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Ethics and/or Success in Conducting Organization Studies: A Habermasian Account

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Abstract

In the world of Organization research, some words are used by scholars with a specific political purpose: two of these are ethics and emancipation. The second is used to recall the social purpose of the academic community, which can be done from several perspectives (for example, that of Critical Management Studies). Regarding ethics, organization researchers often use this word to denounce managerial practices. Their research commonly reports the ideological orientation of such management practices as imply unethical behaviour. In this sense, the unethical orientation of managers has been seen as something masked by a manipulative discourse, which has built the false impression that management practices are ethically oriented. But the organization researchers say almost nothing about their own demagogic ethical discourse, even though their silence has led to the criticism of academics for "lack of ethics." This paper deals with the problem of ethics as it relates to the research practices of organization studies itself, showing some aspects of the ways in which ethics is handled by researchers in their fieldwork. To this end, it adopts Habermas' view of discursive ethics, in particular, his conception of strategic action. In this sense, strategic action ignores ethical claims, because it is oriented to performative and utilitarian interests. Thus, when a speaker performs a strategic action, s/he distorts communicative interaction by omitting or manipulating information (distorting truthfulness), being insincere about her/his actual intentions and/or claiming feelings which s/he lacks (distorting sincerity), adopting illegitimate or subverting legitimate moral claims (distortion of legitimacy) and/or being confused or ambiguous about what s/he is saying (distorting comprehensibility). My argument is presented in the form of three different research examples, which reveal how strategic action emerges in critical research enterprises and how ethical claims are disregarded. In the end, I explore my own research experience, telling a confessional story, which illustrates strategic action in the critical organizational research field. The exemplary cases show that, in addition to the absence of ethical consciousness, researchers are pressurized to supply opportunistic reports of research findings and 'discoveries,' in order to merit further qualifications. To be successful, researchers are prepared to be opportunistic and hence unethical.

Keywords

Organization Studies, Ethics, Fieldwork, Habermas, Strategic Action.

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Ethics and/or Success in Conducting Organization Studies: A Habermasian Account

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In the world of Organization research, some words are used by scholars with a specific political purpose: two of these are ethics and emancipation. The second is used to recall the social purpose of the academic community, which can be done from several perspectives (for example, that of Critical Management Studies). Regarding ethics, organization researchers often use this word to denounce managerial practices. Their research commonly reports the ideological orientation of such management practices as imply unethical behaviour. In this sense, the unethical orientation of managers has been seen as something masked by a manipulative discourse, which has built the false impression that management practices are ethically oriented. But the organization researchers say almost nothing about their own demagogic ethical discourse, even though their silence has led to the criticism of academics for “lack of ethics.” This paper deals with the problem of ethics as it relates to the research practices of organization studies itself, showing some aspects of the ways in which ethics is handled by researchers in their fieldwork. To this end, it adopts Habermas’ view of discursive ethics, in particular, his conception of strategic action. In this sense, strategic action ignores ethical claims, because it is oriented to performative and utilitarian interests. Thus, when a speaker performs a strategic action, s/he distorts communicative interaction by omitting or manipulating information (distorting truthfulness), being insincere about her/his actual intentions and/or claiming feelings which s/he lacks (distorting sincerity), adopting illegitimate or subverting legitimate moral claims (distortion of legitimacy) and/or being confused or ambiguous about what s/he is saying (distorting comprehensibility). My argument is presented in the form of three different research examples, which reveal how strategic action emerges in critical research enterprises and how ethical claims are disregarded. In the end, I explore my own research experience, telling a confessional story, which illustrates strategic action in the critical organizational research field. The exemplary cases show that, in addition to the absence of ethical consciousness, researchers are pressurized to supply opportunistic reports of research findings and ‘discoveries,’ in order to merit further qualifications. To be successful, researchers are prepared to be opportunistic and hence unethical. Keywords: Organization Studies, Ethics, Fieldwork, Habermas, Strategic Action.

In profit organizations most of all, the critical organizational research has faced problematic conditions. In general, one of the biggest problems in the broad field of organizational research is the difficulty of accessing data from an organization and even of entry (Bell, 1999). In part, this difficulty occurs because managers may fear that the research data will be used against the organization and its members. They often see organizational researchers as a threat.

In this sense, organizational research is hard to undertake, because the members of an organization are often afraid that the claims made by researchers will be disturbing (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). They are afraid of what researchers will do with the collected data, or what they may request in their interaction with the organization. For this reason, it is very common for staff to ignore information, hide important data, or in some other way make the research project unfeasible.

This is partly because organizational researchers are nowadays more and more concerned with ethics in particular. In the broad field of management research, the ethical theme seems to be growing into one of the most important study subjects developed in recent years, partly in consequence of the reflexivity and criticism surrounding the role of management and the influence of the dominant corporate interest in the results of managers' actions (Parker, 1998). In critical organization studies, business ethics is a central theme, in particular, as a subject of criticism for its anti-foundationalist ethical approach (Collins & Wray-Bliss, 2005).

This paper deals with this problem by seeking to clarify how ethics is considered by organization researchers when engaged in fieldwork. To reach this point, it adopts Habermas' view of discursive ethics, concentrating on his conception of strategic action. For Habermas, this kind of social action is the opposite of communicative action, an act of speech free of constraint, which is also concerned with ethical commitment. In this sense, strategic action lacks ethical claims because it is an action oriented to performative and utilitarian interests. This argument is demonstrated by presenting three different research examples, which reveal how strategic action emerges in critical research enterprises and how ethical claims are disregarded in this situation. In the end, I explore my own research experience, telling a confessional story, which shows an example of strategic action in critical organizational research.

This paper is structured in five parts. First, it discusses the locus of ethics in organization studies, which is not only an important subject for criticism, but also a subject for serious consideration in research practice. Then, it discusses Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, introducing his theoretical framework of discursive ethics. Next, it moves to discussing how strategic action appears in critical organizational research. Following this, I give a confessional example from my fieldwork experience. Finally, the conclusion is reached that many critical researchers adopt opportunistic behaviour in response to academic pressures, which are exerted to guarantee the productivity claim of capitalist interests, in the same way as any other job in our society.

The locus of ethics in organization studies

Organization researchers usually deal with ethics in the sense of reporting the ideological orientation of such management practices as imply unethical behaviour (for example, Banerjee, 2008; Shrivastava, 1986). In this sense, the unethical orientation of managers has been seen as something masked by a manipulative discourse, which has built the false impression that management practices are ethically oriented. This means that organization researchers often see as problematic the way in which managers and corporations build a false sense of morality around their recent work on social programmes; for example, those for corporate social responsibility and employees' health (Collins & Wray-Bliss, 2005; Haunschild, 2003; Parker, 1998; Roberts, 2003).

For this reason, when organization research is under review, ethical claims can arise which test the researcher's discourse-practice coherency, for researchers are, of course, not immune from ethical considerations in their own practice. Although the ethics debate is almost non-existent in this academic group (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Brewis & Wray-Bliss,

2008), the *lack of ethics* has been subject to some criticism of writers on critical organization and management. For example, Collins and Wray-Bliss (2005) note the discriminatory ethics among Critical Management Studies scholars. It is also clear that when organization fieldwork is undertaken, everyone's ethical claims become more evident (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009).

It seems inescapable that commitment to an ethical theme should compel organization researchers to adopt ethics in their own research practice. However, when they are challenged by the difficulty of access and other pressures, this ethical claim becomes difficult to meet (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009). In other words, organization researchers are faced with the dilemma of being either ethical or successful in their research, and both terms must be considered as central concepts in a Habermasian framework, as we will see in the next section of this paper. To clarify how this dilemma arises for the organization researcher, we use the ethics of discourse proposed by Habermas.

Ethics challenged by the utilitarian view: The theory of communicative action

The work of Habermas has been an important approach for the organizational analysis that takes a critical perspective (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). Starting from the philosophy of language, Habermas proposed a theory, which focuses on intersubjective relationships. Its application in organizational reality can provide an interesting critique about managerial practices and the rationality of modern organizations (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996; Burrell, 1994; Forester, 1983).

Supported by a very heterogeneous theoretical basis, Habermas (1985, 1989) built a deep theory of social action, called Communicative Action Theory. It is based on the social construction of reality, which results from intersubjective interaction. This approach is based on the linguistic dimension of social action, which is based on intersubjective interaction in speech acts with rational claims (Forester, 1983).

Seeking to continue the original project of the Frankfurt School, Habermas proposes a paradigmatic shift to deal with the problem of modern reason. In this sense, he finds an answer in the philosophy of language, following the tendency in social sciences called the 'linguistic turn'. In this approach, the emancipatory claim of reason is reached through the intersubjective interaction, which is practised by members of the same communicative community. In this paradigm, communication is the centre of a social process, because is through communication that human beings are able to interact and built their signification of the world (Forester, 1983). Considering these issues, Habermas claimed that he had formed a theory of "Communicative Action" (Habermas, 1985, 1989).

Supported by the philosophy of language, Habermas (1985) could avoid the teleological point of view of rationality – that is, the assumption which considers as rational the behavior or perspective that provides the best relation between ends and means – which emerges from the tradition of Conscious Philosophy and circumscribes the rational attribute of social action to the limits of the objective dimension of human relations. This is the essence of Habermas' critique of the Weberian concept of rationality, which is monologic and, for this reason, is conceived as rational only from the agent's perspective. Habermas instead defends a re-signification of the rational attribute of social action, which can be imputed to both the subjects involved in any social interaction.

Habermas (1985) also found in symbolic interactionism the theoretical complement to solving the problem of integrating individualization and socialization. Focusing on the process of self-representation, this approach shows how the link between subjectivity and objectivity is made by social interaction symbolically mediated and representing the concept of the social role. In other words, social reality is "objective" in the sense that it is the result

of the process of adjusting meanings, that is to say, social objectivity is reached by intersubjectivity (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

For Habermas, there are three ontological dimensions to consider in his intention to re-conceptualize the rational attribute of social action: (i) the objective world, where reality is constituted as a state of external objects and facts, which exist independently of subjects and are perceived from a realistic perspective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979); (ii) the subjective world, which is the internal dimension of each person's subjectivity, the possibility of accessing the reality of each person's mind and feelings, which no one else can penetrate or know in full; and (iii) the normative world, which represents our cultural reality and the process of legitimating individual acts in a social dimension. Habermas argues that, to be called rational, something must make these three ontologies cohere with one another.

Habermas found the basis of his theory by joining symbolic interactionism to Austin's theory of speech acts. The structure of speech acts reveals to Habermas the potential of communicative interaction to establish a coherent integration between all ontological dimensions, precisely because language is the medium for intersubjective adjustment, in all three types of world signification, whether objective (we can talk about facts); subjective (we can talk about impressions and feelings); or and normative (we can talk about moral statements). In this sense, through communicative agreement, Habermas argues that we can reach "community idealization," i.e., reach social justice without denying our interests and self-aspirations.

For our purposes, we focus on a particular element of the Habermasian theory, strategic action. Put very simply, strategic actions arise when the interlocutor is concerned with the success orientation of the speech act and, in this concern, systematically distorts communication. Although this kind of social action is rational, it is so in the objective dimension only; from a wider ontological perspective, strategic action is contrary to the ethical claims of a community of speech and it compromises the assumption of reciprocity made by a moral orientation, which is present in all human interaction (White, 1995).

If reciprocity and trust are both important elements for reaching communication action, there are at the same time pre-linguistic constraints, the structural issues which stimulate the adoption of strategic action (Felts, 1992; Forester, 1983). In addition, Habermas (1985) proposes that strategic action is built upon systematic communicative distortion. This means that, to achieve a perlocutionary speech act, the speaker needs to manipulate its validity claims. Rather than be deviant in their behaviour, speakers make a communicative distortion, a mechanism to manipulate the intersubjective process, because, in doing so, they can attain success.

In simple terms, communicative distortion is any speech act performed consciously by a speaker with the intention to manipulate meaning as is perceived by his/her interlocutors. In this sense, the main speech acts in this category are lies (truth distortion), insincerities (expression distortion), dishonesties (moral distortion) and misunderstandings (intelligibility distortion). Because a speech act has four validity claims, communicative distortion can affect four issues. Thus, when speakers perform a strategic action, they distort communicative interaction by omitting or manipulating information (distorting truthfulness), being insincere about their own hidden intentions and/or pretending feelings which they lack (distorting sincerity), adopting illegitimate or subverting legitimate moral claims (distorting legitimacy) and/or being confused or ambiguous about what they are saying (distorting comprehensibility). All these strategies of communicative distortion assume a teleological function in the construction of intersubjective interaction, because they are used in order to manipulate the meanings shared by the subjects involved in the interaction. In this sense, the speakers' know that, without this manipulation of meanings, they may find it hard to reach success in the action.

In critical organization research, this approach is used in management discourse in particular to describe communication, which is systematically distorted. Forester (1983) and Vizeu (2011), taking this approach, point out some aspects of management rhetoric, which illustrate how managers use discourse in this strategic way. Table 1 (below) shows some examples of rhetoric in the management area and how each one distorts the claims in the ideal speech act relationship.

Table 1: Valid Claims in a Speech Act

Valid Claim	Possibility of Questioning whether	Example
Truth	What is said is true	“We’re having financial problems and we must to cut people...”
Sincerity	What is said is sincere	“...and I am worried about your situation...”
Legitimacy	What is said is legitimate or morally accepted	“...however, we do it in a fair way, accord to the labour laws”
Comprehensibility	What is said is intelligible	“Everyone understood the terms?”

Source: Vizeu (2011, p. 66)

Organization studies and strategic action

In organization studies, the communicative standpoint on social interaction appears as a fruitful perspective, because it offers interesting theoretical points which can analyze practical problems in fieldwork performance. In this sense, the Habermasian dichotomy of communicative interaction/strategic action and communicative action shows the tension between researchers’ interest in being successful in a complex fieldwork project and their claims of carrying out the fieldwork ethically.

To qualify the complexity of organization studies fieldwork, we can follow the view that the “researcher acts as his/her own research instrument” (Schultze, 2000, p. 7). One argument for this view is that there are many challenges in fieldwork, which force researchers to use all the available tools to ensure success in their research project. Following Habermas’ theory, we go further, arguing that the concern for research success may entail acting strategically. This means that, for their purposes, organization researchers have to be capable of lying, hiding and simulating feelings, providing misleading information and so on, all in the name of research viability. And, the more impediments are perceived to fieldwork performance, the more organization researchers are tempted to distort their communication.

Searching carefully in organizational fieldwork reports, we can find researchers performing strategic actions. To show how they can occur, we present three remarkable cases. All of them show the ambiguous way in which communicative distortions ensued when a researcher faced threats to his/her own research purposes. They also reveal that, to reduce the obstacles to research, researchers may deny their own ethical claims.

The first case is an organizational ethnographic report by Alcadipani and Hodgson (2009). The research had a critically-oriented approach by one of the authors to a British newspaper. Here, we are interested in the researcher’s report on his difficulties in gaining access to the organization. The authors describe a complex context of negotiation and bargaining, which reveals many problems over guaranteeing the basic research conditions.

These problems led the researcher to accept a role, which he did not want: the manager suggested he should be his ‘eyes and ears’ among the workers. Although this request left the researcher very disturbed, he failed to confront it. His justification is presented below:

I was deeply unhappy about his remarks, but I decided at this point to **keep quiet**. My intention was 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. (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009, p. 136)

In this case, the communicative distortion was manifested by silence, because, in keeping quiet, the researcher did not voice his discomfort with the manager’s proposition. He also manifested concern about the ethical implications of this attitude, showing how hard it is to maintain ethical principles in the context of practising organization fieldwork, as shown below:

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. (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009, 140)

Another interesting case is presented by Bruni (2006). It was a piece of critical organization research conducted in the editorial office of a gay newspaper. His report account addresses the problem of sexual orientation in doing organizational research, but at the same time reveals the problem of communicative distortion and a manipulative attitude on the part of the researcher. In this case, one particular event in a fieldwork process demonstrates it very well. It was the researcher’s deliberate failure to clarify his real sexual orientation. As we can see in the following description, this decision was made by the researcher in order to make a good impression on the researched, which – he probably imagined – would affect the research positively:

One day the person I was shadowing said to me: ‘have you got a boyfriend or are you single?’ Seeing that I’m male I realized that he thought I was homosexual. As it happened, I had no partner at the time and so I simply answered that I was “single.” The conversation stopped there, for the time being. I knew that he thought I was gay but I couldn’t understand why. (Bruni, 2006, p. 300)

Knowing that the researched was homosexual (and male), Bruni (2006) admits that he himself distorted communication – because he did not say that he was heterosexual. In so doing, he allowed his own sexual orientation to be misinterpreted. He argues that he was tempted to do it because “being considered an insider for [his] participant observation” would have had its advantages (Bruni, 2006, p. 301). In fact, he admits dishonesty in his evasive first positioning, which in this event of communicative interaction could represent his acceptance of the prevalent utilitarian orientation and a manipulative intention, as we see below:

...but you are gay, aren’t you? This was the final phrase in his explanation of why he thought I was gay. As a question it left no room for evasion; the

answer could only be “yes” or “no.” I was seriously embarrassed, more than anything else because saying “yes” would have been an outright lie, while saying “no” would reveal that I had been dishonest with him. (Bruni, 2006, p. 301)

The fact that the organization researcher wondered whether to say “yes” or “no” shows us the tension between being ethical and being successful in a fieldwork project, which is well accounted for in Habermas’ theoretical dichotomy of strategic and communicative action. This dilemma in doing organization studies has been pointed out by others, for example, Alcadipani and Hodgson (2009) and Taylor (1987), whose work provides the third experience that we analyze.

Taylor (1987) presents a dilemma in which a researcher wondered whether or not to report abusive behaviour during fieldwork. In this case, we are not specifically interested in the main problem pointed out by the author, namely, the specific abuses identified. Our concern is how the researcher dealt with this ethical dilemma and why he chose opportunistic behaviour as his solution. Once more, we argue, the motivation was to maintain the good relationship existing between the researcher and his group of researched persons.

In his fieldwork account, Taylor (1987) shows how difficult it was to build rapport with his observed group, demonstrating all the paradoxes and complexities of fieldwork, as & Hodgson (2009) point out in relation to access. However, Taylor’s case reveals a more conflictive situation, in which the researcher faces an unethical practice, which he wants to critique, and hence – because he distorts the communicative understanding of his ethical position – he includes himself in this social practice. Referring to the abuse of patients by the attendants in a mental hospital, the researcher demonstrates the subordination of his ethical claims to his concern to conduct successful fieldwork:

While intervening in attendants’ abuse might have soothed my conscience and perhaps helped the men temporarily, it almost certainly would have spelled an end to my rapport with attendants and thus circumscribed the opportunities to collect data on their everyday routines and activities. (Taylor, 1987, p. 293)

The three examples shown above demonstrate how organization researchers dealt with ambiguity in doing their job. Obviously, organizations are complicated social research sites for any social researcher, because several issues emerge which require much more complicated research than in other fields (Bell, 1999; Rosen, 1991). As noted above, this is because organizations are sites surrounded by a climate of suspicion. This leads people who work in organizations to interact by adopting a distrustful attitude; they always assume that other people will take advantage of them (in fact, to do their jobs, members of organizations often need to be opportunistic in their relationships). This is true for managers in particular, who are constantly under pressure to behave in a utilitarian way (Watson, 2003). Thus, they are always bargaining, attempting to gain the advantage from anyone and, in so doing, to attain the goals of the organization. From the Habermasian standpoint, the opportunistic approach of management practices is closely associated with strategic action (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996), performed by managers through specific processes of communication that they systematically distort (Felts, 1992; Forester, 1983).

Since organization researchers are involved in the same climate of suspicion felt by the members of the organization studied, it is easy to imagine them acting in the same opportunistic way. As Bell notes (1999, p. 18), “fieldwork relationships in organizations tend to be presented instrumentally and opportunistically”. Besides, organization researchers are also under pressure to obtain results which will satisfy their supporting groups (universities,

research institutes, research sponsors and so on) and consequently they do their work in ways which incorporate opportunistic behaviour. This represents another factor in making organization studies more complicated to strip of ethical ambiguity. But, not as easy as declaring how difficult it is to do fieldwork, is the obligation of organization researchers to admit that to do it they must use unacceptable means (for the researched). For this reason, I decided to illustrate my arguments by exploring my own research.

My confession

In order to clarify how strategic action appears in the process of organization studies fieldwork, I present an experience of my own. It rests on assumptions of auto-ethnography, i.e., when the researcher aims to analyze his/her own research practices, seeking “to give a self-revealing and self reflexive account of the research process” (Schultze, 2000, p. 4). In this sense, it followed the methodological tendency of some organizational researchers who adopt a confessional ethnographic approach (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009; Bell, 1999; Schultze, 2000), which implies introducing in the field notes a confessional approach to the research process, or, as Van Maanen (1988) has named it, confessional writing.

In my fieldnotes, confessional writing falls under the heading ‘my daily impressions and feelings’. It consists in a description of my feelings and related thoughts before/after routines in which I took part. I was writing with the purpose of revealing my emotional state at the time. The original interest was to reflect on my perception of the organizational site in question, considering my emotional bias. For example, if on a certain day I was very sad because I had had a quarrel that morning, I would pay more attention in my fieldnotes of that day. In the presentpaper, I explore my emotions, only in the sense that to do so may reveal my communicative orientation in emotionally critical situations, in particular, those events, which I feel were critical to the success of the research, project at the time.

The illustrative case was a critical study, which I was conducting in a psychiatric hospital. Data were gathered during eight months of fieldwork as part of my dissertation for a master’s degree. The research aimed to investigate the rupture with traditional psychiatric approaches in the hospital, because it had adopted the criteria of Brazilian psychiatric reforms. Its main theoretical orientation in so doing rested on Foucault’s critical views of the approach of modern psychiatry and Goffman’s critique that mental asylums could be interpreted as total institutions and bureaucratic organizations. For this reason, my research could be considered as affiliated to a critical tradition in organization studies, which was one more complicating obstacle to the viability of my research project, bearing in mind the suspicions of managers about the results of critically oriented research (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009).

In this illustrative case, two important moments are worth mentioning, which reveal that the strategic action was related to the fear of research failure. The first moment was when I needed to negotiate the terms of the research project with the top manager of the hospital. As I was afraid that she would not agree to my research terms, I was not fully sincere in explaining the objective of my study.

In the account in my fieldnotes, my thoughts and feelings at a moment when I was waiting in the lobby of the hospital manager’s office reveal that I was afraid of what mightresult from the next conversation. I realized that the hospital manager had the power to disapprove of my research and, for this reason, I decided to focus all my energy on convincing her that I was a person to be trusted and my research would be good for the hospital. Thus, when I was explaining my research issues, I was reticent about the terms, which I judged to be controversial and in fact chose to suppress them. Thus many aspects of my research project were omitted; I denied that my research was critically-oriented; I was not

clear about whom I would talk to and observe; in sum, I tried hard to paint a favorable picture of my research.

In the interview, the hospital manager asked me if I agreed with her about areas where I had not formed an opinion. I simply answered, “yes,” because I thought that this was a good answer and would please her. After the meeting, the only thing that I could think of was: “I got it! She will let me in! I am so excited to begin.”

The second kind of communicative distortion arose when I was in situations, which would have revealed my position as a researcher. Although I never denied that I was doing research, because I chose to enter the hospital as a volunteer worker (in order to perform participant observation), hospital members were often confused about my real status.

In organizational ethnography, a very common way for researchers to participate is to let them work as management consultants (Bell, 1999). However, to observe the interactions that mattered to my research, management activities were not a good option, being undertaken far from patient units. Therefore, I had to engage in other types of activity, some of which were performed near the patients and attendants. Thus, I asked permission of the hospital manager to enter the hospital’s volunteer programme. For this programme, I chose musical activities, because I can play the guitar and piano. I began work as a volunteer for three days a week in a unit for female patients under the supervision of an occupational therapist.

Of course, for the patients and attendants, volunteer status was less threatening than researcher status; consequently, I used to conceal the fact that I was a researcher. I did it because I was afraid to compromise the sense of belonging to the hospital community and its impact on the research results. For instance, when I was among people who did not know about my research, if someone who knew about it informed the audience by a comment (for example, that someone would be an interesting interviewee for my purposes), then the others would look at me in surprise and ask “What kind of research are you doing?” I used to answer: “I am here to play the guitar and this is what matters.” This evasive answer was commonly followed by my playing a popular song, which made everyone sing and forget a conversation, which I found embarrassing.

Conclusions

Organization researchers often claim more ethical orientation than the organizations, which they investigate. However, when they themselves are under pressure in their own research projects, they do not seem to mind strategic behaviour on their own part, which, in a Habermasian sense, is a kind of social action devoid of ethical claims. We understand this problem as a serious contradiction between discourse and practice, which emerges in particular when researchers are involved in critical organizational research. This paper has concentrated on such ethical dilemmas.

The illustrative case shows that, rather than indicating a lack of ethical consciousness, the opportunistic behaviour adopted by the organization researcher seems to be a consequence of being under pressure to secure academic results, namely, papers reporting research findings and “discoveries;” or, in my case, the obtaining of a master’s degree. Thus, to be successful, researchers must tolerate their own opportunistic behaviour, which, in some cases, means being unethical.

As scholars, we deal with the same problems as any modern professional must deal with (i.e., being successful in a professional career). Here, the meaning of success is historically situated and reflects the modern concern with economic results. As a consequence, scholars are workers involved in the pressure to get results which take into account the capitalist world. They are induced to think of their own work relationships in a

utilitarian way, where the only thing to matter is productive improvement. In this sense, the working rules which organization scholars are concerned to deconstruct are paradoxically the same as those, which they use in their own careers. In a capitalist world, we have to work productively, in the same way as others in different working categories are pressurized to do (to illustrate this argument, see Alcadipani's confessions. This text smoothly points out how concern with results can overlap the critical researcher's value orientation).

According to Habermas' theory, performing strategic action has unethical implications, which arise when the interlocutor is concerned with the success orientation of the speech act and, in so doing, systematically distorts communication and meanings. The apparent rationality of this kind of social action is valid merely in an objective dimension; from a wider ontological perspective, strategic action is contrary to the ethical claims of a community of speech and it is built on a denial of the reciprocity which is presumed in the moral status of human relationships.

Strategic action affects the performance of the organization studies fieldwork, in such a way that researchers need to re-invent their own practices. Otherwise, they will not be able to avoid contradicting their own theoretical principles. Thus, in the research experience described above, we sought to show that organizations are research sites where researchers are constantly under pressure from two opposite kinds of claim. We describe these claims in a Habermasian theoretical language, as the tension in a speech act between a success orientation and an understanding orientation. In addition, experience reveals that the critical researcher can be exposed to psychological dilemmas. It should be highlighted that researchers need more extensive ethical reflection during the research design stage. This specific reorientation of organization studies practices should be understood as an effort to extend emancipatory claims beyond an idealist intention.

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