

## **Organizational anonymity and the negotiation of research access**

### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

This paper examines part of the organizational research process, access negotiation, through reflexive analysis of our participation in a recent data collection process. Our aim is to question two emergent norms in this area: first, that organizational anonymity be granted in exchange for organizational access; and second, that access negotiation be seen as a bounded activity at the start of data collection.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

Through our reflexive account and with reference to published accounts of practice in other research projects, we explore the reasons why researchers offer organizational anonymity, and note the unintended consequences of this practice. We locate our discussion in relation to increased expectations on social researchers to contribute to public debate about managing and organizing.

#### **Findings**

We suggest that the negotiation of access without promising anonymity may generate more situated accounts of organization, and greater participation in political or ethical debates surrounding work, organization and management. By facilitating a clearer line of impact stemming from qualitative research, this would also aid researchers in demonstrating the value of their work in informing public debate.

#### **Social implications**

We conclude by reiterating the potential for organizational researchers to achieve greater social and ethical impact, especially if we frame access negotiation as a continuous process rather simply as than a moment at the start of a project.

#### **Originality/value**

We argue that this paper raises a key, but neglected, issue in conducting empirical organizational research, that has political and ethical implications as well as a methodological significance. Through our analysis, we encourage our selves and our research community to be clearer about the potential value of scholarship in debates

happening outside the academy, and to see access negotiation as more complex than simply a transaction in which organizational anonymity is promised in return for data.

#### Keywords

Case study, access, anonymity, confidentiality, organizations, impact.

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### Introduction: Building a case

This paper forms part of our continuing reflexive narrative relating to the process of building an organizational case study from multiple empirical sources (Land & Taylor, 2010; Land & Taylor, 2011). Here we want to explore the ethics and politics of knowledge production in academic analyses, and the possibility of greater critical engagement in public debate if as researchers we name the organizations where we collect data. The case study organization we reflect on the process of researching, Ethico (a pseudonym), has a high public profile and therefore generates data in a variety of different arenas: practitioner oriented books, webpages and blogs, political speeches, and through website and marketing material. When we decided that Ethico would provide an empirically and conceptually interesting case to analyse, we negotiated access to one of the organizational sites to take photographs, conduct interviews, and observe how work, management, and organization are accomplished there.

As we wrote up our data, with the aim of contributing to debates on work/life balance and authenticity at work, we became acutely aware that our case study analysis is located within a series of other situated accounts, each with its own unique data, argument, and political or ethical positioning. As qualitative organizational researchers, our data/analysis therefore potentially competes with, challenges, or speaks to accounts of Ethico generated by non-academic analysts, often highly educated ‘organic intellectuals’ with a sound grasp of conceptual social theoretical debate (Lynch, 2007), who happen to work outside academia. Our published work exists alongside analyses from Ethico owners and employees; contributors to internet discussion fora provide another set of representations; and print journalists and politicians contribute yet more. The multiple occurrences (Denzin, 1989) of our case study challenge us in our attempts to be definitive about Ethico and the social, political or conceptual issues it symbolises. We can and do seek to incorporate ‘other’ narratives of the organization into ours, reading competing accounts as empirical materials that we then apply our analytical insight to – theses for us to construct our antithesis to, and prepare the ground for, our published synthesis. In

doing this we not only incorporate others' accounts into ours, we also make an implicit commitment to establishing a truth about the case study object, verifying the real position of the organization in order to construct a dominant or definitive narrative through our research methods and skills (Denzin, 1989).

In our published analyses we aim to create knowledge around and about Ethico, a convincing, tidy, and above all clear account of management and organization there. This aim is often set at the beginning of the research act, when we negotiate access to collect data. At Ethico, we presented our selves and research work as clearly as we could, promising insight in return for time when we could be physically present in the company distracting people from their work. Crucially, we offered organizational anonymity and individual confidentiality, a conventional part of access negotiation to reassure respondents there will be no internal organizational repercussions and that the organization will not be exposed publicly in the event of researchers uncovering socially questionable actions. This anonymity has meant, however, that whilst our analysis sits alongside and incorporates the perspectives of other commentators' representations of Ethico, this is not a relationship of equals. Unable to name the company, our account is rendered invisible to the public debate over the moral and ethical goodness of the company as a symbolic site, and we are less able to publicly challenge these hegemonic representations.

Organizational anonymity and individual confidentiality are usually framed as ethical issues (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011), in which responsibility to protect individuals lies with the researcher. There is, however, a strong argument within the social sciences to suggest that neither anonymity nor confidentiality should be assumed as inherently ethical. Grinyer (2002), for example, suggests that respondents can feel a loss of control over their stories if they are cloaked with pseudonyms, and that data providers sometimes desire recognition of their contribution to the research. This is a methodologically important argument that challenges the unreflective use of anonymity and confidentiality, potentially making the research and publication process messier. Here, however, we approach the negotiation of access as a political process that extends from initial contact

to publication and beyond. We suggest that the promise of organizational anonymity can be used to de-politicize the process, and hinder our engagement with both our respondents and non-academic readers.

The genesis of this paper lies in something unexpected that happened a few days after we visited Ethico to collect data. One of the senior employees in the company, and a key respondent in our fieldwork, published an account of our data collection visit on the organization's blog pages, complete with a photo of us both, our names, and where we worked. We were exposed under the blog title as 'Two men' who had conducted research there; the blog post said we had found positive responses to our question of what it was like to work at Ethico. We had lost control of our fieldwork as it was presented in a way that contributed towards the construction of the Ethico brand. The anonymity and confidentiality we had offered, and still feel bound to uphold, was threatened by one of our respondents.

This loss of control and the ambiguity it suggests can exist in relation to organizational anonymity led us to question our research practice and its outcomes. This paper is the result of that process; it is structured into four linked parts. First we provide a detailed analytical account of the qualitative research process that has led us to question the norms of offering anonymity and confidentiality. Following from this, we return to debates on these issues within social science to outline proposals for approaching the organizational research act as an inherently messy process, in terms of methods, methodology, and knowing (Law, 2004). We focus in particular on the need for reflexive methodological commentaries on this aspect of the research act, and greater engagement beyond the academic community after the research is formally complete (i.e., published). We then draw on this discussion to explore the consequences of de-normalizing organizational anonymity (defined as 'removing or obscuring the names of participants or research sites' [Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011: 198]), especially if we want our research to form part of the debate in the public sphere as to the purpose and effects of organization and management.

#### A good case: Ethico

### Getting in and getting on<sup>i</sup>

Both of us initially engaged with Ethico as customers. We liked the idea of a clothes retailer that provided assurances about ethically sourced materials and production, and that is promoted in news media as an actor in challenging practice in conventional capitalism. As far as we know, the entire Ethico range of clothing and accessories is and always has been sourced from outside the UK; labels on some of the t-shirts tell us, for example, that they are ‘made in a nice factory in Turkey’. Notwithstanding, the brand is built on reassuring customers that animals, people, and the planet are all treated with respect and care. The products are mainly promoted via email, quarterly catalogue, and sponsorship of action/adventure sports such as mountain biking or surfing. The clothes sell through small independent retailers, and the company has also at times operated dedicated shops in the UK.

We mainly buy the clothes at sale times, because there is a significant price premium – t-shirts are priced at around £25 and jeans at around £90, for example. We discovered that the clothes are practical and long-lasting (we both own and continue to use Ethico clothes that are approaching their second decade of active life), as well as being branded in an attractively rebellious way. The company identity is closely associated with the idea that it is an engaged organizational community of owners, employees, producers, and customers, with an activist orientation. The walls of the company workspace are painted with slogans such as ‘Let’s use this little company of ours to make people think’; T-shirts carry anti-corporate, sometimes anti-capitalist slogans, such as ‘Work hard, die young’ or ‘Time not cash’; the quarterly catalogues contained a ‘recommended books’ section, encouraging customers towards texts like Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity without Growth*; and the organization donates a percentage of its profits to charities, following the model established by US-based outdoor clothing company Patagonia. Employee entries on the Ethico blog tell interesting stories of surfing, sea kayaking, and commuting to work on a fixed-wheel bike, all activities that we either do ourselves or would like to.

When we decided that Ethico would be a good case study, either for research or teaching, we put together a small amount of funding for travel and accommodation from personal research and internal university ‘seedcorn’ budgets, and then contacted one of Ethico’s founders. He responded positively, and referred us to the person responsible for media relations. It then took around six months of email exchange and phone calls with her to negotiate access to the private world of Ethico’s UK workspace, so that we could add primary data to our expanding secondary dataset of publicly available material. After making three arrangements to visit, each of which was postponed, we were finally granted two days to hang around, interview people, and take photos, on condition of organizational anonymity.

We are not suggesting this is exceptional as an organizational access negotiation process, but it is certainly one of the more complex and cautious we have experienced, and we were disappointed by the limited time we were eventually allowed. While this could have been a practical issue framed by how busy the people working there are, we have also interpreted it as a desire to protect the organizational brand from hostile analysis, as the brand is the cornerstone of the value proposition Ethico trades on. This is an issue to which we return later.

#### Getting out, getting back, and getting excluded

Before visiting Ethico we collected as much publicly available data as we could, and continue to do so. Some of it comes to us because we subscribe to automated email updates and buy Ethico clothes; we also talk about our research to colleagues and friends, both of whom point us towards new data. We have downloaded data from the company website, such as catalogue pdfs; we also copied t-shirt images carrying interesting slogans, read employee blog entries, and tracked discussions about Ethico at critical moments in its history, on cycling and surfing community websites. To this we added the transcriptions of our dozen recorded interviews, notes from the same number of unrecorded informal conversations, 60 or so photos we took ourselves, and fieldnotes. Despite our initial misgivings it started to feel like a dataset that we could analyse and write with, as well as providing material for teaching cases.

As noted above, we both continue to follow the progress of the organization. We were given impetus to do this by the partial sale of the company shortly before our fieldwork visit, to a US multinational with a reputation for conducting business in an ethical, sustainable way. We were unable to clarify the details of this process in terms of ownership or money, because the information was not made public and none of our respondents were willing or able to discuss it. As we understand it, Ethico's founders initially sold a significant part of the business, retaining a high degree of freedom in decision making and extracting assurances as to company location and activity. However, less than five years later both founders had left; the business became wholly owned by its US parent, and that company was in turn merged into a global apparel conglomerate which owns more than 20 brands. The founders' account of parts of the process has been given in interviews to national newspapers and through blog postings. Early in 2012 the company was bought again, apparently by employees, and hence became independent once more. There are as yet no public accounts of this process, apart from terse factual acknowledgements of the change of status on the website and in promotional materials.

In the two years after visiting Ethico we wrote two analyses based on our data, presented them at conferences and in research seminars, and then published them in a refereed journal and an edited collection. We talked from time to time about trying to return to the company to present or talk through our written analyses, but we didn't act quickly enough - our gatekeeper left the company, and that was pretty much the end of our formal contact with Ethico. However, we also retain an active interest in the sector that the company operates in. This led us to attend a business development workshop in September 2011, run by Ethico's founders. We spoke to one of them; she seemed interested that we'd published something about what had been her company, and we promised to send copies of our work. We haven't yet, in part because we are apprehensive about the reaction they might generate, but probably will because we would like to return to Ethico now that it is independent again, perhaps to collect more data.



This gives a sense of the lack of contact we have had with Ethico since we collected our data there. We have come to see this as problematic, in the sense that we are not in dialogue with our respondents, their voices are only present in our analyses as data providers, and, as we go on to argue below, our analysis is detached from public debate on the nature of work in contemporary capitalism. Our case study only speaks to the conceptual frames we chose to analyse data through, as an almost transcendental object visible from only one perspective – within the academy. In what follows, we suggest that our offer of organizational anonymity, driven by the norms of tidy research and our desire to gain access, was pivotal in these outcomes, especially in the lack of dialectic between our Ethico object and other accounts in the public sphere. We follow this argument with some proposals to re-orient our own practice and begin to challenge the norms of negotiating access through anonymity in organizational research.

### The importance of rules

In our analyses of Ethico we have worked with various forms of data to build what we think are empirically coherent and conceptually authoritative narratives. However, as we have suggested above, we have also come to see a problem in this, in the sense that there is a gap between our ontological object, Ethico the academic case study, and the public objects that are also Ethico. We trace this problem to our promise of organizational anonymity, at the beginning of the data collection process as we negotiated access.

Our decision to offer organizational anonymity was more complex in its implications than we anticipated. From one perspective, we are able to write relatively freely about Ethico and its inhabitants without worrying about respondents' reactions to what we publish – after all, no one can identify the company or any individuals within it, so we are free to write what we wish and be as critical as we like. (Although in writing this, we have to acknowledge that we don't really know if this is the case – we suspect it would be relatively easy to identify Ethico from the detail of our analyses given the amount of information available about the company, and presumably people working in the company would be able to identify themselves or their colleagues in the quotes.)

Our analyses can be read as critical of prevailing cultural norms in the organization and some individuals' actions or behaviours. Perhaps our journal paper and book chapter have the potential to undermine the capital accrued through the work of organizational branding, as we emphasise the (sometimes yawning) gap between brand-building representations of individuals or organization and accounts of the everyday lived realities of working at Ethico. For example, we problematize the process through which employee private lives, a key building block in construction of the company brand, are incorporated into the marketing narrative. We imply that founders and some senior employees are actively (knowingly) exploiting their colleagues' enthusiasm for active sports to create unachievable physical aspirations within the customer community that are displaced onto, and sated through, consumption. Public representation of the organization implies Ethico is a supportive, fun workplace where spontaneous absence to go surfing is tolerated, encouraged even; our analysis challenges this, also noting the ways in which value creation at Ethico breaks down distinctions between work and life that are contributing to the redefinition of what we understand as labour (Land & Taylor, 2011).

In this context anonymising the organization as we have brings distinct advantages. First, we are granted a kind of freedom to critique, safe in the understanding that it is difficult to connect Ethico with the research site. As an argument, this is reminiscent of ten Bos' (1997) account of the 'effacement of face', in which physical distance encourages a more instrumental attitude to others – we are better able to analyse the experience of people as objects engaged in construction of capitalist value. Anonymity may thus be understood as a means of distancing the researcher, and the research product, from individual respondents and the organizational context. This in turn implies that anonymity has become a moral technology that undermines the ethical quality (ten Bos, 1997) of how we conduct, write and disseminate our research (Wray-Bliss, 2003).

There is a secondary argument for anonymity, in that it may be demanded during access negotiations in ethical codes connected to funding, or for publication in refereed journals. Researchers responding to such structural conditions of data collection and dissemination

have, as Tilley & Woodthorpe (2011) note, little option but to disguise. However, this is also an argument based on an instrumental position that challenges the autonomy of the researcher and has implications for the dissemination process. This issue was experienced in a very acute form by Miriam Glucksmann when writing the book *Women on the Line* in the early 1980s. That book was a very detailed and highly politicised account of women working in a car components factory in north London. Glucksmann's analysis of the company she eventually had to call 'UMEC', manufacturing 'Unidentifiable Mechanical Objects' (UMOs), was initially published providing both complete corporate anonymity and a high degree of individual confidentiality; in addition the book was published under a researcher pseudonym (Cavendish, 1982) to protect Glucksmann from prosecution under libel law as she 'would have to be able to prove legally that everything I said about the factory was true' (Cavendish, 1982: vii). Following the closure of the factory Glucksmann (2009) has been able to reclaim the book as hers and also name the company involved; she also writes of the ethical challenge of representing people in a research account that was based on her working experience there, as it not represented to the company as research. Glucksmann's experience is, as far as we know, unique in the sociology of work and organizations, but it demonstrates the complex difficulties in this area, especially if research is conducted opportunistically or experience is reconstructed as data.

However the rationale for maintaining the norm of anonymity as a conventional aspect of primary data collection is now being questioned. Tilley & Woodthorpe (2011) argue that locating analysis is impossible without detailed accounts of historical or geographical contexts, which inevitably threaten corporate anonymity. This is an especially relevant dynamic as history and place become more significant to organization studies (Rowlinson et al., 2010; Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Tilley & Woodthorpe (2011) also explore individual confidentiality and organizational anonymity in relation to the latest British academic performance measurement metric, 'impact', a way of trying to measure the social or economic effects of research. As they note, researchers taking an ethnographic, participatory, or emancipatory approach may find their ability to engage and achieve 'impact' at local and political levels hindered if they have to anonymise organizations

and maintain respondent confidentiality. Unlike quantitative and econometric research, which is well accepted as evidence appropriate to governmental policy and decision making, for example in the UK Treasury's 'Green Book' (HM Treasury, 2003), qualitative research struggles to gain purchase on policy making. Where research outputs have been anonymised and rendered sufficiently abstract from concrete examples to prevent identification, the second option of engaging in public debate directly by sitting alongside corporate PR and media reportage or political commentary, is also blocked. In such a context it is extremely difficult to have, or at least evidence, a significant impact on either policy or organizational practice.

We are suggesting, then, that the 'positive' arguments for organizational anonymity, while pragmatically productive of access or publication, are ethically and politically problematic. It also has further effects as a normalized research practice. If we approach it from a pragmatic perspective, in our analyses of Ethico we are unable to use a significant section of our data. Publicly available photographs and images of the clothes, for example, carry logos or the name of the company, and are therefore unusable. Conducting visual analysis is not impossible but it is awkward and difficult; this limits our means of understanding Ethico as an aesthetic site of organization and work (Warren, 2008). Analysing some aspects of the organization's founding, growth, and (re)sale would also involve naming it during analysis or making clear which company it is, and we therefore lose some of the richness or thickness available to us in representing Ethico.

Most importantly, however, we would like our analysis of Ethico to be read as an ethical intervention in the public debate as to the nature, purpose, or politics of contemporary work and managerial practice. Our exclusion from this is especially frustrating in relation to Ethico, because of the range of lively, reflexive, sometimes critical narratives presented by other commentators, Ethico employees, customers, and owners. These accounts are published in British national newspapers, in practitioner-oriented books, on blogs, and in Ethico's own promotional materials. While we can participate in a general sense, referring to our research as an example from the sector we located Ethico within (New Age capitalism – see Lau [2000]), we believe we would be much better able to

present an ethical position, and therefore make a political intervention, were we able to name the organization our analysis is based on. This freedom would allow us to participate in wider critical engagement centred on the ideas and practices that Ethico promotes and practices, to denaturalise embedded organizational or societal discourses about how work might be (Fournier & Grey, 2000), and perhaps even allow us a moment of performativity (Spicer et al., 2009) to persuade Ethico's stakeholder communities of the analytical insight we have laboured to produce. However we do not have the option of such reflexive or performative moments because we cannot name the organization; nor did our respondents show much interest in hearing from us after the on-site data collection ended, so we are denied even a private performance of our analysis (cf. Kenny, 2008). We are therefore separated from other Ethico bricoleurs by the cloak of company anonymity, of organizational invisibility, that negotiating access involved. Customers, employees, politicians and media commentators interested in Ethico can all speak to each other, but our room in the ethical debate built around the company has no doorway to the rest of the building.

In negotiating access as we did, we were of course conscious of several prominent issues. First, it was extremely difficult to negotiate access of any kind, so we were perhaps more generous than we should have been. In other words, we could have either argued for naming because it would have allowed a more situated analysis; or we could have withdrawn from the negotiation and tried to find another case study. Second, we knew from colleagues and publicly available data that organizations such as Ethico are very protective of their brands. We should have been more aware at the outset that our research could threaten this valuable commodity. Third, organizational anonymity and individual confidentiality are embedded norms in assessing the ethical stance taken during data collection in organization, and are usually considered an integral part of arguing for the project's and researcher's positive approach to respecting respondents.

Hence our decision, perhaps at the time but certainly retrospectively, takes into account the practical, political, and cultural aspects of conducting research in an organization that trades on ethical practice. Practically, we were unable to use a significant proportion of

our data, including what we think are the most interesting parts – the visual representations that Ethico uses to construct a sense of authenticity or ethical brand, and data that enables the significance of place to be understood. Politically, we believe we are less able to participate in the public debate on work/life balance that centres on organizations like Ethico and the apparent challenge they present to conventional workplaces and working practices. As we have argued (Land & Taylor, 2010), companies such as Ethico may in fact be intensifying the labour process through more systematic incorporation of employees' 'private' or 'non-work' activities into the effort-reward bargain. We believe our inability to present our analysis as organizationally and politically situated means that it carries less political weight than a named case would, something that is especially frustrating when Ethico is used an example of good practice by a British prime minister in speeches.

Last, we followed what we read as the cultural norms of our community in offering anonymity and confidentiality, without much thought – these are conventions that we have followed for a long time, and that we rarely see challenged. There are of course named cases in organization studies, sometimes based on primary data collection, but more often when an organization is held up as exemplary of the issue under discussion (positively, as in Harvard cases, or negatively, as in critical analysis, usually of secondary data). The wisdom of following the conventions was emphasised when we discovered that the journal we submitted our first analysis to requires organizational anonymity and respondent confidentiality in order to publish.

However, as this paper demonstrates, we remain unhappy about the decision we took when negotiating access, and hence would like to make some proposals that contribute towards denaturalizing anonymity and confidentiality as cultural norms for qualitative researchers. Our observations, data collection and analyses, are incommensurable with others that directly contradict them, as they are founded on positions that cannot be symbolically or politically reconciled. When we anonymise a case we lose the ability to name the object, perhaps even the idea of there being an object (Žižek, 2006), in the

sense that there is no master code through which we should interpret what we find in organizations.

Naming cases would enable researchers to speak much more effectively to competing accounts of social practice in organization, particularly as these accounts contribute to economic and political ideologies. However, as Žižek (2006: 75) points out, this means that ‘in the last resort there is no theory, just a fundamental practico-ethical decision about what kind of life one wants to commit oneself to’. Žižek goes on to argue that the parallax, or incommensurability, between ideological accounts of the economics and politics of everyday life demands their interpretation as two separate objects, one real and material (economics), the other shadow and ideal (politics). In practice this means that the struggle for social justice or change should be pursued through political action, based on perspectives representing the material realities of economic activity but not defined by them.

#### Naming without shame

In writing this account of access negotiation we have sought to do three things. First, to denaturalize organizational anonymity as a sine qua non of access negotiation, but also as an unquestioned demand within research funding applications, ethical assessment of research proposals, and publication. There are examples of empirical analysis in our field that name organizations, but we believe it remains rare, especially when primary data collection within the organization is conducted with a view to critical analysis or an in-depth exposition of the lived reality of work, which is rarely, if ever, entirely uncontentious and free from conflict. This assumption that anonymity is a ‘good’ in qualitative research is, we think, a recent development, perhaps related to greater recognition of reputation as a source of value; it is difficult to imagine a company like Ford granting access to someone like Huw Beynon today, for example (see Beynon (1984[1973]) for the story of his access negotiations, and the resulting political debate generated by his named case analysis).

Second, we want to note the difficulties that anonymity presents to conducting research as an ethical or political act. This is a central and explicit concern for organizational researchers affiliated with the tradition of critical management studies but is implicitly so for any qualitative researcher of organization and management. Any account of an organization is necessarily ‘partial’, in both senses of the word. Practically, researchers cannot ever expect to gain access to every aspect of work in an organization as their perspective will be determined by the methods used, theories deployed in analysis, and by their political astuteness in negotiating social access (Carmel, 2011). Similarly, decisions about who to interview, whether to focus on those at the strategic apex of an organization, those on the ‘shop floor’ or those whose work is sub-contracted to off-shore suppliers reflects an implicit, perhaps even unconscious, but always political and ethical, partiality. From whatever political or methodological perspective research is conducted, the prospects for that research to impact organizational practice or the institutional and policy environment that shapes organizing, may be much improved if the research can actively participate in public dialogue, which more often than not focusses on concrete, named examples, rather than anonymous abstractions or general principles. For those engaged in explicitly ‘critical’ analyses of management and organization, research should ‘include practical and direct interventions into debates surrounding management; crafting and creating social change during the research process; and encouraging ‘micro-emancipations’ to enable self-determination (Spicer et al., 2009). Each of these aims would be better served, we believe, by the ability to locate empirical analysis more clearly in terms of history and culture, by negotiating access that goes beyond the act of data collection, and by engaging in a more public form of debate during and after data collection. Each of these possibilities would be more easily accomplished were we able to name organizations such as Ethico.

Third, we also wish to question the desire within case study methodology in particular to achieve an authoritative analysis of practice. We have touched on the philosophical possibilities of this process with reference to Žižek’s (2006) argument about dialectic. If we take his argument to its logical conclusion, any form of empirical analysis that purports to provide an authoritative representation of organization, management, or work,



is pointing in the wrong direction. If we move away from the desire to establish one reality through our empirically informed conceptual analyses, and accept the possibility that there can be a productive incommensurability because of the multiplicity of subject positions from which to observe an object, then organizational research becomes part of a process of at least acknowledging the validity of the multiple accounts of organization and management. These accounts can be generated by those we gather data from, customers, social movements or protest groups, and other inhabitants of the management studies and education field such as gurus or ‘airport lounge’ (Burrell, 1997) authors. Such a position would respond to Law’s (2004) suggestion that social research could engage productively with other metaphors apart from ‘knowing’ in an objective or absolute sense – to reframe knowing as a process of situated inquiry that is inevitably messy, incomplete, and complex.

As Law (2004) makes clear, such a position does not imply acceptance of these alternative realities; nor is it an argument for relativism which might be overcome by the skillful performativity of our arguments. Rather, the incommensurabilities (in other words, the parallax gaps) may be productive of paradox, tension, and political change (Žižek, 2006). The key intervention, as Žižek argues, lies in the ‘shadow’ reality of politics which is defined by activity or practice and dependent on the construction of a ‘materialist theology’ (Žižek, 2006: chapter 2). Our audience, in other words, must also be those able to act at the level of policy, whether inside organizations or elsewhere in the structural conditions of economic life, not only each other as an academic community.

However this is easy to say, less easy to do. If we are bound by organizational anonymity but still wish to engage with our case study organizations, others interested in them, and in the debates they exemplify about the nature or purpose of work and management, what options are available to us from our separate position? As Kenny (2008) notes, conducting fieldwork can be an emotionally bruising process, especially when your carefully crafted and insightful analysis is ignored by respondents. We both have an emotional connection to Ethico, in the sense that we feel we know and like some of the people who work there; we like the company and parts of what it represents in terms of a

different approach to the potentially grubby business of selling clothes; and we invested considerable emotion in the fieldwork process itself. Access and any emotional engagement that stems from it is part of the ‘deal’ (Kenny, 2008: 383) we make, which is always founded on an instrumental exchange. This seems reasonable to us – after all, we (and our respondents) are working, and there are demands on all of us to produce a commodity of some kind from the relationship. The acceptance of separation that anonymity in particular involves is however a position inimical to engaged research that hopes to have any kind of ‘impact’ on organizational life.

Hence we conclude here with the proposal that, in our context of organizational analysis, promising anonymity as a standard part of access negotiation is a significant hindrance to engagement and impact. Case writers in Harvard Business School have long been aware of the power of naming organizations, as a means to engagement and presence (Contardo & Wensley, 2004), as well as accruing social capital based on the logic of association<sup>ii</sup>. Negotiating ‘naming rights’ should also be more common in other, less managerialist and prescriptive, research, most obviously interpretive or critical research. As complex as such an negotiation might be it would enable researchers to more effectively participate in the broader political conversations about work, organization and management that all too often happen around but without us.

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<sup>i</sup> Our narrative here is framed using the terms of Buchanan et al. (1988), as a process of getting in, getting on, getting out, and getting back. To which we might add 'getting excluded' (Kenny, 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> Although this can of course work both ways, in that this form of associational capital can go down in value. We both take some pleasure in telling students about Harvard Business School's changing relationship to Enron, from celebration to disassociation via that company's accounting scandal and collapse, as symbolised in the shift in Enron case studies from 'most popular' to 'withdrawn from sale'. The construction of celebrity in this way is outwith the control of the institutions and individuals involved and therefore fragile (cf. Guthey & Jackson, 2005).