Messy texts and conceptual activism in organization theory

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Abstract

Writing management texts is no longer a matter of simply "writing up the text". This paper argues that the notion of *messy texts* suggested by anthropologist George Marcus may serve as a fruitful model for management writing. Since the production of concepts and theoretical frameworks are always aimed at capturing some event or occurrence, all writing are drawing on what Paul Virilio has referred to as *conceptual activism*. The writing of messy texts are a particular form of conceptual activism wherein there are always voids, ruptures and fluidity present in the text, and where the author is explicitly rejecting the idea of an objective or apolitical account of the event or occurrence. To open up for a discussion on writing practices, critical management studies may enable for a more pluralist view of management writing. In this procedure, the notion of messy texts can serve as one model for new forms of writing.

Introduction: Management as narrative

> I am not a man of messages, I am not a man of ideas, I am a man of style.
>
> Louis-Ferdinand Céline

> A cough or a baby crying will not ruin a good piece of modern music.
>
> John Cage

> Economic writing is, at the extreme, algebra.
>
> Dorothea Olkowski

Management and organization studies are based on the researchers ability to make credible accounts on organizations (Van Maanen, 1995a, 2000; Richardson, 1994). During the last, say fifteen years, management and organization studies have been increasingly influenced by a narrative approach to organization analysis (Boje, 1991, 1995; Sköldberg, 1994; Boyce, 1995; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Czarniawska, 1998; Gabriel, 2000). In narrative studies, the researcher takes part in organizational members' storytelling on everyday organizational life, but also aim at offering individual subjective accounts on the experience of being a management and organization researcher. In narrative studies of organization, the process of organizing unfolds as a series of stories, narratives, and accounts of everyday practices (Boje, 2001). Thus, organization is a multiplicity, an assemblage that are continuously unfolding as one is seeking to examine it from different perspectives. Organization does not have an essence, an innate constitution but becomes entangled with the stories and narratives to be told about organization. Organizations become narrated, formulated in subjective stories expressing experiences of organization. In a narrative methodology, both the researcher and the interlocutors become witnesses to processes of organizing. Witnesses interpret and offer accounts on their experiences. Witnessing is at the very core of the experimental methodology held in esteem in classic science in the tradition of Galileo (Shapin and Shaffer, 1986); Donna

Haraway (2000: 160) says: "[S]cientific knowledge *is* about witnessing. That is what the experimental method is about, the fact of being there". In narrative studies of organizations, witnessing and narrative become inextricably entangled. To witness, one has to narrate the experience; to narrate, one has to witness. Therefore, narrative studies of organizations are always already based on the ideal of experimental methods. In this paper, the writing practices of organization researchers are being discussed. Rather than thinking of writing as being separated from the methodological choices and the empirical work (e.g. field work, interviewing), such practices ("data collection" and "data analysis") are already ingrained with the practices of writing. For instance, when choosing to undertake an ethnography of an organization, the writing practices of the ethnographers of the field are integrated into the research methods from the outset. Therefore, writing cannot be regarded as one of the final parts of a step-wise scientific procedure whose final output is an academic paper. Writing precedes and accompanies the entire research efforts, from the early phases of research design to the final interactions with editors and reviewers. Given these assumptions, writing practices need to be critically examined and discussed. The ideologies of writing practices predominant in the field need to be addressed in broad daylight. For instance, the belief in scientific texts as being representations of real events and occurrences is one such ideologically ingrained assumption that needs to be discussed. Rather than thinking of writing as a linear, rule-governed, fully controlled process of "writing up the study" (Richardson, 1994), writing captures a number of creative and cognitive and perceptual processes that are not simply being controlled by the writer. The writer is as much written as the text in the process of writing; thinking and writing are entangled, and thinking is a most diverse process that cannot be separated from emotionality, embodiment and other human faculties. Thus, this paper suggests that the management and organization theory writer should aim at writing what anthropologist George Marcus (1998) has called "messy texts", that is, texts that acknowledge that there is no final conclusive language—Richard Rorty (1989) refers to this position as "irony"—that once and for all can capture an event, an occurrence, or an experience (See also Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Messy texts are aimed at writing what is fluid, what is subjective, what is essentially non-essentialist, and so forth. But messy texts are not simply subjective accounts on events but may provide useful concepts and analytical frameworks that may be useful for societal action. We can here make use of Paul Virilio's formulation about being a "conceptual activist" (Armitage, 2001), that is, someone that offers a conceptual framework

that aim at radically changing the view on the world. Taking the consequence of this reasoning, management and organization theorists should write "messy texts" based on a method of witnessing containing new and useful concepts that seek to give name to organizational and managerial practices that have been neglected to date. Such texts would represent a break with the dogmas of traditional scientific writing, assuming foundationalist representations, underlying essences, and stable ontological configurations of being.

This paper is structured as follows: First, writing and its relationship to methodology is discussed. In this section, it is argued that methodology is substituting for writing which makes writing a largely neglected area of organization and management studies. Second, the writing practices are examined as being aimed at capturing fluid process of becoming. Here, the notion of messy texts and conceptual activism is elaborated upon. Finally some implications for writing practices are discussed and some examples of messy texts are introduced.

Writing and methodology

In management and organization theory, there is a strong focus on safeguarding that scientific methodologies and methods are being used (see e.g., Rehn, 2002). Business school research has always been at the cross-fire between on the one hand traditional academic disciplines refusing to see the study as a management as more than, at best, a sub-discipline to sociology or economics, and on the other hand, practitioners complaining about business school research not being very actionable or practically applicable (Grey, 2001). In order to establish the study of management practice and organizations as a legitimate object of scientific studies, there is a pervasive belief in the virtues of methodologies. In terms of writing practices there are two assumptions that serve as the basis for the methodology focus. First, it is assumed that methodology serve as the basis for knowledge on a certain topic. The proper use of scientific methodologies opens up for a formulation of knowledge. Second, writing, the written scientific text, *re-presents* methodology and knowledge, that is, the written text is mirroring underlying stable configurations that we refer to as knowledge. The underlying idea here is that knowledge is "fixed" so that one can formulate propositions on a topic under certainty. Writing is used to "express" methodology and underlying knowledge. Thus the idea

of knowledge needs to be examined. John Dewey writes: "Perfect certainty is what man wants. It cannot be found by practical doing or making; these take effect in an uncertain future, and involve peril, the risk of misadventure, frustration and failure. Knowledge, on the other hand, is thought to be concerned with a region of being which is fixed in itself" (Dewey, 1929/1988: 17). Certainty is the objective of all pursuits of knowledge, and certainty always excludes belief. Dewey continues: "We *believe* in the absence of knowledge or complete assurance. Hence the quest for certainty has always been an effort to transcend belief" (Dewey, 1929/1988: 20). To Dewey, this "quest for certainty" in scientific ideology is mistaken as there are very few things we can actually know for certain. Since reality is continuously changing, knowledge can be at best, with Haraway's words (1991), *situational*. Henri Bergson, a philosopher of fluidity and becoming, says of knowledge: "To know a reality in the ordinary meaning of the word 'to know', is to take ready-made concepts, apportion them, and combine them until one obtains a practical equivalent of the real" (Bergson, 1992: 137). Following Bergson closely, William James refers to the tradition of naming things and then taking these names as stable significations as *intellectualism*. James argues:

> Intellectualism is the vicious sense began when Socrates and Plato taught that what a thing really is, is told by its *definition*. Ever since Socrates we have been taught that reality consists of essences, not of appearances, and that essences of things are known whenever we know their definitions. So first we identify the concept with a definition, and only then, inasmuch as the thing *is* whatever the definition expresses, are we sure of apprehending the real essence of it or the full truth about it. (James, 1996: 218)

This intellectualist view of representation is problematic to James because it cannot deal effectively with change and movement:

> The ruling tradition in philosophy has always been the platonic and aristotelian belief in that fixity is a nobler and worthier thing than change. Reality must be one and unalterable. Concepts being themselves fixities, agree best with this fixed nature of truth, so that for any knowledge of ours to be quite true it must be knowledge by

universal concepts rather than by particular experiences, for these notoriously are mutable and corruptible. (James, 1996: 237)

The controversy between pragmatists such as Dewey and James and process philosophers as Henri Bergson on the one hand, and foundationalist thinkers on the other, is that the concept of knowledge is conceived of in different ways. On the one hand, knowledge is never certain, always provisional, in a process of becoming, while on the other hand, knowledge is, by definition, what is not changing not what is once and for all formulated in terms of "laws" or regularities. Hence the concept of knowledge needs to be examined before writing practices are discussed.

Foucault (2000: 12) writes: "Western philosophy—and this time it isn't necessary to limit the reference to Descartes, one can go back to Plato—has always characterized knowledge by logocentrism, by resemblance, by congruence, by bliss, by unity". To Heidegger and later on Derrida, Western metaphysic and Western thinking is based on the idea of presence, on logocentrism. To Foucault, these ideas are integrated into the philosophy of knowledge. Knowledge is what is stable and unified. Studies of scientific practices and scientific communities do, as opposed to this view, suggest that knowledge is always in the making (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Fleck, 1979; Lynch, 1985; Pickering, 1995; Knorr Cetina, 1999). Laboratory work, the most "pure" form of scientific practice, is always based upon the practices of analysis, inscription and translation. Karin Knorr Cetina (2001) talks of "objects of knowledge" as being what laboratory work is producing. As opposed to the common sense view, "objects of knowledge" does not have a stable essence or final configuration:

Objects of knowledge appear to have the capacity to unfold infinitely. They are more like open drawers filled with folders extending indefinitely into the depth of the dark closet. Since epistemic objects are always in the process of being materially defined, they continually acquire new properties and change the one they have. But this also means that objects of knowledge can never be fully attained, that they are, if you wish, never quite themselves. (Knorr Cetina, 2001: 181)

Objects of knowledge "unfold". In the words of Deleuze (1993), they are *multiplicities*, assemblages that continuously unfold in the process of analysis. As a consequence, the "object of knowledge" lacks what Knorr Cetina calls "object-ivity":

> From a theoretical point of view, the defining characteristic of an epistemic object is this changing, unfolding character – its lack of object-ivity and completeness of being, and its non-identity with itself. The *lack in completeness of being* is crucial: objects of knowledge in many fields have material instantiations, but they must simultaneously be conceived of as unfolding structures of absences: as a thing that continually 'explode' and 'mutate' into something else, and that are as much defined by what they are not (but will, at some point have become) than by what they are. (Knorr Cetina, 2001: 182).

"Objects of knowledge" are thus based on its "absences". This Derridaean conclusion, acknowledging the inconsistencies and fissures in the "object of knowledge" underscores Dewey and Bergson's argument that knowledge can never be completely certain but that it must always be conceived of as provisional, temporal heuristics that may serve a purpose but that are never wholly unified and coherent. From the perspective of writing practices, this implies that the written text can never be conceived of as a linguistic system mirroring underlying knowledge, but rather as a patchwork of various accounts and components (see Mouritsen, Larsen and Bukh, 2001). If knowledge is "messy", why cannot the written texts be "messy"? How can we become between in writing what is fluid and continuously changing?

Writing the fluid

George Marcus (1998) talks of "messy texts" as one of the symptoms of a departure from the colonialist tradition in anthropology. Marcus writes: "These texts wrestle with the loss of credible holism, so important in previous ethnographic writing, especially functionalist accounts. In messy texts, there is a sense of the whole, without an evocation of totality, that emerges from the research process itself" (Marcus, 1998: 188). In a colonialist, modernist *episteme*, the text was coherent, well organized, aimed at being objective, and so forth. In the

contemporary society, the anthropological texts need to recognize all the uncertainties of the anthropological work: "Messy texts are messy because they insist on their own open-endedness, incompleteness, and uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close" (Marcus, 1998: 189). To Marcus, the messy text represent the anxieties of no longer being absolutely sure about the qualities and characteristics of the world as we know it. Marcus writes:

> I find them [messy texts] interesting as symptoms of a struggle to produce, with the given format and practices of analytical writing, unexpected connections and thus new descriptions of old realities and, in so doing, to critically displace sets of representations that no longer seem to account for the world we thought we knew, or at least could name. (Marcus, 1998: 189).

Marcus (1998) points for instance at Ruth Behar's celebrated *Translated woman* (1993/2003) as an example of a rewarding messy writing strategy wherein the object of analysis and the author's biography are folded into one another and corresponding throughout the text. *Translated woman* is in brief a text that breaks with a colonialist ideology and its unquestioned prerogative of authorship. In a colonial ideology, the anthropologist had no problem to claim the right of being able, indeed even thinking of him or herself as being best suitable, for naming the world. White anthropologists from Europe and North America took the role of investigating and organize the world in accordance with scientific principles (Prasad & Prasad, 2002; Young, 2001). In the contemporary age, the objects of investigation, the "savages", "primitives" and "tribes", started to claim their right to speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for (Fanon, 1986; Said, 1977; Spivak, 1987, 1999; Bhabha, 1994; hooks, 2000). The anthropologist's experience of de-colonialization is traced in the messy text. The hegemony of the West in classic anthropology is displaced and substituted with all the anxieties of the lost prerogatives. The anthropologist used to talk on behalf of the Western civilization when making accounts on tribal life. Today, the anthropologist speaks for him or herself and perhaps the discipline of anthropology. The moral in this story may be that the transfer from a unified, hegemonic analytical framework to fragmented, situational knowledge on a topic is represented in the writing practices. The step from anthropology to management and organization studies is not that far-fetched. What anthropologists such as

George Marcus (1998), Clifford Geertz (2000), Marshal Sahlins (2000), and James Clifford (1988) discuss in their critique of anthropology is applicable in management and organization theory as well. However, it is also important to notice the differences between the disciplines. However, the writing practices of the two disciplines may follow similar trajectories (Van Maanen, 1995b). In a management and organization theory context, Richardson (1994) talks of *evocative representations*, that is, "experimental genres that deploy literary devices to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses." (Richardson, 1994: 521). For Richardson, evocative representations break with foundationalist, realist writing practice, which Richardson (1994) refers to as *putdownism*.

Luce Irigaray, French feminist thinker, says: "Never abandon subjective experience as an element of knowledge. The most transcendental theory is also rooted in subjective experience. The truth is always produced by someone. That does not mean that it contains no objectivity" (Irigaray, 1994: 30). The subjective is always entangled with the objective. These are by no means excluding categories. Recognizing the subjective in the analysis of "objective events" (say, a sales meeting at a company) will enable the researcher to write a messy text. In addition, messy texts are characterized — at least in Marcus (1998) view — by the loss of a unitary and linear discourse. Therefore, messy management and organization theory texts need to develop writing practices that enables for a break with the doctrine of linearity and simple causality. Rosi Braidotti, a feminist poststructuralist writer, defends the writing practices of poststructuralist writers. Braidotti argues:

> To attack linearity and binary thinking in a style that remains linear and binary itself would indeed be a contradiction in terms. This is why the poststructuralist generation has worked so hard to innovate the form and style, as well as the content, of their philosophy. (Braidotti, 2002: 8)

The writing practices from the perspective of a fluid and fluxing epistemology is different from that of a unitary epistemology, Braidotti argues. If one refuses to conceive of organization as stable entities, but think of them as continuous processes of social interaction, it is not of necessity attractive to adopt a conceptual framework, an army of metaphors, and a set of models that would effectively block any analysis from such a perspective. As Gilles Deleuze points out, concepts and analytical frameworks do not fall from the sky or appear

pre-fabricated but must be created by the researcher or philosopher. The researcher must therefore be a provider of concepts. If we are disgruntled with the previous analytical frameworks, then we need to invent our own concepts and analytical tools. As Braidotti rightly points out, to think against the grain implies that one rejects some of the ready-made thinking offered by those who one may want to criticize. To break with colonialist hegemony, post-colonial thinking must develop their own concepts; to break with phallogocentric ideology, feminists need to abandon its favoured analytical framework; to think outside of the favoured domain of heterosexuality, queer theorists need to coin new phrases and concepts. In Derrida's (1981) formulation, language is never neutral; it rather carries within significant ontological, epistemological, and ideological assumptions and beliefs. In order to get rid of such assumptions, language itself becomes a target of critique. Hence the importance of "messy texts".

The main criticism toward messy texts is that such texts appear as being merely subjective accounts on particular worlds to which most people do not have immediate access. Messy texts do not make as far-reaching claims of objectivity as its predecessors, but they do, of course, not reject the notion of objectivity offhand. Since messy texts are textual arenas for experimentation and "novel thinking", the writers of messy texts may serve as "conceptual activists". Lyotard writes: "What is at stake in artistic language today is experimentation" (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1985: 10). In addition, Lyotard argues that "[T]he artistic vanguard knows that it has no readers, no viewers, and no listeners" (Lyotard and Thébaud, 1985: 10). History repeats itself: "Future Becketts or Kafkas, who will of course be unlike Beckett or Kafka, may well not fid a publisher, and if they don't nobody (of course) will notice". (Deleuze, 1995: 128). The artistic vanguard should be experimental, create the new, novel forms of art. Being a conceptual activist is to experiment with concepts; to coin them, to make use of them, to be their spokesman. But to be the *avant-garde*—a concept coined in the early day of modernism (Hobsbawm, 1994)—is to be without an established audience. People may be interested in the avant-garde per se, but they can never anticipate its work. Being a conceptual activist is to produce concepts that can enable for new thinking. Messy texts may contain new concepts in their accounts—witnessing—of organizational events. Thus the messy text is not only a subjective account but is also aimed at providing new conceptual frameworks. The writing of messy texts are therefore not an symptom of

indulgence but is rather to be seen as an attempt to bridge the objective and the subjective and still recognizing the subjective aspects of writing.

Writing management: Make it messy

The writing messy of texts can never be based on an instructor's manual but must always derive from individual writers experiences and interests. Therefore, it is not worthwhile to try to formulate too a detailed recommendations for messy texts. But there are some aspects that may be useful to keep in mind. Messy texts are filled with subjective accounts, new metaphors, counter-intuitive thinking, changes in perspectives, etymologies, puns, and linguistic transformations (think, for instance, of Heidegger's use of the word "hand"), creative (but not pretentious) textual experiments, play with clichés, and so forth (see e.g., Carr and Zanetti, 2000, Czarniawska, 2001). Messy texts are based on what Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia* (Morris, 1994: 248; Rhodes, 2000), the manifest and immanent hybrid qualities of language. To Kristeva (1980: 67), Bakhtin conceives of "the 'literary word' as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogues among several writings". Language, based on the use of words and concepts, is thus never stable in itself. Words are *dialogic*, that is, they presuppose that each word is uttered in relation to possible responses (Bakhtin, 1984). Thus, language "lies in the borderline between oneself and the other. The words in language are half someone's else." (Clifford, 1988: 41). Messy texts are not restricted by the scientific ideals of reproducibility, objectivity, and modest formulations. The messy texts aim at unconcealing the potentialities of the empirical material, to take it as far as possible, and to give an account of it that produce some new opportunities for thinking. For Foucault, there is a need for a counter-memory in historical analysis, an ability to think against *what is* in order to think *what may be*. Such a counter-memory can be formulated in messy texts, that is, it should give alternative perspectives of an investigated event. Messy texts should also be able to offer texts on fluid, fluxing, and inherently changing processes. In traditional writing, reality is conceived of as being composed of stable, separated entities that can be given proper names. In messy texts acknowledging fluidity, organizations are in a state of becoming, therefore putting demands on the writing practices in terms of capturing change. Messy texts make language—to use a term employed by Deleuze

(1994)—"stutter"; language is "frustrated", bended outside of its normal trajectories, and a new language within the previous language is created. Olkowski (1999: 14) writes: "Stuttering is what happens in language when the language system is in motion, in 'perpetual disequilibrium', so that the entire language system stutters, murmurs, mumbles, and breaks up in a heterogeneity of time and space". Moreover, messy texts should aim at maintaining a certain "suspense" throughout the text. In this respect, there are no determinate lines of demarcations between literature and science since the writer's storytelling skills and techniques are also valuable in scientific texts (see De Cook, 2001). The reader should be intrigued by the writing just as must as by the empirical study per se.

The notion of messiness is by no means restricted to written texts. It has been argued that the present age, which some refer to as a postmodern age, is fundamentally characterized by noise, spectacle, fluidity, the mixture of aesthetic forms and styles, impurity, implosions, and so forth (Best and Kellner, 1997, 2001, Vattimo, 1992; Deetz, 2000). The architecture of Robert Venturi combines various styles and architectural idioms, the music of Alfred Schnittke is polystylistic combining various elements and traditions, and the novels of Thomas Pynchon are veritable carnivals of impressions, styles, and fragments (Mattessich, 2002; Best and Kellner, 2001). In these examples from various forms of art, the genres are being blurred, the standard forms of expression are being mixed, and the taken for granted is overturned. There is no longer any fixed categories but only smooth spaces of expression where various forms are combined into new forms. Messy texts draw from such heterotopias of artistic expression and seek to open up for some messiness amidst the field of management writing.

Examples of messy texts may be Bruno Latour's *Aramis or the love of technology*, Bougen and Young's (2000) paper on bank fraud, or Alf Rehn's (2002) dissertation on "electronic potlatch" within Internet communities. Such texts seek, in various ways, to defamiliarize the taken for granted. In Latour's case, the way we give accounts on human beings and technologies, in Bougen and Young's case how we can examine social events such as financial operations, and in Rehn's case how we relate to concepts such as the market, sharing, giving, and other taken for granted components of economic sociology. In their own particular ways, such texts open up for a rethinking of certain beliefs, ideas, events, writing practices, and so forth. In these cases, writing practices and novel thinking are inextricably entangled; these are experimental texts, in different ways aiming at breaking with the ready-

made off the shelf thinking of management and organization theory and creates their own spaces of writing (see Blanchot, 1982), their own idioms and concepts.

Conclusion

"Writing up the thesis" is no longer possible. Each and every research projects are always already anticipating the writing practices in the research design and methodology. Writing is present throughout the process. Therefore management and organization theory is based on the capacity of *writing* management (Czarniawska, 1999). Writing is an integral part of the research process. If organizational practices become increasingly complex and polyvocal, then this experience needs to be formulated in the written text. Drawing on the anthropologist George Marcus, heterogeneous organizational realities are best accounted for in what Marcus refers to as "messy texts", that is, texts that recognizes the inconsistencies, open-endedness, and uncertainties of the empirical reality and the various problems associated with the endeavour to formulate such a reality in a written text. Messy texts do in brief acknowledge the possibilities and shortcomings of writing practices and literary expressions. Although messy texts recognize a broad range of ontological and epistemological puzzles and concerns, they are by no means indulgent and esoteric. Messy texts could serve to offer new experimental forms of writing at the same time as they provide new concepts that can enable for practical consequences. Therefore, the writing practices of messy texts are both oriented towards addressing analytical and practical concerns.

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