Can critical management studies ever be 'practical'? A case study in engaged scholarship

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Abstract

What happens when you try to engage with management practice as a critical management scholar by actually doing management? Although there have been calls for critical scholars to attempt such engagement, little is known about the practical challenges and learning that may be involved. This paper therefore provides a case study which details some of the experiences one of us had when working as a manager – while trying to remain true to his critical sensibilities. The story suggests that transforming management practice will be a constant struggle, and that the difficulties of achieving even small changes should not be underestimated. However change is not impossible. Following Foucault, we argue that critical perspectives, when engaged in particular ways, offer resources through which we might challenge the dominance of managerialist thinking on a practical level; at least in the long run.

Keywords

Charities / not-for-profit organisations, Situated critical theory, Performativity, Critical Management Studies, Engagement, Case study, Management practice, University management, Engaged scholarship, Resistance

Introduction

The relationship between 'theory' and 'practice' has been a central concern within the academy for many years (Beyer and Trice, 1982; Duncan, 1974). As early as 1776, in his book *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith provides a vitriolic attack on what he saw as the 'uselessness' (1776/1999) of the teaching and research conducted at Oxford and Cambridge universities. More recently, and specifically within the business school sector, a range of problems with the relationship between academic output and its influence on what happens in organizations have been widely debated. Such problems include, for example, the relevance (Bailey and Ford, 1996; Starkey and Madan, 2001), applicability (Barge, 2001), impact (Smith et al., 2011) and usefulness (Boyer, 1996; Learmonth et al., 2012) of academic research, and the barriers it faces in being used in practice (Anderson et al., 2001; Craig and Tracy, 1995; Shapiro et al., 2007).

Various commentators have responded by calling for academics and practitioners to work in partnership, in order to 'bridge the relevance gap' (Rynes et al., 2001; Starkey and Madan, 2001) and create knowledge that is meaningful, useful and relevant to all who are concerned with its production and use (Boyer, 1997). There is also a growing realisation that so-called 'theory' and 'practice' cannot be bifurcated as separate domains, but that different modes of knowledge production interpenetrate one another in mutually dependent ways (Gibbons et al., 1994). In this light, numerous ways forward have been proposed, including, for example, co-generative theorizing (Deetz, 2008), grounded practical theory (Craig and Tracy, 1995) and collaborative partnerships between practitioners and academics (Bartunek, 2007). A particularly popular and influential set of ideas has come to be known as *engaged scholarship*. Indeed, engaged scholarship, defined by van de Ven and Johnson as a 'collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or

phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world' (2006: 803), is quickly becoming institutionalized worldwide, with academics' tenure and promotion guidelines increasingly encouraging efforts to engage with practice (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). In short, the current rhetoric suggests that engaged scholarship is fast becoming a central concern throughout the academy, and perhaps especially in business schools.

We broadly welcome these moves towards greater engagement. However, there seems to be a widespread tendency within the business school sector to regard the 'practitioners' with whom engagement is sought to be exclusively managers, and the primary goals of engaged scholarship to be achieving the sorts of objectives top managers are likely to welcome. For example, in a recent report commissioned by the UK's Association of Business Schools, Thorpe and Rawlinson argue that business schools 'can build on meritorious but isolated examples of success [in engaged scholarship] to create a reliable, general system that better directs and supports the considerable resources of the business school sector towards effective engagement, innovation and impact' (2013: 6). However, claiming a desire to 'help practitioners to engage with the findings [of business school research] to help develop practical lessons and wider implications' they seem to take it for granted that practitioners will be senior managers, and furthermore, that the knowledge produced should be that which these managers will judge to be useful to increase the efficiency and profitability of their organization. Indeed, Thorpe and Rawlinson suggest that '[f]ailure of dialogue makes it difficult to develop insight into what problems matter to *managers*. Business schools are not realising their potential to disseminate the insights they have, nor to help others commercialise innovative ideas and technologies' (2013: 10 italics added).

In contrast, business school academics who are interested in wider social theory, and who aspire to nurture radical forms of social change (a diverse group who, as a convenient shorthand, we here call members of 'critical management studies' [CMS][1]), look for

inspiration from a much broader social scientific literature on engagement that goes back at least to the early 20th Century, with for instance, Mary Parker Follett (Graham, 2003). This literature discusses how researchers can engage with organizations and organization members to foment wider social transformation. In this sense, the aspirations for engaged scholarship in CMS can be seen as part of a vigorous and on-going discussion within the social sciences about how critically-engaged research and teaching can bring about progressive change within society as a whole. Thus, rather than being concerned primarily with increasing organizational efficiency, CMS is distinctive within the business school sector in seeking, for example, to reveal, challenge and overturn the power relations and processes of subjectivisation within which individuals are inscribed (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey, 1994; Poulter and Land, 2008); aid resistance to capitalist, managerialist forms of control (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Contu et al., 2013; Fleming and Spicer, 2010) and create work organizations that provide viable alternatives to capitalist corporations (Parker et al., 2014).

Our paper seeks to contribute to the debates about engaged scholarship in business schools within a specifically CMS context. While acknowledging that there are many other ways to understand and work towards engaged scholarship, our primary concern in this paper is to look at the issues from the point of view of practising managers – i.e. to show ways in which practising managers might engage with CMS research. This focus arises, in part, from our personal experiences. Both of us were managers before we became academics, and we remain particularly interested in the implications of critical theory for the actual practice of management. In revealing some of the personal experiences one of us had when he was trying to practise management in ways informed by critical perspectives, our aims are to explore the possibilities and challenges involved in being a 'critically aware manager' (Learmonth, 2007: 109), and to reflect on the implications for those who may wish to do management with

similar awareness. This contribution is important because the possibilities and struggles that could occur in this kind of critically inspired attempt at direct engagement with management practice are yet to be elaborated. Our intent, then, is to illustrate the struggles involved in our ambition to use critical perspectives in actual management practice.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the literature on engagement from a CMS perspective, with a particular emphasis on exploring what happens when attempts are made to practise management in line with the values and ideals espoused by more critically informed ideas. We then provide a case study detailing the experiences one of us had as a manager who tried to manage 'critically.' We emphasize, in particular, the complex challenges involved – challenges we see as being of an intellectual, a personal, and a practical nature. In the discussion, we focus on the insights of Foucault – a thinker whose work was central to the issues raised in the case study for developing (and problematizing) what engaged scholarship might mean within CMS in the context of management practice. Finally, and in spite of the difficulties outlined in the case, we consider ways in which critical academics might be directly engaged with the challenges of doing management. One place where they/we could realistically start, we suggest, is by contributing to management (and seeking to do management differently) in the places most CMS scholars work – universities.

Engagement and critical management studies

Engraved on Karl Marx's tomb is the famous quote taken from his 'Theses on Feuerbach': 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it' (Eagleton, 2011). It is hardly surprising, then, that many CMS scholars (who often take Marx's work as their intellectual starting point) have long been involved in debates about how to change the world in some way or other.[2] Furthermore, Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman (2009) have recently called for critical management scholarship to undergo a

'performative turn'; a turn which seeks to 'actively and pragmatically intervene in specific debates about management and encourage progressive forms of management' (2009: 537). They seek to move critical scholarship from a mode privileging critique, explanation and caution, towards a more overtly affirmative, practice-oriented position that explores new practices and possibilities for action (see also Gibson-Graham, 2006); a position in which 'critique can, and perhaps must, involve an affirmative, constructive impulse' (Alvesson et al., 2009: 13). Indeed, for other theorists such as Parker, '[a]t some point, being critical of other people, economic ideas and institutions must turn into a strategy of providing suggestions, resources, and models' (Parker et al., 2014: 31).

Engaged scholarship in CMS traditions can therefore take a variety of forms. Perhaps one form widely seen as successful is critical pedagogy (Grey et al., 1996). Inspired by among others Paulo Freire (1970) and Henry Giroux (2011), critical management pedagogy aims to teach management 'in ways that explicitly acknowledge the political, ethical, and philosophical nature of its practice' (Grey, 2004: 180). In doing so the aim is to 'help would-be managers to … reflect on how it [contested managerial ideology] shapes the practice of business management' (Adler, 2002: 392). A recent example of critical pedagogy in action is provided by Dehler (2009), who offers an account of his own practices which challenge students' perceptions and invite them to engage in critical action. This approach provides students with powerful methods to 'generate alternative ways to view phenomena' (2009: 45) that can lead to action such as writing to newspapers or handing out flyers on global warming. While Dehler concedes that these actions in themselves were hardly 'earth shattering', he thinks that, for his students, they nevertheless had a powerful personal impact: they 'represented acts of courage never done before' (Dehler, 2009: 44-45).

Others in business schools have sought to be engaged by influencing organizational policy-making, perhaps through the legislative process, or through ideological and discursive

contestation. Some feminists, for instance, have participated in such contestation, highlighting for example, how workplace practices typically constitute oppressive environments for women. Thus, Fotaki, draws attention to how 'women's embodied (sexual) presence largely determined what they could (not) do or say at work and the position from which they could (not) do so' (2011: 45); and authors such as Perriton have sought to 'open up the discussion of social justice issues in the workplace' (2009: 240). Indeed, Bevan and Learmonth have recently drawn attention to such matters with the desire 'that … [their] article inspires at least some of its … readers to behave differently, and in the future, to challenge the subtle [workplace] masculinities in action' (2013: 154). While, doubtless, there is still a long way to go (and there is, admittedly, limited evidence of such work reaching much outside an audience wider than university academics) arguably the influence of such engaged feminist work on policy and practice is starting to make a difference to women's rights and status as employees.

There have also been moves that involve researchers themselves more directly in organizational practice. Much of this sort of activity is probably happening, as it were, off-radar (i.e. the work is not necessarily written up for journal articles), in terms of academics' everyday activism, and their involvement in all manner of progressive causes. But where these sort of activities have been published, they typically consist of 'modes of research that are more attuned to the creation of practice-based knowing, such as action research, participatory research, [and] collaborative inquiry' (Wolfram Cox et al., 2009: 8). Others have also advocated different forms of direct engagement. Willmott, for instance, argues critical academics should move away from the self-referential sphere of scholarship and engage in practice. However, instead of assuming the practitioner is necessarily a manager, he sees the practitioner as an activist (2008: 927), while for Fournier and Grey the practitioner might be 'the managed, … trade unionists, … women's groups and so on' (2000:

26). In other words CMS scholars have interpreted engaged scholarship as a means to be attentive to power relations and to transform the work of practitioners (broadly defined) towards more progressive ends.

Furthermore there has been increased attention within critical studies of management and wider social theory to alternative ways of organizing (Parker et al., 2014). These include cooperatives, communes (Parker et al., 2007) through to flash-mobs and the alterglobalisation movements (Crossley, 2003; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). Whilst not providing prescriptions for action, such accounts of organizing otherwise do provide the possibility and indeed inspiration that other ways of organizing are possible (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009).

One further way of trying to transform practice more or less directly is by putting critical ideas into (specifically) management practice – the issue to which we now turn. Little literature has been produced that explores what actually happens in such circumstances, and unfortunately, that which is available is hardly encouraging. Learmonth (2007), for example, speculates about what he *might* have done differently had he been aware of critical ideas when he was a UK National Health Service manager. Though now a supporter of critical social theory, he believes that the structural constraints he encountered, along with his own lack of personal courage to pursue emancipatory practices in the teeth of strong opposition from more senior staff, would most likely have meant he would have done little differently. Reedy (2003), similarly, found scant evidence of any change in the managerial practices used by a group of managers who had recently undergone a 'critical' Master's programme. In these managers' interview accounts, the lack of change in their practice (in line with Learmonth's more speculative account) was largely attributed to the difficulties and constraints of corporate life – such as resistance from senior management – rather than a lack of desire to use (or the fundamental inapplicability of) critical ideas in a management context.

While there may be few examples of management activities influenced directly by critical social theory within management (i.e. as published in management and organization journals), a relevant example in a related field is offered by the urban anthropologist, Vincent Lyon-Callo (2004). Describing himself as an activist ethnographer, Lyon-Callo worked for a number of years as an Assistant Director of a homeless hostel in Northampton, Massachusetts USA. Being attentive to the everyday discursive practices within the management activities of the hostel, his research shows how these practices shaped, often in negative and destructive ways, the lives of the project workers and their clients. However, he worked as a manager with staff and their clients 'to problematize routine and taken-for-granted understandings and practices … in the activist hope of creating space for alternative understandings and practices to emerge' (Lyon-Callo, 2004: 156).

At first, many people's reactions to his attempts echoed those suggested by Learmonth (2007) and Reedy (2003) – a desire for something different, but a feeling of being constrained to effect change. For instance, in response to his critique of the practices at the hostel, Lyon-Callo reports one of the project workers responding:

> Such critical thinking is crazy making. People just don't want to hear it. I know we need to do everything differently, but I just don't know what to do. It's just so overwhelming (2004: 157).

However, through sustained critique and reflection he claims that people began to 're-think their established and habitual roles' (2004: 159). Thus:

> staff and guests at the shelter began questioning practices with the hope of developing new strategies. This was difficult and time-consuming work. However, as a result it

> became nearly impossible for the service providers and many of the homeless people I worked with to blindly continue [with existing] practices (2004: 158).

For instance, he claims that other staff began to politicize their jobs in the shelter more directly. In particular, rather than being satisfied with merely fixing the situation for individual homeless people they sought to campaign for affordable housing. Nevertheless, these transformations in people's thinking – getting engaged with campaigns and questioning their everyday practice – happened at considerable personal cost for Lyon-Callo, as well as for the organization for which he worked. He shows how 'funders, political leaders, and administrators responded to our first steps at increased political work around homelessness by threatening [the hostel's] future funding' (2004: 162). Indeed, the breakdown in the relationship between funders and the hostel (caused more or less directly by Lyon-Callo's critical approach) led to budget cuts, which culminated in Lyon-Callo (among others) being forced to leave the organization:

> Although no administrators would say that it was a direct result of the actions during the spring [a campaign for 'food not bombs'], a few months later the shelter staff learned that our funding from the state had been decreased for the coming fiscal year. … This ultimately led to my voluntarily resignation from my position as Assistant Director and Leopoldina, Robert, and Karen [project workers] all losing approximately four hours of paid work each week. Most significant, however, was the new awareness among remaining staff that their assigned role was clearly limited to reforming homeless people and managing homelessness if they wanted to keep their job (2004: 166-167).

In summary, then, the limited literature on the practical effects of critically aware managers who have tried to apply critical principles to their work hardly leads to optimism for the straightforward success. Nevertheless, this literature frames the presentation of our own case study – to which we now turn – the story of an organization where one of us spent a number of years as a manager and was impacted by reading critical perspectives of management, to learn more about the practical challenges of critical engagement.

Case study: A personal narrative

The following case study examines the challenges of – and compromises involved in – being a 'critically aware manager'. It is written from the viewpoint of one of us (Author 1), who set up and managed a voluntary organization. Throughout the following narrative, I self-consciously use the first person singular. While personal narratives are generally still seen as unconventional in many forms of academic writing (Grey and Sinclair, 2006), I use the format as a deliberate rhetorical trope – to emphasise the personal and emotional nature of the struggles I experienced. Though a first person narrative does involve certain risks – most notably the risk of overplaying the impact of individual agency (an issue to which we return in the conclusion) – by presenting my experiences in a narrative style akin to that deployed in some short stories, I hope that my tale produces more immediate engagement than is usual in academic writing, and enables you, the reader, to feel and experience as directly as possible the messiness and the discomforts involved in my everyday practices (Knights and Willmott, 1999). I hope, in other words, that you'll be able to place yourself in my shoes, and be able to feel and empathize with my own struggles in trying to apply critical insights into (management) practice. From a methodological point of view, through becoming attentive to

my own experiences, I have attempted to develop an insider account that enables me to turn familiar situations into objects of study. My attention 'thus turn[s] from the dramatically different "them" and towards the agonizing familiar "us"' (Bell and King, 2010: 432; also see Ellis, 2007; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). My mode of representation therefore reflects a desire to explore the movement between theory and practice by capturing some of the lived experiences involved in applying critical perspectives to my own management practices.

Being a critical manager

Between 2000 and 2004, I co-founded and latterly managed a small therapeutic arts organization called Creative Arts (CA) (a pseudonym), within the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) [3]. Having recently completed a business degree, and started a PhD based around a CMS theme, the opportunity to manage CA appeared to be an ideal opportunity to do some social good and to put the insights I gleaned from reading CMS literature to practical effect. Armed with knowledge from CMS, I believed I would be able to manage in an engaged, autonomous and empowering manner. My own engagement, therefore, emerged out of an active commitment to the purposes of the organization and to manage in a critically informed style. At the outset, it is perhaps worth noting, I had no intention to use my experiences as the source of an academic paper.

When, in 2001, my co-founder became ill, I took over running the entire organization. This meant juggling my management responsibilities around teaching, study and personal commitments. My management activities included administering budgets; liaising with funders, partner agencies and trustees; supervising the therapeutic artists; attending networking events; buying materials; developing publicity material and, most importantly, writing reports for our funders. The latter activity occupied much of my time, because it

involved collecting evidence and writing reports that were key in justifying the organization's funding and, therefore, its longer-term survival.

CA employed six part-time creative therapists (e.g. art and drama therapists) who worked in partnership with other agencies to deliver expressive art courses to socially disadvantaged people. Our typical clients were recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, mental health problems and domestic violence. It was for this reason then, that rooted in the pedagogical liberatory traditions of among others Augusto Boal (1979) and Paulo Freire (1970), the courses I devised were initially intended as 12-week programmes to help those people with difficult life experiences to express and explore their emotions through the medium of the creative arts: art, drama, storytelling, and clay work. Considerations such as personal exploration and growth were therefore valued for their own sakes.

Here I get to the first compromise I made. To make the project viable we were faced with having to apply for funding to pay for our materials and for the creative therapists' salaries. However, in attempting to do so, it quickly became apparent that our creative expressive approach simply did not make sense to the funders – they needed tangible outcomes to meet their national targets. Consequently my co-founder and I decided that we needed to reframe our preferred rationale by emphasizing issues that were more fundable. So things like self-confidence, self-esteem, team working, and communication skills and so on had to replace phrases like critical pedagogy, self-expression and personal exploration. We also added a four-week progression service where we encouraged the clients to sign up for education or training, to make them more employable. These sorts of narratives became the basis of our justification for the funding. Initially we felt uncomfortable with this change in direction as it meant losing the creative and personally expressive nature of what we had set out to achieve. Nevertheless, we justified the changes – at least to ourselves – by seeing them as an extension of our goals: the new managerial terms represented (I began to convince

myself) ways of practically helping the clients imagine new possibilities for their lives and find the first steps to achieve them.

Anyway, in conventional terms, CA was becoming successful. We received around £65,000 funding from a number of sources, worked with respected national charities, were told by partner agencies and therapists that the project was well organized, thought-through and successful and received constant positive feedback. I felt proud of our accomplishments. However, on occasions I also felt uncomfortable with some of our actions. Although I did not examine it at the time, in retrospect it seems to me that the discourse of professionalism was beginning to replace that of critical pedagogy, for reasons I now elaborate.

Discomforting practices

In retrospect, the project began with a great deal of naïve enthusiasm, propelled by the belief we could change peoples' lives for the better. However, as it developed, as might predicted from the literature discussed earlier, I gradually began questioning these initial beliefs and started recording my experiences using a reflective diary (Bell and King, 2010). I also talked to other people who were running similar organizations, as a way of trying to make sense of my own experiences.

For example, even at the outset, I had nagging concerns about the funding and evaluation forms I had to complete. Filling in the funding forms was difficult, because it required me to translate free-flowing, personal, experiential and expressive processes into definable and measurable targets and outcomes. I struggled with this, but was comforted by a number of VCS professionals who reassured me that funding forms were just a 'necessary evil' to get the money. Initially, then, I dismissed my anxieties as merely technical problems that had to be overcome in order to succeed. But once we had received the funding, these difficulties did not dissipate. The targets we had set in the funding form had to be translated

into quantifiable, measurable criteria for the project evaluation forms. Such translation proved challenging because it required me to find a way to capture what are essentially expressive and nebulous concepts like self-esteem within a quantifiable and seemingly objective scale – a process which felt as though I was going against the creative and expressive ethos of the programme. Once again, though, I was reassured by other VCS managers at networking events that this was simply another process of 'jumping through hoops' in order to make the project successful. Believing that we could separate these technical procedures from the actual work of the project, I was reassured (temporarily) that they were a small sacrifice to make the course a success.

Over the lifetime of the project, I amassed a wide range of evaluation and monitoring procedures. For each individual session I had to ask each client to set themselves targets and record if they had achieved them; I devised full session plans detailing set learning outcomes and defining all the activities in the session; and asked the course leader to complete a session evaluation form to assess the session against the predefined measurable targets. Every month I had to complete a monthly evaluation and monitoring form, detailing the activities that the organization had been involved with and how this had met our targets. At the end of each course I wrote a course report, sometimes reaching 30 pages, pulling together all this data to justifying the funding we had received.

Yet, despite the constant reassurance received in the set-up period that they were just procedural, these evaluation and monitoring forms continued to be a source of tension between me and the course leaders and clients. Sometimes the course leaders did not fully complete the forms, stating that they did not fit into their sessions or seem appropriate. When I confronted them they would reply: 'I suppose that we have to do *your* forms … *you* need them for *your* organization'. Similarly, on occasions, the clients refused to fill the forms in, arguing that they spent their lives filling in such forms and did not want to have to do it again,

particularly as the course was sold to them as a space of free-expression and personal growth. Becoming frustrated with this I thought 'How dare they not fill in the forms … how will I make the project a success if they do not give me the evidence?' Without the evidence, I would not be able to justify the project funding, and I was becoming increasingly anxious to make sure that CA was seen as a success by the funders.

Privately, however, I also sympathised with their concerns and was conscious of the extent to which filling in forms and hitting targets dominated our activities and mindset. I began to see that my conversations with the course leaders were increasingly geared towards discussing whether or not we had met our targets. Indeed I was conscious that I even attended meetings and set up new procedures just to have something new to say for the 'Activity and Outputs' section on the monthly monitoring form. In any case, given that this was a relatively small organization, the extent of these forms felt overwhelming and constituted a disproportionate amount of my activity. They felt little more than a box-ticking exercise, maybe a necessary evil, but one I wished I did not have to face.

The impact of reading critique

The situation really came to a head on one particular day, however, when my activities were confronted when reading Foucauldian inspired work. The day had started well as the 'progression service' session I had just run had gone well and I felt I had something positive for the course report and monthly monitoring form for the funder. This particular session was a vital one for our targets. I had taken a risk in running this course because virtually all the clients had dropped out meaning we were far below the eight clients we needed to hit our targets. I therefore needed the session to be a success to justify the decision I had made.

In the progression session, I worked with the client to help her identify some 'education or training opportunities', to devise an 'action plan' and to guide her next steps.

Together we completed a 'progression form' which invited her to set personal targets with measureable outcomes and key milestones. It had been a difficult session, as at first she was resistant to the idea of progressing, due, I felt, to her residual low confidence, fears of change, difficult relationship with her father and continual struggles with drug dependency. I became worried we would miss our targets. However, through using my counselling skills she started to discuss getting back to work and even setting up her own gardening business. I felt elated as it meant we hit our target; a very positive outcome for CA and the client.

Still excited by my success, I returned to my PhD notes from the night before, on the formation of 'the subject' from Foucault. As I began reading them I felt increasingly uneasy that what I had just been involved in was the very thing I was critiquing in my studies. Foucault talked of normalization, of confessional practices, governing the soul, of the formation of the subject. I began to see the progression session not as a way of helping provide my client make choices in how to move on with her life, but, through reading a wider literature broadly inspired by Foucault,[4] particularly the concept of governmentality, as a way of controlling her conduct. I began to see how I had formulated a relationship with her to 'work upon the capacities of citizens to act on their own behalf' (Cruikshank, 1999: 39). This practice was a way of producing new citizens 'in such ways that they become an ally, and not a threat, to the orderly government of a polity and a society' (Rose and Miller, 1992: 189). Indeed, I read Nikolas Rose's Foucault inspired critique, almost in horror:

> To rule citizens democratically means ruling them through their freedoms, their choices, and their solidarities rather than despite these. It means turning subjects, their motivations and interrelations, from potential sites of resistance to rule into allies of rule' (1998: 117).

I began questioning how I was running CA. Had I translated what the client was telling me in such a way that it met the needs of the funders rather than what she wanted? Had I transformed her actions from those of potential resistance into compliance and conformity with what the authorities wanted? Reading McWhorter's definition of governmentality:

> what occurs when the technologies of power (that is, techniques for influencing or determining the conduct of others) and technologies of the self (ethical *askesis*) are practiced together (1999: 221)

I started to wonder whether I was using a technology of power (the progression form) to govern others (the client) and indeed if I was simultaneously being governed:

> One must accept the responsibility to subject one's self, to establish voluntarily a relationship between one's self and a tutelary power (such as a therapist or a social worker) and a technique of power (in a social program or a parenting class). Building self-esteem is a technology of citizenship and self-government for evaluating and acting upon our selves so that the police, the guards and the doctors do not have to (Cruikshank, 1999: 91)

In other words, this critical literature was describing the evaluation and monitoring forms I created – not as neutral tools to assess performance – but as 'the humble and mundane mechanisms by which authorities seek to instantiate government' (Rose and Miller, 1992: 183). As I thought more about the evaluation and monitoring forms, Rose and Miller's statement came to mind:

> making people write things down, and the nature of the things people are made to write down, is itself a kind of government of them, urging them to think about and note certain aspects of their activities according to certain norms (1992: 200).

Benefits of reading critique

Reading these Foucauldian perspectives in connection to my management role was challenging and uncomfortable as it made me question everything I was doing with CA. However it also provided me a discourse to translate the frustrations I was experienced into new terms. These critical perspectives enabled me to reinterpret these monitoring practices. For me, they became not so much ways of assessing progress, but more new ways of 'governing subjects' to be 'responsible citizens' within a prescribed framework (Rose and Miller, 1992) and as part of a broader structural and political framework of visibility and accountability, monitoring and control (Rose and Miller, 1992; Townley, 1993). Similarly, I understood that my managerial targets became, not just a way of maintaining funding, but a mechanism to control and direct my organization's activity (Costea et al., 2008; Newman, 2001). In sum, rather than neutral tools for managing organizations, I began to reinterpret my quotidian activities as highly politically charged (Fleming and Sturdy, 2010). Through this reading, I saw my frustrations not as personal failings but as part of a broader drive towards framing professionalization within a narrow managerialism that was infiltrating the voluntary sector (Newman, 2001); as it already had in much of the public (Learmonth, 2005) and private sectors (Hodgson, 2005).

Applying more critical perspectives also enabled me to recast my conflicts with the project workers and clients. I had seen the course leaders' and clients' refusal to fill in the monitoring forms as an inappropriate form of insubordination. However through reading

critical perspectives I reconstructed them as acts of resistance against *my* control, a way of maintaining the course as a space for free expression (which was, in fact, my initial aim) without having to justify themselves or their feelings to project workers – project workers whom Foucault might have called 'judges of normality' (Foucault, 1991a; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Rose, 1994). Similarly I reinterpreted the course leaders' actions as resistance against the gradual creep of managerialism.

These critical perspectives, therefore, freed me from some of my tacit managerialist assumptions, and allowed me to see the issues I faced from an alternative perspective where I was (at least intellectually) freed from the grip that the target culture held over me. Through this process I also became suspicious of the ideological impact of the VCS, less convinced that my actions were producing unfettered social good, and that they might instead be producing forms of normalization and control. In other words, seeing these experiences through a critical lens helped me cope better with many of the challenges and contradictions that my role presented. It gave me a greater understanding and indeed some comfort that the struggles I faced were not a result of personal failure or solely experienced within CA. Rather I began to see that these tensions were more widespread; indeed that there was an alliance between the concerns and interests of the course facilitators and the clients and my own concerns. I, too, had my actions controlled by these forms. In other words, the perspectives these ideas offered me translated seemingly practical technical frustrations into political and social questions where I could draw an alliance between myself and the course facilitators.

Discomforts in reading critique

And yet …

Did these new understandings make me a 'better' manager in any way? Being freed from a managerialist way of thinking brought with it a new set of practical questions. The literature I was reading demonstrated the power that funding, evaluation and monitoring forms had in mobilizing my practice and changing the relationship I had with the clients and group therapists. What was less clear, though, was how to change what I was doing. Indeed, the more I considered my own practices in the light of such ideas, the more conscious I became of the power that these micro-practices of monitoring and accountability had in shaping my identity and activities. As I thought more about it, I increasingly became conscious that many of the practices I was involved with were being shaped by the target culture and the increasing managerialization of the VCS (Milbourne, 2013). Indeed, my experience of reading theory in the light of my practice was that I became trapped by the depth and gravity of the critique, exhausted by a seemingly endless range of dilemmas. Every time I had to complete the evaluation and monitoring forms, reports or targets, I remembered this critique and felt unable to continue with my role and activities: whatever I did seemed to reproduce the problematic practices revealed by what I had read.

Given that I had started the organization to do some social good, and had read a considerable amount of critical literature prior to starting CA, this realisation came as a shock. It was not that I simply needed to make a few alterations or find a technical fix to the challenges I faced. Rather, the underlying mechanisms and assumptions within which CA operated were being fundamentally challenged and I became increasingly conscious of how such discursive frameworks shaped and mobilized my practice. Every time I considered a particular action I began to consider the possible (negative) consequences and felt guilty about the potential impact of my actions. Rather than solving my dilemmas, critical perspectives introduced a plethora of competing and complex issues, which often felt paralysing. In other words, although such readings had provided me with a different way of

seeing the world, as a practitioner I needed to *act* differently. Like Deborah Connolly (an academic who worked in a homeless shelter), I 'could not, for example, dismiss established … ideologies and practices without putting something else in its place' (2000: xxii). In order to carry on as a practitioner I needed to transform how I worked.

What I had read appeared to me at that time to be unable to furnish me with any practical suggestions for transformation. Disillusioned, I eventually left CA to complete my PhD and, in due course, I became an academic. This was effectively to withdraw from management practice; at least for the time being.

Discussion

The criticisms of Foucault's work that we might be implying via this case study (in a nutshell, that it proves useless for practical action) have been taken up by a number of people sceptical of the value of Foucault's ideas for practice or critique. Deetz and Mumby, for example, believe that 'Foucault is content simply to delineate the construction of knowledge through disciplinary technologies and pointedly avoids any kind of emancipatory turn' (1990: 40). In the same sort of vein, Thompson and Ackroyd argue that Foucauldian accounts provide few examples of resistance, and 'because [according to these accounts] power is everywhere and nowhere, the impression can be given that it is a force from which there can never be any escape' (1995: 625). Fraser similarly argues that one result of Foucault's anti-essentialism, is that he cannot 'tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it' (1985: 29). Foucault then, at least for his critics, appears to have no value in providing possibilities for engaged scholarship.

Foucault, however, was well aware of the apparently paralyzing effects of his work. Indeed, he quotes prison guards' and social workers' reactions to reading *Discipline and Punish*: '"The book is paralyzing. It may contain some correct observations, but even so it

has clear limits, because it impedes us; it prevents us from going on with our activity"'. As the author of our case study, I can only echo these words – I also felt (at the time), Foucault's work merely impeded my action and that it prevented me from going on with my activity. However, Foucault replies to these concerns as follows:

> My reply is that this very reaction proves that the work was successful, that it functioned just as I intended. It shows that people read it as an experience that changed them, that prevented them from always being the same or from having the same relation with things, with others, that they had before reading' (Foucault, 2002: 245-246)

Foucault argues that people typically 'wish for a little monarchy' (1996b: 307); that is, they want someone to guide, direct and tell them what to do (1996a: 262). In other words, to reframe the argument in terms of the engagement debate, people often look for theory that they can immediately recognise to be useful. However, Foucault resists such a role for theory: 'I am wary of imposing my own views, or of setting down a plan, or program' (2000: 154). Indeed, for Foucault, a sensibility that seeks any perspective to provide us with solutions is problematic:

> … my project is precisely to bring it about that they 'no longer know what to do,' so that the acts, gestures, discourses that up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult dangerous …. If the social workers you are talking about don't know which way to turn, this just goes to show that they're looking and, hence, are not anaesthetized or sterilized at all … it's because of the need not to tie them down or immobilize them that there can be no question for me

> of trying to tell 'what is to be done'… the most important things is not to bury them under the weight of prescriptive, prophetic discourse … [Critique] should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays in refusal. ...It is a challenge directed to what is (1991b: 84).

Thus, our reading of Foucault's work is that, in the final analysis, it is *not* paralyzing (however much it might feel like that to start with). Rather, Foucault believes that finding ourselves in a state of no longer knowing what to do forces us to look for something different; and, what is more, it forces us to look outside accepted ideas and conventional approaches. Indeed the search for alternatives related in our case study was precisely the effect that Foucault was seeking to produce:

> My role is to raise questions in an effective, genuine way, and to raise them with the greatest possible rigor, with the maximum complexity and difficulty so that a solution doesn't spring from the head of some reformist intellectual or suddenly appear in the head of a party's political bureau. The problems I try to pose – those tangled things that crime, madness, and sex [perhaps we might add management] are, and that concern everyday life – cannot be easily resolved. Years, decades, of work and political imagination will be necessary, work at the grass roots, with the people directly affected, restoring their right to speak. Only then will we succeed, perhaps, in changing a situation that, with the terms in which it is currently laid out, only leads to impasses and blockages (2002: 288).

Thus, we interpret Foucault to be asking deeper questions than those concerned with merely how we can solve the problems we *appear* to be facing. He seeks to raise questions that challenge the very terms we typically use to think about our problems. And, as importantly, he is not seeking to be an external consultant; for Foucault, it is the people directly affected who, on realising the difficulties of their situation, need to develop their own ways forward.

What, then, does this reading of Foucault add to the debate about engaged critical scholarship? We think that the perspective Foucault is offering is, in a sense, directly opposed to many of the conventional ideas about engaged scholarship that are currently mainstream within many business schools. Rather than offering solutions, or even working on problems that a practitioner (whether a manager or activist) might identify as useful, Foucault is suggesting that scholars should raise questions 'with the maximum complexity and difficulty'. So if critical perspectives seek to be engaged, following Foucault, then they should seek to be so by being disruptive and disturbing to those with whom they engage. They should offer people different and unsettling ways of seeing the world, ways that leave the reader-practitioner (at least initially) confused and bewildered – in our case study, the very state of mind that one of us found himself to be in after reading Foucault. In other words to continue doing the same thing would be the real inaction; stopping doing it – becoming paralyzed by critique – is actually what enables some kind of genuine change as it forces one to engage in deeper questioning and transformation.

We believe, therefore, that it is a mistake to expect CMS perspectives to necessarily be practical and useful; at least when such terms are understood in the sense of giving immediate answers. But we believe that if CMS scholars provide the sorts of problematizations that Foucault commends, their work may turn out to be useful in the longer term, because such ideas have the potential to change the terms of the debate (cf. Learmonth et al., 2012). Furthermore, critical perspectives of this kind work on *us*, open up new

possibilities in terms of ways of being, making things that we thought were static and unchangeable become mobile, and so enabling transformation.

Such insights seem to us to have two key implications for the engagement debate. First, any engagement with critical perspectives of the sort offered by Foucault can be considered part of our subjectivity. Such perspectives provide a way of disrupting taken-for-granted subjectivities and accepted ways of seeing the world – they provide resources to create alternative ways of being. Returning to our case study, the disruption of my identity as a successful VCS manager could have opened up possibilities of alternative identities – perhaps as an activist or agitator within the sector, or as someone judging himself by his capacity to resist funding targets or work for more radical social change. Second, an engagement with Foucauldian critical perspectives requires a different sensibility, a sensibility which encourages an ability to live with not always knowing what to do. Thus, we are not suggesting that all practical action is rendered impossible by this sort of understanding. Indeed, to do so would hardly be faithful to Foucault. As he puts it: 'I don't construct my analyses in order to say, "This is the way things are, you are trapped." I say these things only insofar as I believe it enables us to transform them. Everything I do is done with the conviction that it may be of use' (2002: 294-295).

We submit that Foucauldian critical perspectives have the capacity to reveal to managers a range of choices that they would otherwise not have available to them. But this process is likely to take time. As Foucault put it (above): '[y]ears, decades, of work and political imagination will be necessary …. Only then will we succeed.' In terms of our case study, had I stayed as a VCS manager and had more time to reflect on the implications of Foucault's work, it might have provided me, for example, with new choices about whether to engage in mundane acts of resistance. I could, for instance, have worked with others in similar organizations to decide collectively not to complete our monthly monitoring forms.

Had I/we done this, we might have become less preoccupied with hitting targets, and been more open to new ways of considering the wider purposes of CA. Becoming less enamoured with targets may also have enabled us to listen more effectively to practitioners and clients, privileging their views over those of the funders. Perhaps listening to clients more might have enabled a more positive reading of acts of resistance, so we could have worked with them to produce new practices. Perhaps we might even have considered withdrawing from practices seen as problematic; or shifted our roles away from service compliance towards more explicitly emancipatory ends, effectively turning CA and similar organizations into social movements rather than service delivery arms of the state.

Conclusion

It is, of course, impossible to know what might have happened had I stayed with CA. In any case, it's too late to go back now; the organization is closed, and today we are both firmly (and perhaps a little too comfortably) ensconced within the ivory tower of university life. So finally, we turn our attention to the possibilities for people in our sorts of position to engage directly with these insights.

One obvious place where we could realistically start engaging critically in practice is by taking on significant management roles within our own workplaces – universities. In making this proposal we are in no sense diminishing the importance of the other forms of engagement to which we have drawn attention. Nevertheless, becoming a manager (if only being in such a role temporarily) might represent a further way in which to resist the audit regimes, discriminatory practices and other dysfunctional aspects of university life to which CMS has drawn attention (Ford and Harding, 2010; Parker and Jary, 1995). After all, for Foucault, critique 'should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation' (1991b: 84). But let's be

clear. For us, the primary aim of taking on management roles is not merely to be a 'better' (i.e. perhaps more humane or nicer) manager – something perhaps like Meyerson's (2001) tempered radical. Rather, the challenge articulated in our case study, and in the discussion of Foucault, is to use our management roles to find ways to stop management (as conventionally defined) from working, and thereby open up spaces for the collective reconfiguration of social relations and organization.

Of course, our case study suggests, and as those CMS academics who have taken on such roles have elaborated, the difficulties and compromises involved will be substantial. By entering into the managerial hierarchy as a manager, subjects, however critical, enter into concrete social relations that are structured by substantive financial and institutional constraints. It is not surprising then, that Burrell recounts from his own personal experiences the challenges that a critical management department head receives from those higher up the university's hierarchy: how he faced a brutally unsophisticated politics that encouraged him to intensify workload pressures on junior staff, and to become increasingly commercialized. Reflecting on these experiences he notes 'it is always easier to *write* something that is different, than it is to *do* something that is different' (Burrell, 2009: 555 italics in original). Parker (2004) similarly offers an exploration of his role as a head of department in another school, in which he examines the tensions and challenges that come with the role, and the shifting identities he underwent. He comes across as ambivalent about the role, at times enjoying it, but equally concluding that 'doing well as the manager of a management department means doing things that I would rather not do' (2004: 49).

So, in proposing that CMS scholars take on management roles, we suggest that there would be a particular value for those who do so to develop further theoretically-informed personal narratives concerning the experiences involved in being a critically aware manager. We hardly expect such narratives to provide any kind of how-to-do-it manual. But what they

might do is to provide others (including those in management roles outside universities) with the basis for making more informed choices about their own actions. Such narratives could, for example, enable their readers to be less naïve about such things as the personal and professional costs of speaking out – or of engaging in subversive activities. Perhaps, these kinds of narratives might also enable their readers better to cultivate a self who, following Foucault, can cope with *not* always getting things right, with *not* always knowing what to do. They would also provide their authors with the opportunity to continue to engage with the tension between finding the practical means by which we might do 'management' differently, and the task of articulating how management might be reconceived – the latter being the main role of CMS theory up to now.

Furthermore, the emphasis on producing narratives to inform *others* who seek to work in similar ways represents an explicit recognition that the project of becoming a critically-informed manager must be a collective one if it is to have any chance of (even limited) success. We do not wish to give the impression that worthwhile change might come about solely through isolated individuals acting alone. Indeed, to suggest that it might do (the risk we may have run in producing our first-person narrative earlier) is to collude with an idea that is central to the constitution of contemporary managerial subjectivity: that of the heroic agent, able to transcend structural or organizational contexts.

We are therefore arguing that by taking on *and* critically engaging with managerial roles and responsibilities, as well as working collectively with others who are doing the same sorts of things, critical perspectives might have a chance to forge new forms of engaged scholarship that represent genuine change. Scholarship that has the potential to create new possibilities for thought and action, if borne, paradoxically, out of initially paralysing any action. Of course, the outcomes of such activities cannot be predicted in advance, and the

knowledge thereby obtained cannot be certain to produce desirable outcomes. Nevertheless, in the long run, such activities may well contain the potential for us – with others – to act differently.

Notes

1. We make no claim for CMS being a coherent and well-defined field; indeed scholars who self-identify with it may come from a range of conflicting disciplinary backgrounds (including neo-Marxist, Labour Process, post-structuralist, feminist and psychoanalytical traditions). However, the formulation 'CMS' has now become a widely used shorthand in management studies; those readers seeking a full discussion of its history(ies) and ideology(ies) might consult (Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Reedy, 2008; Spicer et al., 2009; Thompson, 2004).
2. It is worth noting, however, that ideas around engagement remain contested within some quarters of CMS. Concerns centre, in particular, on the institutionalization of engagement and the dangers that critical perspectives might thereby become co-opted (Burrell, 1996) or that critique might lose its cutting edge in the rush for producing easily applicable ideas (Grey and Willmott, 2002).
3. The VCS has not been widely studied within CMS, which has traditionally turned most of its attention on large corporations. However the period covered by the case study was one that saw an increasing managerialization of the sector, inspired primarily by the New Public Management model, with its neo-liberal agenda of targets and accountability (Milbourne, 2013). This managerialization has caught the attention of wider social theorists such as Clarke and Newman, who demonstrate how these practices have shaped the VCS (Clarke and Newman, 1997), including its management practices. Therefore, although CA was not established to make profits, nor did it have shareholders, it was still

subject to many of the same forms of managerial control as a for-profit corporation (Grey, 1999). For this reason we feel that it represents a legitimate target for critical commentary.

4. The work of Michel Foucault has been a major source of inspiration for many in CMS (Burrell, 1988; Collinson, 2003; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998). However, most of the Foucauldian scholars cited in this section are not institutionally located in business schools, and would not, therefore, be identified with CMS as such, though much of their work has been used extensively by CMS scholars. These particular authors are cited simply because (as the case study makes clear) they were the authors I was reading when I began to see more clearly the contradictions inherent in my role.

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