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CHANGE AGENTS, DOUBLE AGENTS, SECRET AGENTS:
THEORIZING ACTIVISM FROM ‘INSIDE’
ABSTRACT

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The participant who wants to discursively contest policies as texts must come to understand how discursive practices operate, how they distribute power and constitute power, and how discursive interventions are possible. This will apply no less to their own discursive practices, including their own policy recommendations, as to those of others (Yeatman, 1990, p. 160).

The question of activism from 'inside' organisations squarely confronts tensions between the "performative stance" and "a commitment... to denaturalization" that are evident in many versions of Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Fournier and Grey, 2000, p.8). Feminists have been long concerned with exactly these tensions, and this paper draws on feminist theory to explore organisational change from 'inside' and 'the bottom up'. The case study I use looks at organisational change from the perspective of Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) practitioners working for social justice inside government organisations. Using interview data, it takes a foucauldian perspective in analysing the complex positioning of those who enter certain organisational discourses of gender and ethnicity in order to change them. By taking up positions that legitimise their arguments in the organisation's terms, they risk losing touch with the political discourses that made them change agents in the first place - in other words they risk 'selling out'.

In considering 'how discursive interventions are possible' (Yeatman, 1990, p. 160), activism, agency and intervention are problematised. The practitioners in the case study were often highly reflexive in their awareness of the complexities, problems and opportunities of discursive practice - although they talk in terms of 'communication'. As practitioners explained in interviews, they have to be 'chameleons', flexible and 'multilingual' in a range of organisational discourses.

More broadly, this paper engages with debates over discourse and agency in the critical management studies literature. The issue of agency is the question of how action is possible: What is our capacity to act, to intervene, to create change? The CMS 'agency' debates centre around the claim that a foucauldian perspective fatally compromises the possibility of agency, because no action is possible outside existing discourses (Chan and Garrick, 2002; Newton, 1998). The response to this claim is that discourse itself enables degrees of agency, and that foucauldian discourse analysis offers ways to see how agency works in a given discursive setting. The capacity to intervene in a way that creates discursive change, rather than simply reinforces an existing discourse, depends on the ability of the agent to 'replay and resignify the theoretical possibilities that have constituted [her]', as Judith Butler puts it (Butler, 1995, p. 42). In this theoretical context, 'communication' draws on discursive resources (e.g. the discourse of social justice) in order to intervene in certain discourses that are already dominant in organisations and which frequently run counter to social justice (such as managerialism).
Whether their project is framed as 'diversity', 'equal opportunities', 'feminism', 'anti-racism' or 'affirmative action', practitioners who want to transform discourses of gender and ethnic difference in organisations do so within a specific cultural, historical and legal context (Jones, Pringle and Shepherd, 2000). In western countries such as New Zealand, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, the 'business case' is the dominant framework for legitimising their agendas (Konrad, 2003). My case study is set among 'Equal Employment Opportunities' (EEO) and 'Biculturalism' practitioners in New Zealand government departments. Practitioners often experience tensions between 'the business case' and political reasons for creating change. In the examples I discuss, these tensions are evident in the relationship between 'selling' the change agenda and 'selling out' to dominant organisational interests. They are expressed by practitioners in both ethical and political terms, as they reflect on and evaluate their own strategies, and compare them with strategies used by others. While they see themselves as 'selling' the message, they often see others as 'selling out'.

I argue that CMS scholars can contribute to organisational activism through practicing a 'denaturalizing' critique. This can provide resources for the kind of auto-critique that Yeatman and other feminists propose: the ability to analyse one's own discursive positions. These include the discursive positions that activists occupy at different times - as managers, or members of minority groups, or human resource management consultants, or cultural experts, or some combination of all of these. In this spirit I begin my case description by asking 'who' EEO practitioners are, and 'where' they come from: how are they discursively constituted in their own autobiographies? I go on to look at how they see themselves as change agents, and at where they see the boundaries between 'selling' their message and 'selling out'.

I present an alternative approach to those of other writers who have considered how change agents within organisations can occupy the positions of both organisational insider and organisational critic. For instance, Meyerson and Scully (1995) propose the concept of 'tempered radicals', 'individuals who identify with and are committed to their organisations, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with, the dominant culture of their organization' (Meyerson and Scully, 1995: 586). Meyerson and Scully, explore ‘tempered radicals’ in terms of identity as well as change strategies. With more of an emphasis on the 'selling' aspect, Ashford et al. (1998) use the concept of 'impression management' to consider how women manage tensions and risk in 'selling gender equality issues'. Both of these approaches link issues of identity, power and 'selling' strategies to bottom up organisational change. I criticise these approaches in terms of both their (occluded) political agendas and their theoretical frames. I present another theorisation based on the idea of EEO practitioners as 'double agents', moving between multiple discourses inside and outside their organisational context, and argue that both their positionings (and my own as critic) are inevitably political in effect.

I consider intervention from the point of view of feminist readings of identities and 'justices' (Flax, 1992), where political agendas of social justice intersect with issues of identity and difference. If, as Butler (1990) and others have argued, gender is performative - that is, a 'set of repeated acts' (p. 33) - this performance can be transformed and re-signified by being interrupted and deconstructed. This 'interruption' provides openings for change agents to intervene in discourses of difference such as
ethnicity or gender so that new versions of these identities can be created, changing the inherent power relations.

Anna Yeatman theorises that organisational change agents produce new ‘texts’ - accounts of their work - which attempt to resolve unresolved tensions and contradictions in their inter-discursive situations (Yeatman, 1990, pp. 164-165). When I carried out interviews in 1993, many EEO practitioners specifically rejected unitary resolutions of discursive tensions. While some EEO practitioners clearly privilege managerialism, and have no problem with that, others seek to maintain and develop a discourse of Equal Employment Opportunities which does not roll over to managerialist discourse, that maintains the possibilities of resistance. In Judith Butler’s thesis, agency is enabled when discursive tensions are kept in play and re-worked to provide a critical space. This project requires a reflexive ability to ‘understand how discursive practices operate’ and to apply this understanding ‘to their own discursive practices, including their own policy recommendations, as [they do] to those of others’ (Yeatman, 1990, p. 160). This reflexive ability requires a critical language which enables political intervention in what Riley calls ‘reflexivity and an ironic spirit’ (Riley, 1988, p. 98). In terms of the project of CMS, the relationship between an academic with a ‘denaturalizing’ impulse and a practitioner with an activist impulse can be an uneasy one. I conclude by discussing some challenges to my own position as I engaged in this research, and some persistent wondering I have about this slightly uneasy relationship.

REFERENCES


