

Sub-theme 44: When Critical Research Goes to Work: Moving Towards Practical Engagement?

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Call for papers

Critical research has an important role in highlighting the “shadows of power” in organizations. Curiously, however, there is less interest in developing possibilities for positive transformations. This sub-theme aims to examine how critical research could have a sustainable and emancipatory impact on organizational and managerial practice.

We ask: What happens when critical research goes to work and engages with those who do the work? What are the possibilities for positively transforming management and organizations?

Recently, several scholars have raised concerns that critical research has failed to have a meaningful impact on organizational change processes or effect what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) call “transformative redefinition”—the construction of alternative organizational realities that are based upon previous insight and critique (Hartmann, 2013; King & Learmonth, 2014; Spicer et al., 2009; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). Encouraging such transformative redefinition, however, remains underemphasized in critical research because scholars do “not step far beyond mere critique” (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2009: 65).

In this sub-theme, we seek contributions that attempt to bridge the gap between critique of the mainstream and articulating what alternative, more democratic modes of organizing might look like. We want to explore how research could step beyond mere critique towards encouraging transformative redefinitions of organizational realities. While some scholars argue that critical emancipatory research should not position itself too closely to managerial agendas for fear of co-optation, others have been more pragmatic in developing what could be called “engaged critical research”.

In the domain of Critical Management Studies (CMS), Spicer et al. (2009) propose various subversive tactics to change management practices through what they call “critical performativity”. Wickert and Schaefer (2015) expand this notion and argue that the performative capacity of language and a close engagement with managers could inform empirical critical research and catalyse small-scale change as a basis for larger organizational transformations. King and Learmonth (2014) empirically show that critical perspectives can offer resources through which we might challenge the dominance of managerialist thinking on a practical level. Finally, Hartmann (2013) contends that the existing canon of institutionalized critical perspectives impedes a “critical performative” agenda and argues

for a more subversive engagement.

We invite papers that engage closely with the role, function and usefulness of critiques of mainstream management. We encourage submissions that blend disciplines and epistemologies and explore new and unconventional methodologies such as engaged scholarship, participatory action research, or paradoxical inquiry. Submissions may include but are not limited to the following questions:

- How can we use critique of mainstream management to trigger organizational change?
- What are the potential limitations and dangers of such a practical engagement?
- What are possible obstacles to “positive transformative redefinition”?
- What potential strategies are available to critical researchers when engaging with managers and organizations?
- What methods are suitable and what are the methodological challenges involved in such engagement?
- What are the possibilities for translating critical theories into organizational practice?

References

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