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Fuck, fuck, fuck: Reflexivity and fidelity in reporting swearwords in management research

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Method's corner

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Abstract. In this essay, I confront a problem I encountered at a recent academic conference wherein the words and sentiments of research respondents were unfortunately and unnecessarily silenced and edited – perhaps due to presenters' unfortunate and needless regard for the supposed impropriety of the respondents' language. I argue that such silencing and editing is not only unfaithful to our respondents; it is also unfaithful to our project as social scientists. I briefly review some of the literature on qualitative interviewing and the importance of positionality, relationality and reflexivity between the interviewer and the participant. I apply some of these prescriptions to the reporting of data in presentations and manuscripts. I then point out some examples of how rude or swearwords have been appropriately used in management and other journals and end with a plea that we remain true to the language and settings that are so important for our understanding of social and organizational life.

Keywords: swearwords, interpretative research, reflexivity, fidelity, data presentation

INTRODUCTION

At a recent paper development workshop sponsored by a top tier journal which focused on disruption, division and displacement, several papers were presented that used field studies conducted in some very difficult and heart-rending organizational settings. These included refugee camps and resettlement centers, military triage and surgery centers, and treatment and recovery centers for those affected by natural disasters. The quality of the fieldwork was impressive and the stories of human tragedy and triumph were moving.

Yet too often, during presentations of data, the quotes and language, the words actually used and often shown on the presentation screens, were not spoken by the presenters as they read quotes aloud. Presenters appeared to self-censor in order to silence strong and rude language. They would skip, hum, substitute and otherwise edit the words of the people involved in those extreme situations, most likely in the misguided hope of not giving offence to the audience. Personally, I found this editing and silencing itself more shocking and offensive than any of the language that might have been used. I believe that such editing and silencing not only does a grave injustice to the people studied, I think it does a disservice to our own professional agenda. I wish to outline my reasons below.

INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH

The purpose of most qualitative research methods in management and organizational studies is to gain a rich and deep understanding of the practices, relationships and meaning-making of those persons engaged in organizational processes and circumstances (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The importance of gaining access to and understanding of the descriptions and expressions of those persons is crucial for interpreting and understanding how they experience and make sense of their social conditions and arrangements. It follows that the researcher and the research participant must come to share a commitment to an open and safe environment in order for the researcher to gain the trust of the participant (Alvesson, 2003). Then, and only then, might the participant feel free to express their perhaps most authentic or personal responses to and remembrances of organizational life, or at the very least, a mutually constructed "valued, coherent self-image" (Alvesson, 2003: 20) in the telling of their experiences. Unfortunately, for most qualitative researchers, much of our training focuses primarily on asking questions and not nearly enough on listening to the responses (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Ezzy, 2010) or on building the relationships necessary to elicit genuine responses. While this is most obviously so in ethnographies and interviews, it is also the case for other forms of qualitative, interpretive data gathering such as diaries, blogs, discussion boards and private papers, where a high level of openness and presence is necessary to appropriately attend to and take in the data.

Much attention has been paid of late to the positionality of the qualitative researcher and the participant in interviews. Often, the researcher is understood, by both the researcher and the participant, as the expert with the authority to determine the questions, the "appropriate" responses and the interpretations of the expressions given by the participant. But as many have pointed out (Alvesson, 2003; Denzin, 2001; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Smart, 2009), the interview is a social co-construction of the information and sense-making (Neukirch, Rouleau, Mellet, Sitri & De Vogüé, 2018; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) provided, and the ultimate interpretation of the experiences is shared. In many ways, this is also true of the interaction between the reader and the text of archival forms of data (Adkins, 2002; Bucholtz, 2001; Macbeth, 2001). An appropriate self-reflexivity (Bento, 2017; Macbeth, 2001; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) and even humility on the part of the researcher is required in the eliciting and interpretation of spoken and written expressions of the social and physical reality of persons interacting in and with organizations.

Of particular importance is the need to avoid silencing the interview participant, allowing for more complete expressions of thoughts and actions. This includes the emotional and physical expressions of the participant (Ezzy, 2010; Smart, 2009). Interpretive interviewing and other forms of data gathering require that interviewers carefully attend to voice, speech, word choices, visual cues, emotional states and other expressions of the participant, such that, as Benjamin (1988: 192) suggested, "the act of knowing can be felt as communion, not conquest". In this way researchers are often able to give "voice to the voiceless" (Smart, 2009: 299), both those that are seldom the subjects of our research – as in the situations I described above – and those who might self-censor or avoid difficult, and even shocking, topics and descriptions.

Clearly, this same reflexivity, this openness to the participant, trust and communion applies to the reporting of that data in our manuscripts and presentations. While training and guidance for writing up our qualitative

analysis and findings does not get as much attention as do data gathering and analytic techniques, the current consensus generally calls for more rather than less presentation of the raw data, in the form of quotes, both in the text and in presentation tables. The use of

> the verbatim quote has become a way of bringing "real lives" into the sociological text. The extent to which this is a successful way of making sociological accounts more authentic or "real" is open to debate (or even refutation), but … the aim seems to be to "get closer" to real people and also to make sociological texts have texture. (Smart, 2009: 299)

Verbatim quotes also allow for greater plausibility and credibility of the author's interpretation of the data. Certainly, then, our position as researchers requires us to respect the accuracy and genuineness of that unsilenced voice in those quotes, both in manuscript and in presentation form. While presentation of data in a manuscript, page or word limits from journals often force us to make difficult choices concerning what and how much data we can include, nonetheless respect for our participants and humility as stewards of the data shared, as well as boldness and courage in what we show, are often required of us as we do so.

SWEARWORDS AND SILENCING VOICES

As might be expected, the data gleaned and presented in the workshop described above included many quotes and excerpts from observations, interviews, diaries and other archival sources that used both affecting and, in many cases, quite strong language, language that represented the height and depth of disbelief, disorientation, frustration and anguish, and occasionally hope, that such situations most certainly engender. Often that language was what we in the polite world of academia and unruffled social life refer to as rude, swearing, inappropriate or unacceptable. Yet the language presented was immediate, raw, even shocking and, at least in my view, entirely appropriate and, more importantly, honest and true to the situation and lived experience of the informants, whether the language was in the moment or reflective of past experience. That presenters would then skip, hum or otherwise silence that language as they read it aloud was very disturbing to me.

SWEARWORDS MATTER

Those quoted in these presentations have lived, and are often still living, in the situations characterized at this workshop and elsewhere, through extremely difficult and often perilous situations. Their words and their voices reflect the realistic responses, thoughts and reactions to the difficulties, stresses and threats that they face. Our research participants have given us a very precious gift and allowed us to peer into the often unvarnished and vulnerable parts of their lives and their experiences. Having most often been assured of the thin veil of anonymity, they have opened their hearts and thoughts to our prodding and probing and allowed us to see what, in other circumstances, they may very well have wished to keep private, if not secret, from even close family and friends. But if we, as researchers, try in our offices, laboratories, conferences and manuscripts to clean up the data, to make it acceptable, even antiseptic, we do a grave injustice to those people. In attempting to do so, even a little bit, we prove

ourselves untrustworthy, unappreciative and even biased as we treat their words in any way other than as they offer them. Unless our respondents have asked us to not quote them directly, we dare not afford them the disrespect and discounting of that vulnerability and openness they have shared. Avoiding, editing or silencing their voices because we are afraid their words might somehow offend either the audiences we seek to address or some socially constructed sense of propriety or even internalized shaming is to disrespect and discount those voices. Perhaps we have been taught, both in our primary socialization and in our academic training, to avoid such impropriety or risk of offence, or even that the use of such language is somehow a poor reflection of our own character. But that does not give us license, it does not give us the right, to impose those constraints on others who have indeed opened their innermost thoughts and feeling to us. To do so is unfaithful, disrespectful and fundamentally unjust.

Further, when we try to make the language of our interviewees and respondents socially acceptable, we put our own project at risk. Again, as social scientists our research agenda is to discover, uncover and represent social life and social organizing in all its richness, complexity and variety. Our agenda requires us, then, to be faithful to our data. If we edit or silence language, no matter how potentially offensive, we systematically bias that data and hide from view much of that richness and variety. We remove some of the dimensionality and therefore the antecedents, processes and outcomes of social life and social organizing. For example, the recent move by some scholars of institutional theory to examine the role of emotions in how people engage in organizational life and in institutional processes requires considering, reporting and examining not just socially "nice" emotions such as love and joy, but raw, deep and often ugly emotions such as shame, fear and rage. But these emotions, which people often try to either cover up or ignore in everyday social settings, can often be most readily accessed through language, specifically language that represents the raw, deep and ugly nature of both the emotion and situation that elicits it. If we censor, if we edit or silence that language, we likely will also fail to uncover not only the emotions at play, but also other forms of engagement, reaction, sense-making, evaluation and action that such language might reveal.

Perhaps, often our desire or instinct to tidy our data derives from our sense as social scientists that we must maintain some appropriate distance from our research participants as a form of avoiding bias in our findings and conclusions. Indeed, some have held that disinterestedness is an essential characteristic of good scholarship (Merton, 1942/1979). Such disinterestedness is often perceived as requiring a certain objectivity and dispassionate engagement with our data and perhaps even a need to ignore or censor the "outliers", data that seems inappropriate and therefore unimportant. But the falseness of such a myth of disinterestedness has long been revealed (Gouldner, 1962; see also Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014). There is no such thing as a disinterested or thoroughly objective researcher. Indeed, even if we attempt a level of disinterestedness and objectivity, a true disinterestedness or objectivity would require, rather than forbid, engaging the full range of our data, no matter how socially questionable, unpleasant or potentially offensive it might be.

As reflected in the workshop I attended, management scholarship has recently begun to examine more and more extreme or uncomfortable aspects of organizational life (Claus, Rond, Howard-Grenville & Lodge, 2019). Organizational misconduct, dirty work, stigmatized organizations and even the call for this workshop and the special topic forum associated

with it on disruption, division and displacement, are all topic areas that management scholars have paid little attention to until very recently. But as new scholarship, new field settings and new topic areas emerge, new (or rather very old but taboo) language also emerges. We must make room for that language that describes and illuminates these situations, being true to both the empirical setting and our respondents and to the conditions and situations they find themselves in.

Fortunately, there have been some recent publications in top tier management journals that have challenged our limited notions of what is appropriate to study and what is appropriate to publish, including language that might previously have been edited. For example, Gill and Burrow (2018) recently published a study on restaurant kitchen staff that included quotes of staff using the word "fuck". Creed, DeJordy and Lok (2010) also reported the word "fuck" as used by one of their participants. Helms and Patterson (2014) and Massa, Helms, Voronov and Wang (2017) each reported the word "shit", as did Spicer (2013). Bothello and Roulet (forthcoming) published the word "bullshit". Massa's (2017) recent examination of the online community Anonymous reports several potentially offensive labels of others used in that setting, words such as "fags", "bastards" and "bitches". The publication of swearwords has also shown up in the leading journals of our sister disciplines, such as sociology (Duneier, 2002; Green, 2007; Healy, 2017), psychology (Etengoff & Daiute, 2014; Jay & Jay, 2013; Toolis & Hammack, 2015) and anthropology (Bourgois, 1996; Groes-Green, 2010; Pandian, 2012)[1]. These examples are just a few that I am aware of. No doubt, many more exist. Importantly, these authors, and their editors and publishers, are genuinely to be congratulated on honestly reporting and using the language of their settings, no matter how potentially offensive it is. Let us follow fearlessly their excellent examples.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DATA GATHERING

Importantly, the use of swearwords and other forms of strong language can alert us as investigators to interesting and often crucial aspects of the experience and sense-making of our participants, as key cues to direct us to explore further (Down, Garrety & Badham, 2006; Kisfalvi, 2006). Swearwords tell us something important is going on. Indeed, our own discomfort with swearwords is not only about our own bias but is data that is useful to be aware of. It is important to convey both that sense and the interpretation of it to our audiences. As we listen to and for such swearwords, perhaps we should probe more deeply the experiences, the sense-making, the aesthetic judgements and the emotions that strong language indicates. As we exercise our own reflexivity while participating in that co-construction, trust-making and communion with our participants discussed above, swearwords may be the crucial intersection where deeply held and deeply felt co-interpretations and intersubjective sharing can emerge. Again, this is most certainly applicable in interviews and ethnographies, but should be applicable to written forms of data as well. Swearwords and strong language point us to areas probably deserving of greater investigation.

1. Unsurprisingly, I could not find any examples in economics.

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATIONS

As academics and as people engaged in social life, we owe it to our participants and to ourselves to cast off outworn and restricting notions of what kinds of social life and language are appropriate for study and publication. The importance of studying organizational and social life in extreme and difficult settings (Claus, Rond, Howard-Grenville & Lodge, 2019), focused on disruption, division and displacement, involving "the examination of distasteful – and occasionally objectionable, despicable, and disgusting – activities, work, and organizations" (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014: 242) or even the ugly or grotesque (Creed et al., 2019) is becoming clearer and thus such studies are becoming more frequently engaged. So, then must our methods of investigation, data collection, analysis and presentations adjust. These extreme cases as data settings and methodologies are already proving to bring to light processes of organizing and organizations that may be overlooked or hidden in more normal settings. The literatures on emotion and organizations and institutions have clearly benefited and will continue to do so. Literatures on organizational trust (Hasel, 2013; Jones & George, 1998; Nielsen, 2004; Sitkin & Roth, 1993), organizational climate (Trau, 2015), micro-level processes of macro-level phenomena (such as strategy (Felin, Foss & Ployhart, 2015) and institutionalism (Gehman, Lounsbur & Greenwood, 2016; Powell & Colyvas, 2008)), individual (Bhatt, van Riel & Baumann, 2016; Grima & Beaujolin-Bellet, 2014) and organizational identity and image (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000), and many more literatures may benefit greatly from exploring these topics in extreme settings. But in doing so, we must be honest and true to our participants and to their reality of social and organizational life. We must discover and present the rich diversity of that life, including its rawness, its ugliness and its desperation. We must allow the raw emotions and evocations that such aspects of life elicit. And we must do so without worry that revealing those aspects of life and emotions might somehow give offense.

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