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Writing Responsibly: Narrative Fiction and Organization Studies

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Abstract

In this paper we reflect on the use of fictional source material and fictional formats in organization studies in order to explore issues of responsibility in the writing of research. We start by examining how research using fictional narrative methods has worked to radically destabilise distinctions between what is real and what is fictional. In relation to this we ask the question: if a research account can be regarded as fiction, what are the implications of this insight for the responsibilities of authors? Opposing the view that using fiction necessarily leads to an 'anything goes' relativism, we argue that a recognition of the fictionality of research texts implies a heightened sense of researcher-author responsibility. We see our main contribution as extending existing discussions of reflexivity in research into a consideration of issues of ethics and responsibility as it relates to the textuality of research writing. To do so we draw on Derrida's theorisation of responsibility and undecidability as a way of problematising and discussing the ethics of research in relation to its textuality. We argue that the explicit borrowing from fictional genres evinces the essentially 'written' and fictional status of research papers, and highlights the ethical dimensions associated with decisions related to representational strategies and authorial subjectivity.

'The perfect description of Thomas industries,' Mike exclaimed. 'We help lay the traps. We punch out, but don't stop working. It shows on our faces. Our minds are *crippled*!' Charlie and Randy nodded. 'The noise from the control room, that damn Thomas industries sign, the gyp mountain, smokestacks… every night this mess is with me before I go to sleep.' Charlie and Randy were silent.

They arrived just in time to punch in before the 7 o'clock whistle. 'Goddamn whistles,' Mike grumbled. 'Remind me of grade school.' (Jermier 1985: 71-72)

There were 40 or 50 different routes, maybe more, each case was different, you were never able to learn any of them, you had to get your mail up and ready before 8 a.m. for the truck despatches, and Jonstone would take no excuses. The subs routed their magazines on corners, went without lunch, and died in the streets. Johnstone would have us start casing the routes 30 minutes late – spinning in his chair in his red shirt – 'Chinaski take route 539!' We'd start a halfhour short but were still expected to get the mail up and out and be back on time. And once or twice a week, already beaten, fagged and fucked we had to make the night pickups, and the schedule on the board was impossible – the truck wouldn't go that fast. (Bukowski 1988/1971: 9)

There are a number of similarities between the two passages cited above – both are written in a narrative fiction style familiar to short stories and novels, both are taken from narratives about work, and in both the characters are telling us about their subjective experience with the organizations in which they work. These passages are evocative and reflect an embodied and personal understanding of the troublesome experience of working life. Despite these similarities, there are also some important differences, most noticeably the context in which each was published: the first passage is excerpted from an article written by John Jermier and published in the *Journal of Management*, the second is taken from Charles Bukowski's novel *Post Office*. What is notable is that Bukowski's writing conforms to the broad expectations of the genre of the novel, while Jermier's text is strikingly different from the social science genres more commonly used in academic management journals. A superficial assessment suggests that in scholarly management journals one would expect to find descriptions, discussions and theorisations of empirically grounded 'facts'; in a novel one might expect creative, fictionalised yet plausible stories that have been 'invented' by the author. In these two passages, however, the reverse seems to be the case. Jermier's short stories are 'made up' – they are fictional stories that he uses to enable a discussion of the 'psychic processes engaged in when human actors confront an alien world and make sense of it' (Jermier 1985: 67). Bukowski's novel *Post Office,* on the other hand, appears to be 'factual' as it is based on his ten years of personal experience working as a postal clerk. Indeed the protagonist of the novel, Hank Chinaski, is, in all likelihood, a thin disguise for the author Charles Bukowski. Despite this, the dedication at the front of the book reads: 'This is presented as a work of fiction and dedicated to nobody' (Bukowski 1988/1971)[1].

In citing these two works at the beginning of our paper, we wish to introduce our discussion of fictionality as a methodological issue in organization studies – a discussion that explores issues of ethics and responsibility as they relate to research writing. As we will show, fiction (both as a methodological concept and a genre of writing) has been quite fruitfully

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[1] Bukowski's dedication is itself of relevance. He does not say that his book *is* a work of fiction, but rather that it *is presented as* a work of fiction. Interestingly, the dedication seems also to apply to Jermier's text.

employed in organization studies for some time – not mainstream, but certainly present and accounted for. In particular, we note that fiction has emerged as a methodological concern in three related ways: (1) fictionality can be seen to be a characteristic of research writing in general and therefore; (2) explicitly fictional stories can be regarded as appropriate empirical material for organizational research; and (3) fictional genres can be used as a legitimate mode for the writing of research. Although we are both sympathetic to, and supportive of, the use of fiction, we do not suggest that researchers should necessarily adopt or fixate on fictional sources and forms. Instead, our paper explores some of the theoretical and methodological implications of the uses of fictionality for organisational research more generally. In discussing this we address the question: if the writing of research can be regarded as a fictional activity, what are the implications of this insight for the responsibilities of authors? Indeed, what we wish to make most central to our discussion is the way that, as researchers, we might take responsibility for the knowledge claims that we make in and through our writing if we no longer accept that writing is an unproblematic representation of the social world.

We argue that one important legacy of the current interest in fiction in organization studies might be its implications for ethics in research writing. We recognise that for social scientists it is often problematic to use fictional forms because presenting research in such a way is generally held to be 'outside the boundaries of what is constituted as acceptable by the knowledge making communities of social science' (Usher 1997: 35). Such problems also relate to resistance to the idea that social science is 'mere' storytelling that leads to relativism and subjectivism where research is 'made up' and therefore cannot be trusted (see Berg 1989; Watson 2000). Opposing the view that using fiction necessarily leads to an 'anything goes' relativism, we argue that a recognition of fictionality implies a heightened, rather than reduced, sense of researcher-author responsibility. In so doing we concur with Usher (2000: 182) that ethical issues are 'integral to the textuality of the research process' and argue that the use of fiction in organization studies draws attention to an ethics of writing. It is a discussion of this responsibility vis-à-vis writing that we see as the principal contribution of our paper.

Our discussion is structured into five major sections. First, we assess how notions of fictionality have been incorporated, both textually and methodologically, in organization studies. Our purpose here is to provide a brief synthesising overview of this literature for those not familiar with it. On that basis, the second section begins a discussion of the implications of a recognition of the importance of fiction for research methodology. In particular, we describe how a consideration of fiction leads more generally to questions centred on the relationship between fact and fiction in research and how the issues raised may be used to reflexively recognise the role of the writer in crafting organizational realities. Our third section builds on a consideration of reflexivity by discussing the responsibility of writers under conditions where fact and fiction are problematised. We argue that attesting to the fictionality of research has important implications in terms of authorial responsibility. This is a responsibility where, rather than relying on programmatic and calculable truth claims, researchers are responsible for their textual choices in selecting and emplotting narratives of organization. In the fourth section of the paper we suggest that authors of research consider how their privileged position is entwined in the

construction of their own selves and those of their authorial 'Others'. Indeed, we argue that a responsibility to the Other might be considered a guiding principle in writing research. Finally, we present a summary of the main themes that we have explored.

Fiction and Organization Studies

The methodological turn to language in organization studies (Alvesson and Karreman 2000) has led to enhanced sensitivity to its role in processes of social construction (O'Connor 2000). The writing of organizational research is widely recognised to be both a practice of representation, and a narrative performance (Rhodes 2001a) such that research texts can be understood more modestly as '"stories" rather than privileged truth claims' (Chia 1996: 68). In considering such stories, it has been argued that 'there are no structural differences between fictional and empirical narratives, and their respective attraction is not determined by their claim to be fact or fiction' (Czarniawska 1997: 19). Research in general might thus be regarded as an 'intriguing fiction' that is an effect of particular representational strategies (Smircich 1992). Seen in this light, for example, stories (as familiar to literature) and experiments (as familiar to science) are quite similar in that they each work to create intersubjectivity in the joint enterprise between the inquirer, the actors and the audience (Butler 1997). By implication, it has been suggested that social scientists might 'learn from the art and craft of the novelist, dramatist, journalist, film-maker, soap opera creator' (ibid: 945) and so forth. If one reviews the field of organization studies, it is evident that this 'learning' is occurring such that researchers have increasingly sought to connect fiction and organizational analysis in order to 'provide a new intertextual arena within which theories of organization can come to life' (Phillips 1995: 635). One question that this poses for researchers is: 'should we incorporate dramatic forms, poetry, fictional styles into our research accounts?' (Linstead 1999: 5). This is a question to which an increasing number of theorists have answered with a resounding 'yes'. The point is that if we accept that the writing of organization is inseparable from the organization of writing (Jeffcutt 1994), then the organization of writing is a significant methodological issue yet one, as we will argue, that has not yet been adequately addressed in terms of the ethics of research writing.

One way that fictional narratives have been incorporated into organizational research is as a source of data to be theorised and an inspiration for theory building[2]. Such approaches regard fictional texts as valuable means by which organizations and working life might be understood and informed. A rich diversity of different forms of narrative fiction have been used as inputs in organization studies, including novels (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux 1994), children's literature (e.g. Greenwood 2000), poetry (e.g. Weick 1995), television cartoons (e.g., Rhodes 2001b, 2002), science fiction (e.g., Parker, Higgins, Lightfoot and Smith 1999), plays (Feldman, 2003), and popular music (e.g. Clegg and Hardy 1996; Rhodes 2004). Literary novels, however, are by far the most commonly used

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[2] In many ways the recent use of fictional narrative in research in organization studies is parallelled and informed by the more established practice of using narratives as pedagogical tools for management education. See, for example, Stevenson (1996), Hobbs (1998), Cohen (1998) Comer and Cooper (1998) and Campoux (1999). Here we have restricted our review to those examples where the use of fictional narrative is focussed more on research and knowledge than on education.

fictional material in the organizational literature. An excellent example of this can be found in Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux's (1994) edited work *Good Novels/Better Management*. This book explicitly suggests that reading fiction is a means to better understand the 'realities' of organizations because it incorporates subjective and emotional perspectives together with more rational and ratiocinated accounts often found in traditional academic writing. The aim of their work is to 'show how well the classics treat topics of high relevance to managers without flirting with stereotypes and without losing their narrative force in superficial prejudice' (Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux, 1994:15). Similarly, David Knights' and Hugh Willmott's (1999) book *Management Lives*, uses a reflection on the characters in four novels (*Nice Work* by David Lodge, *Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera and *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro) to illustrate the themes of power, identity, insecurity and inequality in management and organizations. The result is a lively interaction between theory and fiction which both effectively and paradoxically uses 'fiction' to facilitate understanding of embodied 'facts' and the lived experience of managing. Although these examples are recent, it is worth noting that the use of fiction in this way is not just a contemporary development. For example, in William Whyte's (1956) classic *The Organization Man*, two chapters are dedicated to 'The Organization Man in Fiction'. Here Whyte refers to popular novels such Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, and popular movies such as *High Noon*, to illustrate his thesis regarding the emergence of a new social ethic of work.

In addition to the use of literary novels, texts that are more commonly associated with popular or even 'low' culture have also been deployed in the study of organizations. Such work culls insights from the ways in which organizations are represented in the popular media based on the rationale that 'popular culture offers more dramatic, more intense and more dynamic representations of organization than management texts' (Hassard and Holliday 1998: 1). A sustained set of examples is presented in Hassard and Holliday's edited collection *Organization-representation: Work and organization in popular culture*, which brings together a series of papers intended to 'take a critical look at filmic, literary, televisual and journalistic portrayals of organizations, and to explore the ways in which these portrayals both remark on and inform current organization theory and practice' (Hassard and Holliday 1998: 1). In another example, Parker, Higgins, Lightfoot and Smith (1999) (see also Smith, Higgins, Parker and Lightfoot 2001) have written extensively on organizations in science fiction. Their work is an attempt to disturb the discipline of organization studies by suggesting that the 'split between the expressive art of storytelling and the performative imperatives of managing is one that leaks and seeps at every turn' (Parker, Higgins, Lightfoot and Smith 1999: 583). Other studies have explored the value of popular culture to understanding organizations through the analysis of television cartoons such as *The Simpsons* (Rhodes 2001b) and *South Park* (Rhodes 2002). These studies suggest that popular culture provides resources for a 'carnivalesque' critique of working life that examines the effects of turning working life 'upside down' - one that 'breaks the rules to make them more visible [and] in so doing, opens up a space where these rules can be interrogated and questioned' (Rhodes 2001b: 382).

Not only has fiction been used as a source of material to be analysed or commented upon critically, but fictional forms have increasingly been used by interpretive researchers seeking innovative ways of representing empirical materials and ethnographic experiences. In a methodologically focused approach, for example, de Cock (2000) reviewed the writing of Jorge Luis Borges in an attempt to reconceptualise and render more complex the nature of organizational interpretation and representation. He argues that literature can be used as a source of insight that might 'inspire and instil a sense of humility in organizational scholars' (de Cock 2000: 597) to set up activities that enable readers to make up their own minds by producing texts that value imagination and enthusiasm over analysis and dry knowledge. One implication of de Cock's work is that social inquiry need not only be informed by the practices of physical scientists, mathematicians and logicians but might also learn from the 'creative arts' (Butler 1997: 945; Phillips 1995) such that the 'facts' become the empirical grounding for plausible narratives (Pacanowsky 1995). Similarly, it has been argued that stories gathered through interviews and observations can be used to create narratives which blend 'the actual dialogue told in specific stories to form a composite, interpretive narrative that relates an impressionistic account of the concept under investigation' (Brown and Kreps 1993: 54). In the longer term, one result might be an 'ethnographic fiction science' created out of the explicit acceptance that research writing is the creative weaving of a plot out of the empirical materials at hand (Watson 2000). Further, while these examples illustrate the use of fiction in 'science', they hark back to 19th century traditions where it was 'largely historians and authors of realist novels who described the emergence of capitalist structures' (Patient, Lawrence and Maitlis 2003: 1019).

Jermier's (1985) article 'When the Sleeper Wakes', quoted in the introduction to this article, is an example of the use of literary methods to present field data (Frost and Stablein 1992). Jermier begins his paper with two short stories that present different interpretations of the experience of Mike Armstrong, a worker in a phosphate plant. The first story, which is said to be a dream, portrays Mike as a compliant employee who generally follows the policies and dictates of the plant management, even in potentially controversial matters concerning the health effects of dust and vapours in the plant. This Mike is one who, after work, spends his time watching sport on television, drinking beer, and appreciating the 'freedom' that smoking cannabis and using cocaine give him. In the second story, which is said to be 'the real nightmare', Mike responds quite differently to a similar set of circumstances. This is a more aggressive Mike who tries to rally his co-workers in support of demanding that the management of the plant rectify the problems causing the dust and vapours. This frustrated and angry Mike sees drug use not as an act of liberation but as a crutch. Jermier's stated intention in presenting these two fictional stories is to 'illustrate theoretical descriptions of psychic processes engaged when human actors confront an alien world and make sense of it' (Jermier 1985: 47) and 'effectively illustrate critical theory with a short story' (Jermier 1992: 218).

Other scholars have argued for a view of anthropology as an 'artful science' that can reasonably be written as poetry (Brady, 1993, 2000). Journals as diverse as the *American Anthropologist*, *Cross-Cultural Poetics* and *Qualitative Inquiry* all now regularly publish poems. In our field, Kostera (1997) has presented a series of short poems, by different

writers, as a way of looking at organization and management that attests to the relationship between feelings and organizing. These poems, both lyric and narrative, are said to 'reflect new ways of thinking about organizations and management, grounded in very local and powerful feelings' (Kostera, 1997: 347), and in ways that treat members of organizations as legitimate authors of local knowledge. Other scholars have written-up their research experiences as ethnodramas. In one example (Rhodes 2001a) a short story was written in order to represent interview-based research in organizational change and learning. The story was written by combining characters, themes, plots and settings from the interviews into a single coherent narrative in order to present one 'take' on how the organization *could be* written about. In so doing, the intention was to open up the narrative possibilities that can create a dialogue between different conceptions of a particular organizational reality. Other authors, such as Starkey (1999), have written about organizational issues in the form of plays, in this case representing the reaction of members of a fictional MBA class to Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street*. Indeed, ethnotheatre is currently attracting considerable attention from scholars, for as Saldana (2003: 231) has asserted:

> If all playwrights are ethnodramatists, then all ethnographers have the potential to become playwrights. The best lens for fieldwork views human action 'dramatistically' (Goodall, 2000, p.116).

Fiction, Reflexivity and Pragmatism

It was Geertz (1988) who first argued that anthropological writing is inescapably fictional in the sense of being 'constructed', and while not necessarily being 'untrue', is nevertheless unable to relinquish its fictional character by adopting realism as a mode of expression or making vacuous claims to authority. It has also been argued that writing qualitative research as fiction is a way to free the author from the 'constraints of science' (Richardson 1994: 521), and draw on thoughts and feelings which are not readily accessible to standard forms of research (Rowland, Rowland and Winter 1990). The skilled use of fictional forms, which employ 'explicit literary and figurative devices poised in the space between "fact" and "fiction" where "truth" is manufactured', permits a valuable combination of poetic and conceptual rigour in the production of an account (Linstead 1993: 7). As shown in the previous section, there are many examples in the literature of writing in this 'space' – a space where hard distinctions between what is *real* and what is *fictional* are problematized (even though the binary between the two is still conceptually dominant). While it has been acknowledged that empirical and theoretical work is more appropriately conceived as factually indifferent rhetorical argument, or 'interesting "stories"' (Chia 1996: 68), the use of fictional genres draws attention to this through its deployment of data sources and representational forms which confound 'the positivist/realist/naturalistic dichotomy between fact and fiction' (Jermier 1992: 224). The explicit use of fictional sources and forms draws attention to the embedded fictionality in/of all research writing (Smircich and Calas 1987) and demonstrates how 'fiction is more like science, and science more like fiction than most of us would like to admit' (Martin 1992: 238). Derrida (1988: 134) extends such conclusions, arguing that:

> The rules, and even the statements of the rules governing the relations of 'non fictional standard discourse', and its fictional 'parasites', are not things found in nature, but laws,

In reflecting on the uses of fiction, our attention is drawn to the arbitrary, artificial, and changeable rules that are used to define and evaluate methods for the production of 'knowledge' as they are manifested in more standard modes of research representation. In the context of social science, fiction stands in stark contrast to more scientistically oriented approaches through which 'method "forgets" that research is writing' (Usher 2000: 184). Indeed, the use of fiction questions the representational claims of modernist research and the modes of writing that make its truth claims possible. Whereas 'traditionally research has been conceived as the creation of true, objective knowledge, following a scientific method' (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000: 1) and 'to wander away from the facts … is to be irresponsible' (Silverman 1975: 93), the employment of fictional sources and forms exposes issues of truth and objectivity in ways that invite close consideration.

The use of fiction in research writing can lead to a questioning, or even dismantling, of the opposition between fact and fiction (Alvarez and Merchan 1992) by making the textual effects of research more explicit (Smircich 1992). This is evident when one considers that 'the world of business, economic life, and organization has been frequently reflected in narrative fiction' (Alvarez and Merchan 1992: 28) and that organizational researchers and theorists have regarded such representations as important sources of both inspiration and empirical material. As discussed above, it is also manifest in the use of fictional genres to write about organizational research. We thus concur that organizations (as facts) might not best be regarded as ontologically secure 'things', but rather as active accomplishments, fictional in the sense that they are invented or created as 'constructs forged out of publicly shared languages [that] enjoy no existence independent of this fictional endeavour' (Case 2003: 158). Thus, to write about organizations is to create them, and to suggest that one's creations be taken seriously by others. It is also to recognise that 'sociological studies and novels, ethnographies and journalistic articles are all stories … they are varieties of the same thing' (Watson 2000: 502).

The use of fiction in research begs a coming to terms with the 'made up' dimensions of social science writing and the role of the writer in that 'making up' (Watson 2000). One established response to this issue is the need to incorporate reflexivity into research processes and products (Humphreys, Brown and Hatch, 2003; Rhodes 2001a). This position proposes that if we accept that 'as we act, and give accounts of our action, we are creating society and ourselves' (Albrow 1997: 47), then researchers might find ways to write that explicitly account for their position in relation to such creations. When it draws attention to how research is 'made' the use of fiction is one way that this can be done. This suggests that there are many different ways that a researcher can choose to tell the story of their research, each of which are different in terms of their potential meanings and effects (Rhodes 2001a).

Another important implication that has been drawn from the use of fiction in research has been a pragmatic response to reflexivity. In proposing that the fictionality of research is more of a 'given' than a 'problem', the pragmatic issue is whether research might be an effective guide to action that enables a reader to 'fulfil whatever projects they might wish to

pursue in that area of human activity' (Watson 2000: 507). For Rorty (1991) an acceptance of the fictionality of writing means substituting the view that language is a mirror on reality with the idea that language is a set of social practices. Following Rorty we can say that the choice of a vocabulary or genre for research writing is 'made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old' (Rorty 1989: 73). Here 'there are no grounds for assuming any correspondence between language and reality, be it iconic, symbolic or other' (Czarniawska 1997: 169). The pragmatic implication of this lack of 'ground', however, 'does not mean that texts are just black marks inscribed on white pieces of paper … but rather that different readings [and writings] lead to different consequences' (Rhodes 2000: 25). That such consequences might be of value to some people at certain times is what is pragmatic, not whether or not they truthfully represent some putative reality.

The idea of organization studies as a practice of storytelling leads to a focus on the forms of representation that 'knowledge' about organizations can legitimately take and the way that those representations are constructed. Our position, like that of Denzin (1994: 507), is that in general 'interpretive writing is like fiction'. There is still, though, much resistance to the idea that 'social science is the practice of a craft' (Mills 1970: 215) and that 'fieldwork is a creative endeavour' with art-like qualities (Wagley 1983: 16). Our argument is that such resistance is misplaced and irresponsible. This is not to propose that researchers should freely falsify the reporting of empirical material. It is, rather, to suggest that a researcher's failure to recognise the fictional characteristics of his/her own work, and that of others, is to embrace 'falsehood'. What we wish to highlight is a significant methodological issue with notionally 'factual' accounts of research, namely that they do not tend to accept or recognise their role in constructing the realities that they purport to represent (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1997). To label one's writing 'factual' is to claim an equivalence between one's representations and an externally located 'reality' that not only sidelines the need for reflexivity but denies the author's responsibility for his/her writing.

Given that there is a 'profound uncertainty about what constitutes an adequate description of social "reality"' (Lather 1991: 21) outside of its own discursive construction, we suggest that the claim that research represents reality unproblematically is irresponsible. This irresponsibility stems from a failure to question the way that language might be a process of creating rather than reflecting meaning, and therefore is not a straightforward way of representing others or the world (Hatch 1996). Consequently, language is always an unresolved problem for research, and there can be no 'perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the natural or social world' (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994: 255). This is a methodological issue for research, but not one that is adequately addressed by blind-siding it through an unreflexive assertion of representationalism. Indeed, to write a text and claim that it is 'true' or 'factual' can be seen as a particular practice of power, a power that claims that the researcher has the ability to unequivocally access and represent reality. In this regard, Foucault is informative:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the means by which each is

> sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault 1980: 131).

That is, a 'regime of truth' constrains writing practices into conventional forms lest they be considered 'untrue' in the sense of being outside of an agreed 'system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements' (Foucault 1980: 132). This means that some forms of writing have more currency in an institutional regime than others, as only some generic coding conventions are deemed to bring representations 'within the realm of the true'. It is in this way that the factual/scientific text makes its claim to truth and its claim to power. Thus 'the choice of a dominant rhetoric, figure or narrative mode in a text is always an imperfect attempt to impose a reading or range of readings on an interpretative process that is open-ended, a series of displaced meanings with no full stop' (Clifford 1986: 110) even if a 'full stop' is insinuated. The myth of neutrality also encourages various forms of egotistical self-indulgence on the part of researcher-authors who subscribe to the 'fantasy' that they 'are able to write themselves out of the texts that they produce' because this delusion then 'gives them license to impose their personalities on their texts' (Humphreys, Brown and Hatch, 2003: 11).

In short, there is no culture or organization that can be innocently and accurately represented by researchers. The observer always creates cultural and organizational fictions through the process of their research (Riley 1991). Writing is far from being 'a neutral conduit of meaning', and acknowledging this 'highlights the power that is played out in the writing of research' (Rhodes 2001a: 3) and should encourage writers to take responsibility for that power. Our descriptions of organizations and events, and the words and deeds we ascribe to major characters, are manipulations (Geertz 1995: 4) which systematically but arbitrarily privilege one version of reality over others (Deetz 1995: 219). A narrative fiction approach thus challenges those researchers who are 'unreflexive about the representations they produce' (Knights 1992: 515) to recognize that there is no fixed, final or monologically authoritative version of their research 'findings'. To be self-reflexive implies a preparedness to engage in continual processes of reflection, contest and discovery as we form stories and characters through writing (Boje, Luhman and Baack 1999: 358) and as we form our selves in relation to others.

Responsibility and Writing
> …reflections on our responsibilities as social researchers must punctuate all texts we produce (Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong, 2000: 128).

Reflexivity and pragmatism, discussed in the previous section, are important and established responses to an acknowledgement of the fictionality of research writing. Such responses pose radical questions regarding the character and practice of research writing. Berg (1989: 214) put it this way:

> How can we ever get a sense of scientific quality, and how can we ever separate superstition from science in a world characterised by such theoretical relativity and extreme methodological subjectivism? This is a world which denies positive truth, a world in which the discourse is seen as part of the reality that it is supposed to embrace.

While reflexivity is one strategy for addressing such issues, our concern is that reflexivity alone might not adequately account for the responsibility of authors once it is recognised that 'truth' is not a criterion against which research outputs can be judged. Indeed, as noted by Guillemin and Gillam (2004) 'although reflexivity is a familiar concept in the qualitative tradition, we suggest that it has not previously been seen as an *ethical* notion' (p. 262, italics in original). In relation to this, we ask: if a researcher is not responsible for 'telling the truth' what is s/he responsible for? While we have come to this question through a consideration of the use of fiction in research, the question is relevant to the ethical practice of research more generally as:

> The reporting of objectivist research is invariably a literary accomplishment that relies on denying, mystifying, or masking its dependence on communicative acts in the construction of what it wants to pass off as revealed truths or facts that transcend sheer textual performance (Case 2003: 145).

Working on the premise that research is appropriately regarded as a textual performance, Watson (2000) asks rhetorically: 'If the writers of ethnographic fiction science stories are significantly "making it up", how can we trust them?' Indeed, there are strong traditions that suggest that a research text is 'seen as moral … because its author's aim is to stick to the "facts"' (p. 505). In our view, reflexivity and pragmatism partially address this question by suggesting a process of accounting for the researcher in the research text, and acknowledging the provisional and situated use value of research outcomes rather than regard them as timeless and context-free truths. What this does not necessarily account for is the ethical position of the researcher in making his or her textual claims. In other words, how can we 'take responsibility for our reflexive position and still dare to write about others?' (Rhodes 2000b: 522). That researchers continue to write, however, means that some way of accounting for this responsibility is required as part of a broader programme of reflexive research. We suggest that fictional methodologies imply that writing is an ethical rather than a descriptive practice, and that 'we can no longer be satisfied with the production of images and reproduction; we also have to produce or develop a new set of values, norms and ethics concerning the principles of image creation' (Berg 1989: 214).

Such an ethics is an ethics of choice rather than an ethics of rules, where to write is always about making representational decisions – decisions which are apparently ethical because they construct others, and embalm transient events into a textual permanency (Clifford 1986). The fictional examples that we described earlier are a clear illustration of this because the use of the non-conventional genre of fiction in social science draws attention to their textuality, their aesthetics, and their constructedness. This illustrates that to write involves the use of one form of writing and one selection and emplotment of events (rather than others), and that these different uses have significant effects in terms of the potential meanings that may be read into a research text (Rhodes 2001a). Although such 'decisions' might be taken for granted through the use of established and institutionally normalized methods and methodologies, it is nevertheless the case that researchers *choose* (more or less self consciously) what to write about and how to write about it. It is in this decision - the intertwined space between the 'what' and the 'how' - that responsibility can be located, and where an attention to the aesthetics of writing is not separable from the ethics of writing (Usher 2000).

A naïve reading of the fictional nature of organizational research is that it enables one to 'say anything' without recourse to the 'facts' of the matter. Such a reading is most likely to be accompanied by a fear of 'anything goes' methodologies that is thought to relieve researchers of their responsibilities and undermine all claims to knowledge. To consider this reading we borrow from Derrida's (1996) discussion of two possible responses to a putative ability to 'say anything'. The first response is that of irresponsibility – that 'I can say whatever I like and I say it in the guise of a poem, a fiction, or a novel' (Derrida 1996: 80). The second response is that of responsibility – that is 'I can say anything and thus, not only do I not simply say what I please, but I also pose the question concerning to whom I am responsible' (ibid). As Derrida argues, it is 'responsibility' that links fiction to the history of democracy wherein the responsibilities implied by fiction make for a context of writing that has embedded in it the political experience of responsibility. To write or comment on fiction, therefore, highlights problems associated with research traditions that seek or claim 'objectivity' in research – that is, the 'frightful' claim that one does not need to take responsibility for what one writes because it is the 'truth', or the 'meaning' for which one is merely a communicative conduit or interpreter. Objectivity, in this sense, is problematic as claims to it distance an author from reflexive responsibility for what she or he writes.

To further consider these issues we reference Derrida's notion of 'undecidability' as it relates to responsibility[3]. Derrida opposes the view that decisions are about the application of a formula or calculation in order to assert or predict the likely outcome of a course of action. He instead sees decisions as being about political and ethical responsibility (Derrida 1996). Such responsibility emerges because free decision making must be considered beyond 'the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process' (Derrida 1992: 24). Indeed, if a decision were made from such a process, it would be no decision at all. Thus for a course of action to be a decision it must pass through undecidability:

> Undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations (for example, discursive-syntactical or rhetorical – but also political, ethical etc.) (Derrida 1988: 148 italics in original).

The point here is that undecidability is not the same as indeterminacy, but rather the double-bind between alternatives that are already determined (Jones, 1993a). In relation to our case, this refers to the decision to write research in one way rather than in another. Importantly, this means that undecidability is not equivalent to relativism. On the contrary, it is about making choices amongst a heterogeneity of possibilities without being able to predict the effects of that decision:

> The instant of decision must remain heterogeneous to all knowledge as such, to all theoretical or reportive determination, even if it may or must be preceded by all science and conscience. The latter are unable to determine the leap of decision without

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[3] In so doing, we agree with Jones (2003a) that, in terms of 'business ethics', 'little attention has been paid to connecting Derrida's work on ethics with questions of organization' (p. 225) and add that this lack of attention also applies to issues of research methodology in organization studies.

transforming it into the irresponsible application of a program, hence without depriving
it of what makes it a sovereign and free decision (Derrida 1997: 219).

In terms of our discussion, the implication is that for research writing to be responsible it must not claim to be 'true' in any objective sense. Instead an ethical writing is one where it is accepted that what is written was made as a decision by the writer rather than through the decidable application of particular methods and techniques for the true. Notably, however, this is not complete 'free play', but rather attests to the limits of calculability in order to open 'the field of decision in the order of the ethico-political' (Derrida 1988: 116) such that without undecidability there can be no moral responsibility. Thus, if one's actions were made only in terms of following a pre-established programme, then this would be no decision at all: 'Nothing would be more irresponsible and more totalitarian' (Derrida cited in Raffoul 1998: 278).

Writing *About* Organizations
A recognition that, in research writing, the issue of responsibility is related to textual decisions, leads to a consideration of our final question: if one is not responsible for the 'truth' then for what and to whom is one responsible? Following Levinas, Derrida (1999) suggests that the responsible subject (in our case the researcher) be regarded as a host or a guest who, rather than being self-sufficient, is defined by the welcome offered by the Other (Raffoul 1998). In these terms, a writer does not take responsibility as a pre-formed and self-sufficient being. Rather, responsibility is assumed by a subject in his or her constitution as a researcher through the act of writing about other people. An ethics of research writing emerges through the characterisation of the relations between self and Other in the text. As such, the Other is not considered as an object under the scientific gaze of the writer or as an entity that can be represented unproblematically. Indeed, the primary ethical focus is on the relations between self and Other not control of, and mastery over, the Other. To claim to 'represent' the Other in any factual sense becomes ethically problematic if one considers the subject as an 'openness to the Other' (Raffoul 1998: 277). This is an openness, however, which is exterior to the Other rather than colonising of them. The Other is not an object of knowledge that can be ascertained by the application of method, but a radical alterity that cannot be mastered by the self – in this sense 'to genuinely take the Other *as Other*, one must not assimilate the Other or make demands (Jones, 2003a: 233, italics in original). Ironically, such a position also concedes that in choosing to write, to represent the Other, that Other is always rendered in someway as an object of knowledge (Usher 2000). Indeed, 'we cannot escape the need to 'represent' the Other since without this we could not even articulate anything about the Other (including its singularity)' (ibid: 178).

Considering the self of the researcher in this way, the concepts of decision and responsibility that we have discussed are not to be attributed to the egological subject but to a subjectivity where self is defined in terms of the Other. For writers of research, such a definition of self emerges in the way that text imagines this self in terms of other people as it constitutes and represents them in various ways, either specifically or in general. Most commonly these people include those explicitly written about (e.g. research subjects), those written to (e.g. other researchers, managers), and to the scholarly community more generally. In this sense, the identity of the author (and his or her author-ity) is not given, but created through textual practices which variously position the author in power-relations

with respect to others (Rhodes 2001a). Indeed, it is only by denying the fictionality of research that it might be claimed that a self-sufficient egological self is, for example, describing the reality of organizations and the life of people in them for the edification of the reader and for the advancement of an agnostic knowledge. What we have discussed here as responsibility and undecidability suggest, on the contrary, that an ethics of research writing is related to how responsibility is taken and decisions are made which actively constitute both the author and those written about. The issue is not the 'truth' about the Other in a finitely objective sense, but the connection between self and Other and how particular others are constituted as objects of knowledge. The fiction in research lies in its inability to capture the Other, and it is the recognition of this inability that can constitute an ethics of writing.   This is what Derrida (1996, following Levinas) calls 'infinite responsibility', such that each act of decision does not overcome or traverse undecidability, but rather 'I know that I have not done enough and it is in this way that morality continues' (p. 87). In the terms of our discussion, to decide to write is not to close off or finalise the 'truth' about the Other, but rather to engage in an ongoing relation with the Other, a relation that is ethical.

An awareness of issues centred on the use of fictional sources and forms in organization studies alerts us to the problematics of what it might *mean* to write about organizations and the limitations of standard 'scientific' forms of representation. These are the dilemmas that constitute what has been referred to as the 'crisis of representation' (Lather 1991; Denzin and Lincoln 1994), which radically questions one's ability to represent adequately the Other. To write about an organization is not to produce a text that captures, is equivalent to, or identical with that organization or any part of it (spatial and/or temporal) that is written about. There is an intimate connection between the 'self' of the researcher and the Other such that both require, and are responsible to, each other in order for both to be written into existence (Humphreys, 2004). The writer and those researched are thus related, but this relationship is not such that the text is a substitute for, or unproblematic representation of, the absent Other. Still, the connection between the text and its subject is that one claims to be *about* the Other. It can be said that this *about* is a way of writing a new text that in someway relates to, but is not the same as its subject, a relation that is both a connection and a mutual definition.

About seems to us to be quite a good word to understand this relationship. In thinking *about* this, it is interesting to consider the etymology of the term *about*. It comes from the old English word *abutan* – *a+butan*, where *butan* relates to being outside, without or except, and the prefix *a-* relates to being on or in. Hence, *abutan* concerns being on the outside of something. As it has developed in modern English, a common use of *about* as a preposition relates it to being concerned with, being engaged with or being connected to, but not being the same as. Thus, a text *about* organization might be considered as a text that connects with organization in particular ways rather than being one that somehow represents it.   This relation is thus one of exteriority.   Such connections are also connections between the self of the author and the Other of the organization. It is in this fictional space that responsibility is played out.

Implications and Possibilities
In this paper we have challenged the efficacy of Enlightenment notions of 'value-free experimentalism' and 'neutrality' that still pervade dominant contemporary understandings of the social sciences (Christians, 2000). As Astley and Zammuto (1992: 449) assert, our empirical observations serve only as excuses for our theoretical works that are essentially fictions. The challenge for us is to explore these arguments through our research and our writing, to blur further the boundaries between fiction and the social sciences, and thus to take responsibility for the relationship between what we write, how we write it and who we are. Writing is, after all, both a method of inquiry (Richardson 1994), and a method of reality construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). By implication research and theory development might be considered 'not as reflection or as explanation but as exploration of what might be possible' (Jones, 2003b: 520). In bringing the paper to a close we briefly re-consider five of the main themes that have permeated, and emerge from, our arguments in relation to some of theoretical sources and inspirations that we have drawn on.

First, writing research is a creative act that problematises standard distinctions between fact and fiction. Moreover, it may be that borrowing from literary genres can assist us in our efforts to produce more interesting and readable accounts of organizations. As long ago as 1990 Rose argued that scientific monographs were increasingly drawing on techniques associated with novels, such as 'the descriptive setting of the scene, the narration of the people's own stories, the use of dialogue, the privileging of the objects of inquiry along with the subject of author who writes, and the notation by the author of emotions, subjective reactions, and involvement in ongoing activities' (1990: 55). Relatedly, Dyer and Wilkins (1991: 617) have argued convincingly that a few works have become classics in our field 'because they are good stories' that allow us to 'experience vicariously the relationships and ideas presented'. In this paper we have sought to illustrate these views and to tease out some of their implications for authorship in studies of organization.

Second, it is no longer acceptable for us to ask others to reveal something of themselves while we 'remain invulnerable' (Behar, 1993: 273). To leave our informants to carry the burden of representations that we have constructed while 'hiding behind the cloak of alleged neutrality' (Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong, 2000: 109) is, in our terms, fundamentally irresponsible. Our point is similar to that of Brady (2000: 955) who argues for '[t]he conspicuously poetic author [who] willingly appears in his or her own text as an artisan whose constant display is the craft of language'. Our arguments also echo those of Watson (1995: 302) who exhorts social science writers to produce accounts which incorporate 'an honest attempt to maintain scientific integrity'.

Third, it is uncertain that engaging in standard reflexive statements of the type that include autobiographical and personal information are sufficient to adequately position an author with respect to a text. These kinds of assertions often do little more than assert a researcher's authority, and, when taken to excess, may even silence those who are written about (Lal, 1996). Rosaldo (1989: 7), for example, has commented upon 'the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other', while Clough (1992: 109) was warned against a 'compulsive extroversion of interiority'. Rather, we see methodological benefits in finding ways for writers to explicitly introduce

themselves into their texts as major characters (Van Maanen 1988). Like Humphreys, Brown and Hatch (2003: 6), we see scholars of organization as 'engaged in a dual quest for self-identity and empathy' that requires them to give an adequate account of themselves and how empathic understandings have been achieved. Ethnographic work in particular is not just an investigation of the Other but a search for a uniquely personal 'voice'.

Fourth, to author research texts is to embrace multiple sets of responsibilities to varied constituencies. In part it implies being 'true' to ourselves in the sense of writing texts in which we have confidence, and which incorporate and preserve authentic notions of ourselves as researchers and human beings. Of course, what this means in practice may differ radically between researchers. For instance, for some it might mean constructing an adequate version of 'what is', while for others it might involve writing with an explicit political agenda. Consider, for example, Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong's (2000: 122) assertion that 'Our responsibility…as we see it, is… to insist on a state that serves its citizenry well and responsibly'. It also means taking seriously the lives of others, recognising that they are multi-dimensional and culturally complex, and producing accounts of them that have 'depth, detail, emotionality, nuance, and coherence' (Denzin, 1997: 283). Authors can also assume responsibilities in relation to their readers, at the very least to account adequately for their representations, to write in an engaging style without recourse to bland or esoteric language and, ideally, in ways which enlarge their moral sympathies.

Finally, researchers might recognise explicitly that the social sciences are regimes of power with a hegemonic potency that serves to produce and reproduce social orders, not least by normalising subjects into prescribed categories sanctioned by political authorities (Foucault, 1980). In authoring our texts we might not only eschew ideological commitments to the production of morally neutral objective knowledge, but also acknowledge the situatedness of power relations that privilege researchers over subjects (Denzin, 1977). At a micro-level we need to recognise that our accounts of organizations are rhetorical artefacts designed not merely to inform but to persuade (Nelson, Megill and McCloskey, 1987). Thus research writing questions power relationships, not only as phenomena to be observed and analysed by researchers, but also one in which researchers are implicated through their practice.

Ending Comments
We began this paper with two citations taken from writings about work, both of which were ostensibly written in the same literary genre. Taken in the context of their publication, this commonality of genre was problematic as Jermier's science appeared 'fictional' and Bukowski's literature appeared 'factual'. In-between this ironic juxtaposition of conventional expectations, as it is played out in organization studies, we have sought to assemble some new ideas relevant to methodological discussions linked to the collapsing of divisions between fact and fiction. In particular, we have tried to instigate a consideration of responsibility and ethics as it relates to research writing. Here, we have taken examples of the use of fiction in research as a starting point to extend existing discussions of reflexivity, pragmatism and research. This is not to say that fiction and narrative are the guarantors of responsibility – clearly fiction may be used either for didactic or deceitful

purposes, or alternatively might just result in the production of amateurish stories. More to our point, however, a possible legacy of narrative fiction in organization studies is one that researchers might draw on in order to consider issues of 'responsibility' in terms of their methodology and writing. Our hope is that our paper will contribute to such debates.

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