The illuminative potential of organisational ethnographies

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Abstract
Evaluation studies, especially of South African educational institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offering educational programmes, have been criticised for focussing inadequately on the ethnographic and anthropological dimensions of organisations. The dominant approaches to evaluation, it is alleged, have been structuralist and empirical-rational in orientation, serving narrow bureaucratic functions for funders and donors, based on self reports by programme participants. One way of resolving the dilemma of unreliable evaluation reports is producing richly contextualised organisational ethnographies which illuminate organisational contexts beyond superficial analyses. What are the potential benefits of an organisational ethnography, and what are the epistemological and ethical implications of such an endeavour? The author attempts to answer these questions by drawing on an organisational ethnography of a South African NGO offering language teacher development programmes, and tracing its mutating identity over three decades. The author uses insights derived from the traditions of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman 1999) and illuminative evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton 1976) as theoretical lenses to appraise the value of narratives in understanding organisational behaviour. Further, he appropriates discourse analysis to interrogate selected narrative data as a methodological lens in organisational analysis, and reflects on his experience of engaging in such a project. In the latter part of the article, the author revisits the methodological wisdom of engaging in an institutional ethnography, highlighting some of the ethical, representational and epistemological dilemmas in negotiating a non-conventional approach. He concludes the article with a brief allusion to the potential value of organisational ethnographies in mediating an emerging performativity driven higher education culture.

Keywords: organisational ethnography, empowerment evaluation, illuminative evaluation, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION
My interest in an organisational ethnography was motivated by my interest in the mutating identity of the South African non-governmental organisation (NGO) known as the Environment and Language Education Trust (ELET). The NGO was founded
in the apartheid era in South Africa as an alternative agency for language teacher development, from which I graduated in the mid-1990s with a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) qualification. After the installation of the new democratic regime in 1994, many NGOs found it difficult, if not impossible, to survive on the substantially reduced funding quotas. Funds that were once accessible to NGOs for development projects were redirected to the new – ostensibly – democratic government. The crisis was exacerbated as organisations such as ELET, which once enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with higher education institutions (HEIs), were now under threat from their counterparts in higher education. This was because HEIs were forced to reconfigure their own institutional arrangements in order to respond to a changing policy environment.

How was ELET able to prevail at a time when several similar NGOs submitted to fiscal fatigue? This was the compelling question that commanded my attention. As I pursued the enquiry through the typical evaluation routines of document analysis and interviews, it soon became apparent that the answer to the question was not going to be as simple as the question itself. Furthermore, conventional modes of enquiry based on the dominant empirical-rational model would be inadequate to excavate the delicate contours of an NGO’s life. The challenge was to transgress the mimicked methodologies that are not always relevant or appropriate to their context, in favour of a methodology that represented the life of the organisation, more authentically through the eyes of those who constitute it.

Inspired by the prospect of an approach to organisational evaluation which had the potential to satisfy my own intellectual curiosity, while simultaneously providing illuminative insights for members of the organisation, my interest in an organisational ethnography found resonance with empowerment evaluation, and illuminative evaluation, which have their roots in an anthropological conception of organisations and institutions.

EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION AND ILLUMINATIVE EVALUATION

Empowerment evaluation (EE), which was popularised by Fetterman (1999), is a form of participatory self-evaluation which aims to create conditions for members of an institution to reflect critically on their praxis, with a view to affirming good practice and instituting mechanisms for change where necessary. Fetterman (1990, 5) suggests that ‘an evaluator does not and cannot empower anyone; people empower themselves, with assistance or coaching’. Consistent with the theoretical and methodological tenets of EE, is its kinship with illuminative evaluation (IE) proposed by Parlett and Hamilton (1976). Illuminative evaluation research purposes a substantive understanding of the milieu as crucial in gaining insights into the lives of individuals who constitute the organisation.

The crucial question that IE poses is: how do we discard the ‘spurious technological simplification of reality’, by acknowledging the complexity of the organisational process; while the crucial question that EE poses, is: of what pragmatic value is the
emergent evaluation exercise if it does not inspire critical self-reflexivity among research participants? One of the most important guiding principles of EE is to understand what is going on from the participants’ own perspectives as authentically as possible; to document this in a credible and legitimate way; and to make this accessible to participants as a stimulus for self-appraisal.

A powerful means of inspiring illuminative experiences is the use of narratives. Narratives facilitate the reconstruction and interpretation of subjectively meaningful features and critical episodes of an individual’s and an organisation’s life. In this respect, narratives allow individuals to see the unities, continuities and discontinuities, as well as images and rhythms of experience. Attempting an organisational evaluation using narratives and subjecting these to rigorous discourse analysis unveils those multiple, competing discourses members of an organisation construct. In effect, individuals move outwards from an individual life, to a model of a localised social-institutional structure, whose life is situated, to the wider societal context (see Rustin 1999).

This mode of analysis resonates with Chia’s (2000) framework for analysing organisational behaviour. Challenging the canonical structuralist-functionalist mode of organisational analysis, Chia argues that social objects and phenomena, such as ‘the organisation’, ‘the economy’ and ‘the state’, do not have an unproblematic existence independent of people’s discursively shaped understandings of such phenomena. It is anomalous therefore to speak about ‘organisational discourse’ as discourse about some pre-existing, thing-like social object called ‘the organisation’. Hence, for Chia, discourse analysis is organisation analysis.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS ORGANISATION ANALYSIS

While ideology and discourses ‘frame’ the way in which individuals see the world, it does not imply that they are rigidly trapped within this framework. On the contrary, individuals appropriate specific discourses according to their particular circumstances. Discourse is also a hegemonic process, where dominant social groupings exert power and influence over others through a variety of mechanisms, including normative and coercive strategies. In this way, organisations derive their stability from generic discursive processes rather than from the presence of independently existing concrete entities. In other words, phrases such as ‘the organisation’ do not refer to an extra-linguistic reality. Instead they are conceptualised abstractions to which it has become habitual for people to refer as independently existing ‘things’. Consequently, discourse analysis creates a coherent world which gives a semblance of stability; order and predictability to what would otherwise be a nebulous, formless undifferentiated reality (see Chia 2000). It achieves this by inscribing into language and utterances, the material, codified forms that constitute the foundation of language and representation. This then becomes regularised and routinised through social exchanges, leading to the formation and institutionalisation of codes of behaviour, rules, procedures and practices. In this way, the world people have come to inhabit
achieves an apparent familiarity and regularity, which is consistent with their consciousness, through the internalisation of these discourses.

**WHAT NEW KNOWLEDGE DOES AN ORGANISATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY GENERATE?**

I attempt to answer this question by focusing on a research project spanning more than three years involving the production of narrative data with individuals associated with ELET, which I represented in an organisational biography entitled *Archaeology of a language development NGO* (Dhunpath 2010). The biography documents the subjective experiences of members of the organisation and attempts to capture the nuanced meanings of their experiences and interactions, as they reflect on the life of the organisation in its mutation over three decades. In the section below, I engage in an analysis of the discourses of key members associated with the organisation to illustrate the effects of their singular and collective identities on the organisation.

The selection of data for analysis is intended to serve two purposes: Firstly, it signals elliptically, through the eyes of members of ELET, the limitations of the dominant econometric mode of evaluation which the organisation is routinely required to conduct. The limitations highlight the angst this causes and how such a reaction potentially compromises the work of the organisation. The same data are used to demonstrate the potential of narrative research to act as a catalyst for the generation of heightened empiricism (Gough 2001), both for the analyst as well as the participants. The data also provide insights into the ways in which individuals are constrained and shaped by their particular contexts, and the ways in which they are able to devise strategies to enact their agency.

At this stage I want to introduce the four protagonists who have had an influential role in shaping the identity of ELET, namely, Mervin, Cecil, Tracy and Rene. Mervin is the founding director. A former educational manager and academic, he was disillusioned with the state of language teacher development and the non-delivery of in-service professional development programmes within HEIs. In response, he launched ELET as an alternative agency for language teacher development through a grant from Anglo Vaal, a corporate donor. By the year 2001, the neo-liberal season of mergers and takeovers had resulted in a more inward-looking Anglo Vaal which announced the termination of its 30-year social responsibility funding lifeline to ELET. At the time of writing and the concurrent stage in the organisation’s history, Mervin finds himself walking the tightrope of competing demands. On the one hand, he has to steer the organisation towards financial self sustainability to ensure its survival. On the other hand, he is committed to preserving the humanitarian mission of the NGO. These incompatible demands are the source of tension he is required to manage within the organisation.

Cecil, a former teacher educator and school principal, is a senior manager deeply committed to the creation of ecologically conducive learning environments to supplement and complement ELET’s teacher development programmes – especially
in rural schools. Using a bouquet of indicators to determine the characteristics of an ‘unloved school’, he institutes programmes to rehabilitate schools through a holistic development of the physical and psycho-social environment, using a variety of activities based on the Freriean model of participatory action. This is done within the context of language development by integrating environmental issues into literature and poetry, using drama and role-play. However, in recent times, Cecil is feeling increasingly alienated from his work as the organisational discourse increasingly takes on an econometric flavour.

Tracy is the programme manager of the Project for Health and Sanitation (PHASE). Like Cecil, she is committed to rebuilding schools ravaged by apartheid. Trained as a creative artist and graphic designer, Tracy believes that effective learning cannot take place in hostile ecological environments. Driven by a developmental impulse, she chose in the earlier years of her career to apply her aesthetic skills to materials design and curriculum development for NGOs. Like Cecil, she is currently experiencing an existential dilemma as a result of the progressive erosion of the organisation’s developmental mission. Because of a persistent sense that she is unable to assert her values and have them taken seriously, she desires disengagement from the organisation whose identity she helped shape.

Rene occupies a somewhat invidious position in her dual roles of development consultant to AngloVaal (the core funder) and chairperson of the ELET board of governors. Rene, who has her roots in the NGO sector, moved into the corporate domain in an attempt to exercise its espoused social responsibility mission. She is the architect of the new organisational discourse as she nudges the organisation to be more receptive to changing market forces as they impinge on the organisation’s survival. Her discourse, grounded in economic pragmatism, appears to be at odds with the developmental inclinations of the other members in this conversation.

Before I direct my attention to analysing the discourses of these four individuals, it might be useful to situate these discourses within some of the common senses that have come to typify the NGO sector as articulated by Eade, Hewitt and Johnson (2002, 3) who argue:

Corporatism, strategic planning, and formal accountability became the order of the day; a way to contain if not to understand the complex environments in which development and humanitarian programmes now had to function. Having discovered a particular brand of corporate management, however, many Northern NGOs and official development agencies began to seek spiritual and practical guidance not from within their own unique and multicultural experience, but from the orthodoxies of the for-profit sector (Powell and Seddon 1997; Lewis 1998). Ironically, many observers and insiders feared that in nailing themselves so firmly to the mast of strategic planning and market-led approaches, NGOs risk casting their central values and accumulated wisdom – their distinctiveness – overboard.
THE NORMATIVE AND COERCIVE POWER OF ORGANISATIONAL DISCOURSE

An analysis of the discourses of the four key participants in the study reveals interesting consonances as well as contours and cleavages to what might be considered commonsense orthodoxies reflected above. The central focus of this section is an analysis of organisational discourse and how it is articulated by individuals working in NGO environments, as they construct and reconstruct material practices and their psychological identities. The essence of the argument is that even if organisational members do not consciously embody the values of the organisation, they inevitably reproduce it through their agency. In other words, adopting a social constructionist perspective illustrates how individuals’ discourses constitute the identity of the organisation, just as their identities are simultaneously constituted by the discourse of the organisation. Further, I contend that these discourses do not simply reside in the realm of public knowledge, but are consciously mapped on by individuals who control the strategic resources to do so. The normative and coercive power of these discourses can be formidable in neutralising dissent and co-opting individuals to be consenting agents, particularly in a context characterised by resource dependence.

All four individuals identified above are representative (to greater or lesser degrees) of the traditional NGO world which symbolises humanitarian values based on a developmental mission. At the current stage in the organisation’s history, ELET finds itself in a crippling financial crisis as a consequence of inadequate student fee recovery, compounded by the announcement that its core funder was terminating its support. The context of this debate is a two-day strategic planning workshop intended to map the future of the organisation. Rene, in her capacity as the chair of the board, warns that unless ELET exercises fiscal austerity and adopts econometric principles, it faces demise. Rene contends:

"... can I afford to continue keeping the item on my shelf if no one is buying it? I’m sorry if that sounds like a tough line, but if people are not paying for the courses, then ELET must make some tough decisions about the courses. Each one of us here, and not just the managers, should be wearing a marketing hat, to promote the services we offer. If we still are not able to sell what we have to offer, we must stop selling it. If the courses are not profitable, we must discontinue them. We need to abandon the spirit of entitlement (which some NGOs are guilty of) and adopt a spirit of entrepreneurship where every individual within the organisation adopts a corporate ethic and works to promote the interest of the whole organisation rather than individual interests.

In response, Cecil, who manages the teacher development courses (which are implicated here) argues:

If this [ELET] were a grocery shop, we would have closed it down a long time ago. But we are not a grocery shop. We offer teacher development courses. Our experience is that students may not pay up when we want the money, but in the end, just before graduation, they pay their dues. We’ve experienced financial crises before
and we’ve bounced back. There is no reason to believe that we won’t bounce back again.

These transcripts articulate the dilemma experienced by two managers, negotiating the tensions between development ideals and the realities of development practice. Cecil subscribes to the belief that in order for the NGO to fulfil its developmental mission it has to retain its humanitarian identity, which he believes is compromised by the adherence to a corporate rationality. Cecil languishes in the belief that there is some self-perpetuating, philanthropy that will ensure that ELET bounces back. The difference between Rene – in her capacity as chair of the board – and Cecil – as a practitioner – is that Cecil has the luxury of dreaming lofty dreams without being unduly concerned with matters of fiscal austerity. Such matters, it would seem, fall within Rene’s province of responsibility.

Rene cautions against this idealistic posturing. She does this with the benefit of hindsight from her experiences with the NGO world, and foresight from her involvement with the corporate world. She makes a conscious choice to infuse an agenda influenced by a corporate ethic into the neo-NGO world, because she believes that ELET can no longer seek refuge in corporate handouts as she articulates below. Significantly, she infuses the standard neo-liberal toolkit (Giroux 2004) into the strategy debate which seeks to neutralise the assumptions of corporate ideology, silencing its social implications. These commonsense assumptions relegate the developmental idealism of agents like Cecil to the level of expensive rhetoric. Here, agency is stripped of an ethical language, and fails to recognise a politics outside of the realm of the market. In this view, social developmental impulses are romanticised as activism – an occupational hazard that the market has to tolerate – reflected in Rene’s response:

I think that it is important that we maintain dreamers like Cecil and it is perfectly reasonable that there will be people who will not be comfortable with the new rationality. We do need to keep the dreams alive, but with a consciousness of the reality we ultimately have to face. There were times when an organisation would fall into the crevice and some Good Samaritan would come along and rescue it. The days of organisations bouncing back because of Good Samaritans are forever gone. These days organisations bounce back because they respond creatively and strategically to their predicaments. Today we no longer have the comfort of expecting a lifeline every time we are in trouble. We have to dream with the consciousness that at the end of the month we will have to pay the rent or face eviction. We cannot sit back smugly hoping that we will bounce back as we always have.

On the one hand, it might be argued that Rene has an obligation to maintain the social mission of the NGO, which implies resisting the coercive power of the corporate rationality that she symbolically represents and overtly advocates. On the other hand, she has an obligation to ensure the survival of an organisation which finds itself struggling as a consequence of a changed and ever-changing development arena.
MANAGERIALISM, PROFESSIONALISM AND THE ETHICAL DIVIDE

Rene is cognisant of the benefits to be derived from adopting the econometric language of the corporate world. In that sense, her intention may not be insidious, but strategic. This is a consequence of her belief that the post-apartheid South African NGO is caught in something of a time warp. Rene observes:

In the post 1994 era, I don’t think the issue is whether NGOs are relevant .... It is about everyone, the NGOs included, recognising the need for a changed and changing role. Where we have failed as the NGO movement is interpreting what its new role is. It would appear to me that because NGOs were once central to the whole development agenda in this country, they expect that the mainstream should come to them, rather than their joining the mainstream. Now we face a situation where funders and donors regard the democratic government as legitimate (whether it actually delivers or not) and find it more appropriate and proper to work with the government directly rather through the NGO movement.

By comparison, Tracy, with a relatively limited exposure to the NGO world, endorses the need to bring the agenda of the traditional NGO into dialogue with the agenda of the corporate world for its survival. She does not consider it anomalous to infuse the corporate rationality into the NGO world as long as the social goals pursued are clearly defined. Like Rene, she believes that the NGO should not carry the baggage of ELET’s historical roots into the new order – simply because of its success in a bygone era. Tracy advances that:

We must remember that we are operating in a very different context now. We have witnessed a dramatic shift in the funding scenario. Funders are no longer only funding NGOs; they’re also funding consultancies, non-profit organisations, universities, research units and others. Now, NGOs have to respond to competition and a results-orientated development environment. Therefore, cultivating a positive image and marketing an organisation aggressively is vital. Funders are favourably disposed to an NGO which has a social bottom line, but which acts like a business.

There appears to be a significant consonance between Tracy and Rene’s discourses. Their conceptions of organisational ‘structure’ and identity are both located in a corporate discourse, despite their different disciplinary backgrounds. Tracy gave up a position in the corporate sector to join the NGO world. Rene, on the other hand, left the NGO world to join the corporate world. Although Tracy echoes Rene’s marketisation discourse, it does not suggest that she is blindly compliant in her advocacy of a new organisational identity, as will be observed later. Tracy’s position is borne out of her belief in the need to rethink management strategies at ELET in order to make it more responsive to changing market conditions. This is different from Rene’s call for a fundamental ideological reorientation of the organisation in order to imbibe the new corporate rationality. However, despite their differing philosophical and disciplinary orientations, their collective discourses – in the context of this strategic planning meeting – have a profound performative impact on the organisation’s strategic orientation. Hence, although Rene and Tracy occupy differing ideological positions, the commonsenses inscribed into the language of
strategy achieve the effect of consensus rather than contestation. However, Tracy’s reflections in the following transcript disrupt this assumption:

Over the past month, I spent so much time on what I regard as a complete waste of time and energy simply to satisfy USAID’s obsessive demands for senseless statistical reports they call evaluation and accountability. We generate vast amounts of data for the funder that I find rather shallow because they really say nothing about the real impact of the programmes. Having said that, I must emphasise that I fully endorse the need for rigorous, creative modes of evaluation for accountability, I’m just opposed to the highly technicist quantitative approaches that funders seem to favour over more meaningful qualitative approaches ... sometimes you have to take a step back and say, ‘No, I don’t actually care, I want real action projects, not numbers.’ But these officials often create the impression that they are really powerful, and behave as though they are parting with their personal fortunes. Relating to them is a very stressful experience, and I sometimes feel my throat closing up with tension when I have to talk to them. I don’t mind the rigorous demands from funders, but the USAID management style is very heavy handed, to point of becoming demoralising ...

In an apparent attempt to reclaim her integrity as a development professional, Tracy concedes that the professionalisation of NGOs needs to happen, but not on the terms of the evidence-driven model that is presently demanded by funders. For Tracy, the tensions between bureaucratisation and professionalisation are a consequence of superimposing a narrow corporate economic rationality on the NGO, thereby putting an inordinate amount of pressure on NGOs to satisfy technocratic requirements as a means of accountability. In the process, however, such an approach dislocates its centre of gravity. Yet, in order to survive, NGOs are required to submit to these coercive forces, as they cannot operate outside the corporate framework since their survival depends on the benevolence of funders.

Hence, while individuals within the organisation might appear to share a common language, they derive different meanings from it. Tracy’s discourses are consonant with those of Rene on fundamental issues of systemic reorientation and strategy. Both Rene and Tracy submit arguments which few individuals within the organisation can dispute convincingly. However, while both Rene and Tracy argue for a more robust corporatist and managerialist organisation, Tracy is in fact circumspect about her allegiance in her practice. She is aware of the danger in funders’ prescriptions for evaluation and reporting which re-orientates accountability upward, that is, away from the grassroots, supporters and staff, towards its donors. For Tracy, without meaningful accountability to their beneficiaries, scaling-up could seriously distance NGOs from their clients and compromise their raison d’être. The following quote reveals Tracy’s apprehension. Note that she made this declaration to me in an interview outside the strategic planning meeting.

There are times when I feel I’m not doing enough as manager. I’m not referring to management of the bureaucratic aspects of the programme – there’s far too much of that in my opinion. I want to be able to refine the programme and add value to it. I want to take it beyond its weaknesses, particularly weaknesses in its implementation
... beyond satisfying the unreasonable demands of the funder, who often has little knowledge of pragmatic realities one has to deal with. We generate vast amounts of data for the funder ... I find that rather shallow. It’s a game I don’t enjoy playing ... but ...

The fact that Tracy chooses not to make the above sentiments public is significant. It might be argued that her choice to remain silent makes her complicit in her own oppression as she submits to the coercive influence of the dominant discourse. However, her silence belies a profound disillusionment with the instrumentalist and technicist nature of development work resulting in a conflict between the unitary ‘personal’ self and the ‘false’ organisational self, requiring compromises to private aspirations. The personal and private are suppressed and subsumed under the dominant discourses of the organisation as the avoidance of conflict takes precedence over personal inclinations. Thus, the boundaries between public and private are increasingly blurred as the organisational identity increasingly colonises all the spaces in the manager’s life, diluting or confounding the manager’s sense of self. Tracy’s disillusionment is further compounded by her sense of being devalued, as she articulates below:

The tone at management meetings and even in informal discussions was starting to become quite combative: that there was a winner and a loser. I realised that I was investing so much in the outcome of the process that there was a danger that if my proposition wasn’t taken seriously, I was going to feel undervalued and undermined. It was then that I decided that it was time to disinvest.

Unable to maintain the buffer between external demands and her inner self, Tracy expresses a strong desire for disengagement from an organisation whose identity she helped shape, but which no longer gives her the kind of affirmation she desires at this stage in her life.

CORPORATISATION VERSUS DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSES

This discussion has attempted to demonstrate how power relations are sustained within the micro-politics of interaction, where individuals, notwithstanding their own ideological inclinations, are complicit in imbibing and perpetuating a corporate culture. In the first instance, such a culture derives its legitimacy from individuals’ willingness to be consenting agents and, in the second instance, is perpetuated by what Marx refers to as the ‘false consciousness’ of agents. Individuals are induced to become consumers of corporate culture as they are presented with opportunities to express their individuality in forums such as strategic planning sessions. Their perceived autonomy is affirmed as ‘engineered’ opportunities, created for individuals to enact their agency. In this way, the normative framework designed by management is internalised, co-opting agents insidiously into realising corporate objectives.

However, the above discourses are at variance – not necessarily in the performative sense – with Mervin’s development-discourses. As director of the NGO, Mervin concedes the necessity for the professionalisation of the NGO, in
as far as acknowledging its obligation to deliver high quality emancipatory teacher education programmes to support the reconstruction of education. Yet, he is reluctant to submit to a corporate-managerial mentality – which he believes is in conflict with the spirit of the developmental enterprise and will necessarily undermine its values. He laments the decline in ELET’s work to that of a development sub-contractor with little to show by way of substantive development. Mervin contends that:

We often have to compromise our principles because all they [funders] want NGOs to do is provide a prescribed service in certain areas such as train teachers using materials and modules that were not prepared by us – we just have to deliver. They use the word ‘deliverables’. You deliver a number of workshops, you deliver a number of school support visits and you leave. You have certain time frames and time lines and log frames and logjams and a series of bureaucratic and technical requirements. As a result, our core business – language development – is degenerating into a facile indulgence . . . [But] It is better to light one small candle in one dark corner, than to curse the darkness. So we try and achieve a balance between what we call ‘needs driven’ and ‘supply driven’ by matching the skills we offer with the actual need in schools.

Mervin resists cooption into the funder’s modus operandi, because of his commitment to language as a disciplinary mechanism for development. The funder is acutely mindful of the prospect of ELET’s ‘jetting in, jetting out, consultant model of operation’ degenerating into ‘a facile indulgence’, where linguistic deficiency is compounded and the gap between those who are linguistically ‘privileged’ and those who are not, is widened, resulting in the cultivation of ‘a new generation of confident illiterates’. It is this social development mission that has propelled Mervin in his professional life, which he is now reluctant to abandon.

These competing discourses signal the duality that characterises the lives of those struggling with the ambiguity surrounding their roles. An NGO in South Africa no longer has a clearly defined, developmentally focused function, but is a contested entity, having to reconcile fundamental issues about professional identity while simultaneously redefining itself pragmatically to ensure its relevance as a means to continued legitimacy. These competing discourses are debilitating for some, empowering for others, but collectively they constitute a vital ingredient to maintain a vigilant balance between pragmatism and managerialism, a balance that has determined the survival of few and the demise of many NGOs in the post-1994 period.

Looking back on the usefulness of a biographical approach in understanding an NGO, I am able to say with some degree of confidence that the approach has yielded insights that empiricist methods alone could not. However, this ‘reading’ of the organisation was achieved through a psycho-social analysis of members’ discourses. It may be argued that such a reading does not in fact transcend paradigm insularity, nor does it generate multiple perspectives of the organisation, particularly since this reading has been mediated by my own positionality and ideological orientation as a researcher. In the process of documenting the institutional memory of the organisation,
the memory has become part of my psyche in as much as I am implicated in its construction. Hence, my capacity for evaluative integrity might be considered as being compromised and diminished, especially since discourse analysis is as much a reflection of my discourse as it is of my research participants’ discourses. How might what Cherryholmens (1993) calls the threat of textual fundamentalism be transcended?

MULTI-PERSPECTIVAL READINGS OF ORGANISATIONAL DISCOURSE

Rhodes, in his methodologically astute paper entitled *Reading and writing organisational lives* (2000) uses an approach proposed by Cherryholmes (1993) in which he argues that texts do not speak for themselves and that rather than being fixed, the meaning of any text resides in the interpretative act. He argues for a pragmatic reading of the same text through multiple conceptual frameworks. For example, the discourses of ELET members cited above might yet be read (among a host of others) from a feminist perspective, a post structuralist perspective, and a Marxist perspective. Each perspective generates nuanced interpretations, thereby illuminating different facets of the organisation. Ideally, this reading is undertaken by ‘independent’ critical readers in an attempt to generate alternative perspectives. While none of the readings is privileged as providing a more correct, more real or more essential interpretation, they all attest to the fact that organisations can be better understood through particular forms of discourse created by language, constructed from the narratives of key organisational members. This meta-theoretical approach to organisational studies is seen both as a way to break from the dominance of systemic structural-functionalist approaches to studying organisations and to promote new opportunities to excavate the less visible and accessible dimensions of organisational life.

Deconstructing the biographical method in organisational studies shows how ‘the understanding of organisations is inseparable from the organisation of understanding’ (Rhodes 2000, 17) and how attention must be paid to the ‘organisation of writing rather than the writing of organization’ (Cooper 1989, 501, in Rhodes 2001, 17). Each text we use to understand the world produces new texts and new understandings as the texts dissolve into one another and we become aware that we use the same means of making sense of our world as our “subjects” use in making sense of their world, and in both our making sense of their world, and our making sense of their sense making’ (Burrell 1996, in Rhodes 2001, 17).

The approach proposed by Cherryholmes and Rhodes (1993) challenges epistemological foundationalism which rests on the premise that a final truth can be determined, ‘but at the same time recognizes that we must still choose strategies for understanding the world without the possibility of final knowledge of whether we are right or not’.

In this sense, it would be naïve to ascribe any definitive causal effects of the research experience for the organisation or its members, and the question of whether
the emancipatory outcome has been achieved is perhaps best left to the individual participants in the study. Participants declared via their discourses that they have benefited significantly from the experience of narrating themselves. However, this self-declaration is not a self-evident indicator of outcome. The two questions that remain are, firstly, whether the ‘illuminating experience at the individual level has set the stage for liberation at the institutional level’; and secondly, whether Fetterman’s (1999, 16) suggestion that empowerment evaluation can ‘unleash powerful forces for self-determination’ has been enacted or realised in any significant way.

With regard to the impact of the exercise at the individual level, Rene, the chair of the board, announced that she would relinquish her position at the next board meeting because her continued dual roles within the organisation were no longer tenable. Shortly after the strategic planning meeting, Tracy, the programme manager, resigned from the NGO, citing irreconcilable differences between her developmental goals and those of the organisation. An immediate consequence of the evaluation at the organisational level was ELET’s resolve to replace the ‘English’ in its name with ‘Environment’, a symbolic precursor of other changes that were to follow, as the organisation reconfigured its identity. Among the many changes proposed, was that the newly conceptualised organisation would devote greater attention to establishing a stronger public profile by establishing a marketing and public relations wing. Additionally, it would infuse a mandatory research component in all future projects. It also proposed an organisational ethic that was more responsive to the dynamic environmental realities in which it operated, such as the opportunities and challenges of working in an environment plagued by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

However, ascribing unqualified optimism for the above developments is a giant leap of faith in the value of strategy, since strategy is a social and, in particular, a linguistic construction. In fact, it is a particular kind of rhetoric that provides a ‘common language used by people at all levels of an organisation in order to determine, justify, and give meaning to the constant stream of actions that the organisation comprise’ (Hardy, Palmer and Phillips 2000, 3). Ultimately, the real test of performativity will be how effectively ELET’s strategic discourse can galvanise the organisation into tangibly furthering the mission for which it was conceived, a necessary task of subsequent evaluations.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEORISING ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Traditionally, performance appraisal of higher education appropriated the financial accounting model, which emphasised profitability, return on investment and cash flow as indicators of an institution’s success or failure. In recent years, questions have been raised about the overt reliance and adequacy of this model (Ruben 1999). While the need for external modes of accountability requires no debate, there is a growing sense that financial performance indicators in themselves fail to capture the critical nuances of organisational behaviour and therefore fail to present a
comprehensive, authentic image of the organisation (Ruben 1999). This is perhaps a crucial consideration for HEIs whose organisational cultures are being shaped by an emerging performativity ethic, influenced by pressures of internationalisation and competition.

Critiquing the slide towards a performativity culture, evaluation practitioners have identified several limitations of conventional models of institutional evaluation. Among these are that they: lack predictive power; reflect functions, not cross functional processes within an institution; give inadequate consideration to preservation of resources such as intellectual capital; and do not give adequate attention to workplace satisfaction (adapted from Branco, cited in Ruben 1999). Furthermore, accounting based models which emphasise those variables that are most easily quantifiable, may not capture crucial elements of an HEI’s life, such as student satisfaction; employee satisfaction and productivity; organisational adaptability and innovation; environmental competitiveness together with a range of other less tangible elements of an institutions life. The less than complete picture of HEIs, which are a product of existing tools, makes it imperative for institutions to explore alternative and innovative approaches to supplement the dominant models.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The article has pursued the dual outcomes of methodological and theoretical exploration in organisational analysis. To this end, firstly, the article borrowed from the established traditions of empowerment and illuminative evaluation, appropriating their key tenets in informing an organisational ethnography. In the process of constructing and representing the organisational narratives, the approach provided opportunities for members to engage in self-reflexive interrogation of their roles and praxis. Secondly, it attempted theoretical elaboration by challenging classical organisation theory as inadequate in understanding the organisational culture of an NGO. As an alternative empirical lens, it proposed discourse analysis as complementary to classical management approaches in organisational analysis.

Having engaged in an organisational ethnography, the study has nudged me towards a neo-institutional orientation where organisations are seen as no more than ‘taken for granted norms’ [rather than] ‘distinct sectors of society’ (Stern and Barley 1996, 149). Such an orientation requires that psycho-social dynamics, such as stress, alienation and emotions in the workplace, be acknowledged, as well as other personal and interpersonal dynamics as legitimate areas of enquiry. The narrative approach to understanding an NGO yielded rich insights and was able to excavate data not easily accessible to empiricist methods alone.

The use of discourse analysis to make sense of the multiple worldviews that constituted the organisation proved equally useful in theorising organisational behaviour. Two notable threads stand out in the analysis. Firstly, the morality discourses held by development professionals are rendered profane as the neo-liberal corporate narratives constitute the new discursive cultural field (Bourdieu 1990),

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in which the neo-liberal speak is authorised and legitimised. Secondly, although corporate discourses appear immutable, the scope for agency does exist. However, the scope for agency is now defined by and mediated through the corporatist discourse where the exercise of power takes place within the new defining parameters that legitimate or silence voices.

Insofar as having achieved its espoused emancipatory intent, it would be premature to make any definitive judgements at the organisational level. Such judgements are more likely to emerge from subsequent longitudinal assessments. Extrapolating the benefits of the approach to higher education would be equally premature in the absence of empirical research. However, in acknowledging the need to set new standards in organisational self-evaluation, universities are being propelled to explore innovations that will render them less vulnerable to cooption by ‘market’ agendas while making them potentially more responsive to competing demands of changing academic and professional identities and roles within a massified, diversified and globalised higher education sector. In this context, the ethnographic dimension in organisational evaluation is worthy of further empirical scrutiny.

NOTES

1. Empowerment evaluation (EE) as an approach has been institutionalised within the American Evaluation Association since its introduction in 1993 and is consistent with the standards for Educational Evaluation. (See, also, D. M. Fetterman, Reflections on empowerment evaluation, 1999, for an appraisal of EE.)

2. ELET’s Project for Health and Sanitation Education (PHASE) is a literacy programme based on the participatory action framework to address water and sanitation problems in rural areas.

3. I use the notion of corporate ideology with some degree of cynicism, fully cognisant of the prospect that there are forms of corporate ideology that do not have sinister connotations.

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