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Wayfaring: A Scholarship of Possibilities or Let's not get drunk on abstraction

Ann L. Cunliffe

Accepted by associate editor Olivier Germain

Abstract. I argue that our academic work is becoming increasingly normalized through the gatekeeping activities of journal editors, funding bodies, ranking systems and so on. This is resulting in a narrowing of scholarship: of methods, of theorizing and of ways in which we write our accounts. I suggest that one way of addressing the situation is to build a more pluralistic scholarship of possibilities, one that requires us to humanify ourselves and others. I draw on anthropologist Tim Ingold's notion of "wayfaring" as a metaphor for re-thinking how we might conduct our research as a scholarship of possibilities, and suggest this involves foresight, imagination and reflexivity.

Keywords: scholarship, humanifying, reflexivity, wayfaring

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INTRODUCTION

First, I would like to thank Olivier, Thomas and Thibault for inviting me to contribute to this Anniversary issue of M@n@gement and allowing me to write about an issue close to my heart—the need to encourage more imaginative and situated forms of scholarship. This is particularly important in today's academic environment where we are faced with a scholarship of normalization through the operation of research metrics, the gatekeeping activities of journals and an institutionalized audit culture. Those of us doing non-mainstream work find ourselves in a paradoxical situation—on the one hand we are exhorted by journal editors to be "original", "insightful", "curious", "theoretically radical", and "fresh" (all adjectives taken from well-known journal mission statements) and told by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2015: 2) that "Excellent social science needs people with the skills, curiosity and creativity to be truly innovative…". Yet in my experience we are facing the opposite—a narrowing of scholarship through increasing normalization. "Theoretically radical" can be interpreted in various ways, as conservatively radical, critically radical, radically radical … and doesn't seem to encompass "methodologically radical"!

I believe this narrowing of scholarship is occurring for a number of reasons: we are still obsessed with the "grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism" that sociologist C. Wright Mills cautioned against back in 1959. Grand theory, according to Mills, is concerned with developing generalities, typologies and abstractions that do not help us "make our experience more sensible" (Mills, 1959: 33), and grand theorists are often "drunk on syntax, blind to semantics" (p. 34), which makes their work unintelligible. Mills also

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criticized sociology's obsession with "abstracted empiricism", which he argued eliminates meaning through the circularity of thin description by using "statistics to illustrate general points and the use of general points to illustrate statistics" (p. 71). It's a concern that was shared by Peter Berger (2002) who lamented that sociology had fallen foul of "methodological fetishism", where methods (usually quantitative) trump content, resulting in "many sociologists using increasingly sophisticated methods to study increasingly trivial topics". Consequently, the visibility of our work beyond academia is minimal (Hamet & Maurer, 2017) because we over-intellectualize our research findings and write in overly academic ways that even academics themselves find an uninteresting read (McGrath, 2007).

And this has practical implications for our discipline. In her 2012 Academy of Management Presidential Address, Anne Tsui (2013) argued that young scholars face a "terrible life" as they are forced towards the homogenization of their work because of the drive to publish in top journals. The pressure to conform to the increasingly narrow, intellectualized version of scholarship that is supported by universities, funding bodies and journals means that we are experiencing, to borrow anthropologist Tim Ingold's phrase, "the prostitution of scholarship" (Ingold, 2011: xiii) in which we feel we have to act in ways that satisfy the normalized view or help us build an "acceptable" CV. And if we try to engage in research that is different to the norm, there is a danger that we are criticized and rejected for not contributing to theory, not doing rigorous (i.e. "scientific") research, and end up in the far corner institutionally and academically (Cunliffe, 2018). Even though the "impact" discourse is becoming more central (especially in the UK), this relates to *impact of theory on* practice, not *impact of theory in* practice (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017).

I suggest the problems associated with this normalized view of scholarship are that:

- It separates knowledge/knowing from being—and I believe that knowledge is not objective and neutral but is embedded **in** and influences/is influenced by our lived experience.
- It de-humanizes, because we treat people as objects to be studied or focus purely on the words they use without understanding the context, intention and feelings behind those words. I recall years ago John Shotter saying to me that he moved away from psychology—his original discipline—because he became disillusioned with experimental psychology's focus on treating people as if they are rats in a maze. Experimental psychology has made significant inroads into studies of leadership, ethics and work, and I struggle to see how it appears to be more acceptable to generalize from controlled lab experiments with undergrad students than it does from an in-depth ethnographic study of people and practices in a workplace.
- It distracts us from addressing important social, ethical and moral issues that we could contribute to in meaningful ways. As social science scholars we are not only creating knowledge *about* society and organizations, we are living in society and organizations, creating knowledge/knowing with others, and therefore also generating possibilities for change.
- Finally, it can take away any sense of responsibility to and for ourselves as academics and for others.

And it worries me—a lot!—that the normalizing and increasing administrivializing of scholarship is pushing us further away from original, insightful, imaginative and responsible work. This trend ignores that *we are*

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humans living in a human and material world saturated with history, culture, relationships, emotions, intentions, and imagination.
Can we do anything to redress the situation, and if so, what?

I want to suggest that we can attempt to influence the situation by building a scholarship of possibilities that embraces pluralism in terms of focus, approach, methodology and theorizing. A scholarship of possibilities means accepting and encouraging different ways of seeing, being in and generating knowledge/knowing about our world.

This in itself, of course, is not new. It goes back to the "Paradigm Wars" of the 1980s and 90s, centering around whether there should be a unified or a paradigmatically diverse organization theory (Pfeffer, 1995; Van Maanen, 1995). But I want to come at this issue from a different perspective—one that is very close to my heart because it relates to the need to be reflexive about who we are and what we do as scholars. And I will argue that a start point for this is the need to humanify ourselves.

A SCHOLARSHIP OF POSSIBILITIES

What is a scholarship of possibilities? I suggest that it means aiming for a pluralistic, profound—a thought-ful and care-ful—understanding of the lived world. This understanding requires us to recognize our role as academics in shaping our experience, knowledge of and way of living in that world. I propose that it's a scholarship of foresight, imagination and reflexivity—pivotal to which is a need to humanify ourselves. I'll therefore begin with the latter.

HUMANIFYING OURSELVES

> *The lives of humans are temporally stretched, between the already and the not yet.*
> (Ingold, 2017: 19).

Much of organization studies is concerned with de-humanifying people by treating them as objects within structures and systems. From a critical perspective, even the emphasis on team-based structures, self-managed work groups, autonomous and self-actualizing individuals can be seen as ways of reordering behaviour and controlling actions under the guise of freedom, while maximizing system efficiency. I would like to suggest that the first step in developing a scholarship of possibilities is to humanify ourselves as researchers and organizational members, and in doing so, I will draw on the work of social anthropologist Tim Ingold and philosophy/communications scholar John Shotter.

For the last 20 odd years I've been interested in exploring the lived experience of people in organizations, of trying to articulate this experience in different ways, as a means of helping leaders, managers and researchers think about what they do from a more ethical and responsible perspective. This is what draws me to reflexivity, to relational leadership, to more embedded research methods and to exploring what it means to be critical educators and researchers. I believe that underpinning all of these issues lies a fundamental ontological question—one that we often ignore: *What does it mean to be human in a human world?*

Our answer to this question, and to the related question of what we believe to be the nature of social reality, is crucial to understanding the nature and purpose of scholarship, of education, leadership, management and the role of organizations and universities in society.

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I'd like to re-tell a story that I've written in a chapter in the recent book honouring the work of John Shotter because it's central to the issue of humanifying ourselves (Cunliffe, 2016). Back in 1993, I read John's book *Conversational Realities* and 21 words on page 118 stopped me in my tracks:

I shall take it that the basic practical moral problem in life is not what to do but [who] to be…. (Shotter, 1993: 118)

They did so because they provoked me into questioning what I'd taken for granted for many years, that the assumptions underpinning much of the work in organization and management theory is based on the premise of what the "right" thing is to do, what behaviours, actions, roles, language and techniques leaders and managers should employ to make them "good" i.e. rational, efficient and effective organizational members. Even the topic of authentic leadership, which one might assume is concerned with "who to be", is defined "as a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviours on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development" (Luthans & Avolio, 2003: 243), i.e. as a multi-dimensional and multi-level construct, not as how to be human in a human world. Shotter's 21 words therefore call upon us to question what it means to be human and also to question the way we think about and enact our role as academics.

This has also been a long-time concern of Tim Ingold, who in his 2011 book, *Being Alive,* argues that anthropology is about "the potentials of human life" (Ingold, 2011: 3) and that inquiries into human life are about exploring "the conditions of possibility" (p. 7). He uses the term "humanify" to argue that our humanness is an achievement not a pre-condition, and that we have to work continually on our humanity. And Shotter takes up Ingold's idea of humanifying saying that it's "Creating and sustaining our human-ways-of-being-human-in-a-human-world" (Shotter, 2016: 116). We can extend these ideas to organization and management studies, where humanifying takes on particular relevance because as ordinary people getting on with our lives we spend most of our day working in and associating with organizations.

What are the implications of Ingold's notion of humanifying for our work as scholars and researchers? Humanifying ourselves and our work means that deterministic, cause–effect correlations, testable measures or essentialist categorizations are inappropriate because they objectify people. For example, studying identity in the conventional sense de-humanifies by focusing on the "what"—on social categorizations, self-concept schemas, roles, personality traits, etc. Humanifying identity takes us to the fundamental existential question of who we are as human beings in the world and its implications for the way we live our lives and do our work. And if we are to avoid turning people into objects, then one way of humanifying ourselves and others in our work is by viewing people as relational knowing beings, reflexively situated, in which becoming human is open—responsive to—and influencing others and our surroundings. This means engaging in scholarship that focuses on the lived experience of people, drawing from more hermeneutic phenomenological, interpretive, subjective and intersubjective perspectives.

A few scholars have embraced this position, humanizing themselves, others and us as readers in their accounts. Examples are John Van Maanen's (e.g. 1978) provocative stories of ugliness and humour

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in the US police force, and Bud Goodall's (2005) compelling narrative ethnography of discovering on his father death that he had been a CIA agent—proposing the idea of "narrative inheritance"—shows that we (and organizations) inherit life stories from the past that help us explain where we come from, how people lived their lives, and who we are now (rebellious or not). Their stories are compelling and insightful in that they connect us with human fallibility. And while they are not "generalizable" in the positivist sense of the word, I believe they are far more powerful because they *resonate* with us and cause us to think about our own and others' experience. In addition, Michelle Fine's collaborative change-oriented work with disadvantaged and excluded groups, for example around the identity of Muslim-American youth post "war on terror" (Fine and Sirin, 2007), de Vaujany's (2016) "unplugged" dinner conversation about management research, and my own effort to put a human face on the experience of academic othering (Cunliffe, 2018) are forms of writing that attempt to move away from abstraction to embed insightful observations within lived experience. A humanifying scholarship of possibilities therefore means creating compelling stories that resonate with others. How, then, might we start to think about the form this research might take? I now go on to propose that we think about research as wayfaring, which involves foresight, imagination and reflexivity.

RESEARCH AS WAYFARING

The walker on the move, lest he [sic] lose his way, must be ever vigilant to the path as it unfolds before him. He must watch his step, and listen and feel as well. He must, in a word, pay attention to things, and adjust his gait accordingly.
(Ingold, 2017: 17)

Wayfaring or walking is a provocative metaphor for research because it is contrary to much that is taught in PhD programmes and published in top management journals, which is often embedded in positivism and, to borrow from Mills, "drunk on abstraction". Positivist research (both quantitative and qualitative) focuses on the "explanation and control of variables: discern(s) verified hypotheses or nonfalsified hypotheses" (Gephart, 2004: 456) by neutral, independent researchers who follow standardized processes or "codifications of procedure" (Mills, 1959: 195) that allow us to transmit generalized knowledge. Ingold (2011) argues that knowledge doesn't necessarily develop through transmission or prescription, or by following pre-determined paths, but through wayfaring.

Wayfaring humanifies the researcher because it requires that we recognize that we are alive, embedded in a landscape (physical, organizational, etc) and always becoming and learning. As human beings, we are open and sensitive to what's happening around and beyond us because "lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere" (Ingold, 2011: 148). We are in touch with our surroundings as our feet come in contact with the ground: as we talk with people, observe meetings, navigate buildings, etc. Wayfaring is the embodied experience of walking/moving along paths in our research landscapes paying attention—where attend means to wait and be open to what may unfold. We can prepare for the activity of walking/research with a backpack of tentative interests and ideas, with a commitment to the craft or art of inquiry rather than to a fixed position, control or prediction. The latter is destination-oriented in the sense the researcher is transported (moved

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from point to point) along a ready-formed path—often in a disengaged way observing, classifying and categorizing objects along the way. As an *embodied feeling person moving in* the landscape, the wayfarer threads her way through the world following different paths, moving with others and noticing sound, feeling and the features of our social landscape that need traversing, climbing and re-mapping. A wayfaring researcher asks what paths are well worn, why, do we need new ones, and what are the ways in which we may explore them? Do we need to/can we venture into the unknown? And what evocative narratives can we write about the journey? Narratives that might resonate and make a difference.

Figure 1: Wayfaring—being out there

So, wayfaring is about moving around in an organizational landscape, being open to its features, to what's happening around us, how people say, do and feel, engaging with ideas and seeing where they may take us in terms of creating multiple interpretations and insights into our lived experience. Abductive approaches to research lend themselves to wayfaring because abduction employs an iterative process of transposing observations, participants' accounts and experiences, and theory in relation to research questions, to see how each informs the other. Wayfarers engaged in abduction embrace surprises (Agar, 2010) and make doubt generative (Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008) as they are sensitive to and responsive to the landscape—they notice what's going on around them rather than being preoccupied with their own concerns.

FORESIGHT, IMAGINATION AND REFLEXIVITY

Wayfaring is not just travelling a path and noticing, it also involves foresight or feeling forward, i.e. "opening up a path and improvising a passage" (Ingold, 2013: 69)—making sure that we are attentive to where we may be going. Foresight can be equated with anticipation and conjecture, not in the sense of prediction or finalizing something, but by

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elaborating possible futures by paying attention to what is going on around us by looking, listening and questioning. As such, it means being poised between imagination, anticipation and the concreteness of our feet on the ground. I think I know what this feels like: if I reflect upon how I do my own work, I rarely start off knowing exactly what I'm doing and where I'm going. Rather, an idea, a topic, a research site, data, an opportunity to work with someone, arises and engages me. Questions emerge: How can we start thinking about [x] in different ways? What theoretical paths can we follow that might illuminate our understanding? Can we create an interesting, "fresh" and rigorous narrative that will resonate? And then the task begins of creating a map of the theoretical and experiential landscape—which inevitably involves imagination.

Imagination in relation to a scholarship of possibilities is about making unobvious connections that can lead to new insights and narratives: bringing ideas together that may at first sight be irrelevant—while being sensitive and accountable to our research participants and their experience. This became grounded for me two years ago when my four-year old grandson gave me a Mother's Day card that he'd made.

Figure 2: Jamie's card—imaginative narratives

I asked him to explain his drawing. He told me that he's the figure and he's standing next to the tree in his garden. There's a pink fluffy cloud above with a chocolate underneath (because I love chocolate) and a blue Kinder egg because he loves those and I bring them for him from my travels. He wrote his name around a heart, because he loves me, we hug a lot, and that's a hug.

The relevance to research struck me as he told his story and as the card took on new meaning. He created a narrative that made sense to him and a path unfolded as, what at first to me seemed to be random objects, became connected. We were wayfaring in an imaginative space, both

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metaphorical and literal, that was also situated in our lived human experience! How does this example connect with a scholarship of possibilities? It illustrates a sense-making process that could inform our theorizing and writing—one that draws on our imagination and also brings in acts of conjecture, which generate meaningful images in a speculative manner (Weick, 2016). I suggest it also draws attention to the need to be open to surprises, new narratives and multiple interpretations; to play with ideas; to move between theories and lived experience while trying to untangle possible connections; and to create clear, interesting and resonant narratives—narratives that the reader/listener may interpret in ways meaningful to them.

So often we are constrained by academic norms of writing (abstract, definitive, neatly complete) and rigid ways of structuring an article. It's assumed this form of writing conveys an objective and generalized "Truth"—as opposed to more interpretive forms of writing, which are subjective (often defined as biased, emotional, personal) and are rarely complete or definitive by nature. So how are wayfaring narratives a form of sustained and disciplined inquiry? They may not be generalizable in an objectivist sense, but they can resonate with others in compelling ways. As Fisher (1985) notes, narratives are meaningful if they embody the principles of probability and fidelity, i.e. the narrative has internal coherence, the characters are plausible, and they make sense to us. Wayfaring narratives are created through an ongoing process of interpreting our surroundings and of simultaneously assessing and critiquing our experience. In other words, as we are wayfaring we are being reflexive about what we are doing, taking into consideration "how our presence influences and/or changes people and practices and how their presence influences us—intentionally or otherwise" (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013: 365). Unlike the detached, neutral researcher, the wayfarer cannot take herself out of the research because the journey—the paths we take, what we notice along the way and the choices we make, influence the outcome. In turning our gaze on ourselves, acknowledging that we live with others in a world that we shape between us, we are humanifying ourselves.

FINAL THOUGHTS…

I'd like to begin my summary discussion with two quotes from Weick (2016: 340, 342):

Complex stories matter because they can reshape constraints of comprehension.
Organizational research prepares people for what they don't see and don't know.

Constraints of comprehension occur when we are too quick to make connections, conjectures and solidify meaning, and when we are transported along a pre-determined research path to a predictable destination. We constrain understanding when we try to fit "complex stories" of lived experience into abstracted models, hypotheses and single definitions. Although we can argue that comprehension is always constrained in some way (paradigmatically, methodologically, experientially, etc.), we can expand our ways of understanding an issue by accepting and supporting multiple ways of researching, i.e. by being open to a scholarship of possibilities. I do want to modify the second quote—suggesting instead that *organizational research offers a different way of seeing and knowing how people see and know*, for we are implicitly

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knowledgeable about what we do. We should not ignore the tacit knowing, explicit knowledge, instincts and imagination of our research participants. The metaphor of wayfaring underlines the need to humanify ourselves and others, to recognize that we cannot leave our humanness outside the door, that we are part of the landscape we are studying, and that as researchers/wayfarers we ourselves are sources of "data" as we traverse organizational landscapes.

My home is New Mexico, where being human takes on many different meanings (good and bad), and I would like to end with some words by Simon Ortiz, a native American poet from Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. He's an observer and a storyteller of what it means to be human in our world and our culture:

It's not humankind after all
nor is it culture
that limits us.
It is the vastness
we do not enter.
It is the stars
we do not let own us.

In other words, a scholarship of possibilities calls upon us to embrace the vastness and not be constrained by limiting acts of our own making. After all, insanity is continuing to do the same thing while expecting different results.[1] To wayfare is to *know well* and to "trace a path […] that others can follow" (Ingold, 2011: 162)—to be sensitive to people and the world around us and to explore our landscape in open, exploratory and imaginative ways.

1. Attributed to Einstein.

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