admitting that the performativity problem has no easy solution, Willmott does nonetheless encourage scholars to consider the performative consequences and political effects of the concepts we, scholars, use.

Although Willmott's elaboration of the performative effect of the notion of 'organisation' is appreciated, I would have liked to see a deeper engagement with performativity in a volume of this nature. Given the editors' call to reflect on research practices, and given the political sensibility claimed by the authors in the volume, it is surprising to see no systematic discussion of a problem that is strongly shaping the debate among qualitative scholars (see, for instance, Law and

Urry, 2004; Mol, 1999; Bourdieu, 1991a, 1985). More so when the argument of the constitutive effect of our concepts and methods has political consequences for the realities we study and the knowledge we produce (see Barinaga, 2016; Mol and Law, 2002; Bourdieu, 1991b; Roelvink et al., 2015).

The question is whether the editors and the authors in the volume are themselves aware of the extent to which their concepts, practices and analyses are implicated in the reproduction of what they claim to only unveil (Spicer et al., 2009). In any case, if critical scholars are serious about their emancipatory ambitions, they, too, need to become aware of the constitutive effects of their conceptual and methodological practices as well as of their own role in reproducing the power dynamics which they so condemn. It is positive that these researchers are developing practices that increase our tolerance for the ambiguity and complexity of the realities we study. This will hopefully contribute to richer and more varied realities (Mol and Law, 2002). Yet, until the day we start taking responsibility for the practical and political consequences of the concepts we choose and the practices we conduct on the realities we study, we are bound to fail in our emancipatory ambitions.

references

Barinaga, E. (2016) 'Engaged scholarship: Taking responsibility for the politics of our method mediations', in H. Landström, A. Parhankangas and P. Riot (eds.) *Challenging entrepreneurship research*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1991a) 'Description and prescription: The conditions of possibility and the limits of political effectiveness', in J.B. Thompson (ed.) *Language & symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991b) 'Identity and representation: Elements for a critical reflection on the idea of region', in J.B. Thompson (ed.) *Language & symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1985) 'The social space and the genesis of groups', *Theory and Methods*, 24(2): 195-220.

Law, J. (2005) *After method: Mess in social science research*. London and New York: Routledge.

Law, J. and Urry, J. (2004) 'Enacting the social', *Economy and Society*, 33(3): 390-410.

Mol, A. (1999) 'Ontological politics: A word and some questions', in J. Law and J. Hassard (eds.) *Actor network and after*. Oxford and Keele: Blackwell and the Sociological Review.

Mol, A. and J. Law (2002) 'Complexities: An introduction', in J. Law and A. Mol (eds.) *Complexities: Social studies of knowledge practices.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Roelvink, G., K.S. Martin and J.K. Gibson-Graham (2015) *Making other worlds possible: Performing diverse economies.* Minneapolis, MS: University of Minnesota Press.

Spicer, A., M. Alvesson and D. Kärreman (2009) 'Critical performativity: The unfinished business of critical management studies', *Human Relations,* 62(4): 537-560.

the author

Ester Barinaga works at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at the Copenhagen Business School. Recent publications include articles in Geoforum, Ethnicities and Journal of Social Entrepreneurship. Among her recent books, Social Entrepreneurship: Cases and Concepts (Studentlitteratur, 2014).

Email: eb.mpp AT cbs.dk