Introduction

The relevance of academic research to organizational practice is increasingly a concern for management scholars (Currie, Knights, & Starkey, 2010; Starkey & Madan, 2001), and wider social scientists (Chatterton, Hodkinson, & Pickerill, 2010). In particular there have been calls for "engaged scholarship" (Van de Ven, 2007) to "bridge the relevance gap" (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001) and create meaningful knowledge that is relevant and useful for practice (for a debate see Boyer, 1997; Deetz, 2008; Learmonth, Lockett, & Dowd, 2012; Van de Ven, 2007; Zundel & Kokkalis, 2010).

Such concerns about relevance have also become prevalent within critical management studies (CMS), with regular calls for critical academics to intervene in organizational practice (see for instance Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Clegg, Kornberger, Carter, & Rhodes, 2006; Koss Hartmann, 2014; Voronov, 2008; Walsh & Weber, 2002; Willmott, 2008; Wolfram Cox, Voronov, LeTrent-Jones, & Weir, 2009). Recently this has been labelled the "performative turn" (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009) in which critical scholars seek make their work more relevant to organizations (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014, p. 19).

Yet, despite the regularity of these calls for intervention, there have been few actual examples of engagement by critical scholars directly into management practice. Without such examples, our understanding of the possibilities of engagement by critical scholars into practice is thus limited, and CMS is left susceptible to the criticism that it is more comfortable discussing radicalism than actually intervening (Koss Hartmann, 2014).

To think through some of these dilemmas this paper therefore offers four case studies which attempted to use critical perspectives to challenge, rethink and transform organizational practice. In doing so, they examine what *actually happens* when one seeks to use critical perspectives to rethink practice, exploring the opportunities and difficulties that are encountered when doing so. They thus provide illustrative examples of what happens when one intervenes into practice, enabling us to learn from these experiences. In other words it examines some of the tensions and contradictions of the academic at work in the world.

The paper argues that rather than simply applying critical perspectives to management practice, as is implied within "critical performativity" literature (Spicer, et al., 2009), direct attempts at engagement, are messy and complex. Moreover, critical theories of management, as they are currently conceived, whilst useful for diagnosing problems, are less effective at helping practitioners transform them (Koss Hartmann, 2014). Therefore if critical scholars are to impact practice, then engagement needs to be accompanied by a move from negative critique towards affirmative critique, which privileges possibilities for action (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Such a move can not only produce new a manner of theorising but new subjectivities for engagement and transformation (Gibson-Graham, 2008). In doing so this article thus seeks to explore not only the challenges of intervention, but also to raise wider questions about what it means to think *and act* critically.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly it examines the reason behind the current calls for engagement and the challenges it faces. It then presents four case studies, in which I actively engage with organizational practice. The paper concludes through examining the common challenges presented in these cases and the lessons learned for an engaged critical management studies.

Critical Management Studies calls for engagement with practice

Over the last twenty years (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992a) Critical Management Studies has made significant contribution in academic theory (Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009), education (see Dehler, 2009; Grey, 2007), and policy-making (Fotaki, 2011) and has thus established itself as a significant, institutionalized, academic discipline within the Business School (Koss Hartmann, 2014). However, despite, or even due to this institutional success (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007), critical scholars are increasingly questioning their impact on wider mainstream management theory and practice, with many claiming it has been, at best, modest (Grey & Willmott, 2005; Parker, 2002; Phillips, 2006; Walsh & Weber, 2002; Zald, 2002). Indeed for Bristow there are "signs [that] radically critical organisation studies [is] in tidal retreat" as critical perspectives are becoming increasingly domesticated (Bristow, 2012, p. 235).

For critical scholars, engagement with practice is particularly important as following Fournier and Grey "to be engaged in critical management studies means, at the most basic level, to say that there is something wrong with management, as a practice and as a body of knowledge, and that it should be changed" (2000, p. 16). Consequently increasingly there have been calls for academics to reach "beyond the self-referential sphere of scholarship" (Alvesson, et al., 2009, p. 17) and engage directly with organizational practice (Voronov, 2008; Walsh & Weber, 2002). Thus, as Parker et al, states "At some point, being critical of other people, economic ideas and institutions must turn into a strategy of providing suggestions, resources, and models, but these themselves must be criticized" (Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014, p. 31).

However calls for greater engagement are contested. CMS is far from a unified field and the extent to which CMS can, or indeed should (cf. Burrell, 2009), intervene in organizational practice is subject to a long-standing debate (see for instance Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b; Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Critical Management Studies Workshop, 2001; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Styhre, 2009; Voronov, 2008; Walsh & Weber, 2002; Willmott, 2013; Wolfram Cox, et al., 2009). These debates are produced by the various intellectual traditions that constitute CMS and can be summarised by these three issues:

Firstly, is there a normative basis for critique (Adler, et al., 2007)? This contrast is most clearly seen between neo-Marxists, who widely contend that there should be a normative basis and post-structuralists who have a suspicion of "grand narratives" (Lyotard, 1984) that provide 'Blueprints' telling others how to act, arguing blueprints merely recreate another form of hierarchical power-relationship and thus oppression (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Consequently these post-structuralists call on CMS academics to focus on more modest

micro-emancipation rooted in local struggles around specific practices (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b; Barros, 2010).

Secondly, should critical knowledge tell people what to do? CMS knowledge has been criticised for being relentlessly negative and like other critical traditions has "placed too much attention on awareness and understanding and not enough on enabling alternative responses. The implicit faith – that if people knew what they wanted and the system of constraints limiting them, they would know how to act differently – has little basis" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 20; also see Fay, 1987; Fenwick, 2005). However for Burrell, being more prescriptive could lead to co-option resulting in the critical perspective becoming commodified, solely focusing on pragmatic issues and losing the external questioning role of theory (Burrell, 2009; Fournier & Grey, 2000).

Thirdly, is the institutionalization and location within the business school a strength or limitation (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011)? Whilst CMS location within the Business School certainly offers opportunities for expansion as an academic discipline, its isolation from organizational practice, means its locked within an 'ivory tower' (Parker, 2002; Voronov & Coleman, 2003; Wolfram Cox, et al., 2009), unable, or possibly even unwilling (Reedy, 2008) to transform organizational practice.

As a way of responding to these dilemmas there have been many calls to shift from a detached critique to greater engagement with practice (Grey & Willmott, 2005). For some this involves working directly with groups including 'activists' (Willmott, 2008), trade unions and women's groups (Fournier & Grey, 2000), marginalised (Adler, 2002; Adler, et al., 2007) and 'sweatshop' workers (Boje, 1998), students (Grey, 2007) and managers (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), particularly middle-managers (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014). Furthermore it involves introducing alternative organizations into teaching to demonstrate "the possibility that the world *could be* different and, crucially, will have provided examples of *how* it could be different" (Reedy & Learmonth, 2009, p. 254 italics in original).

A recent incarnation of this approach has been taken by Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman who have called for a "performative turn" (2009) aiming to reimagine CMS as a "project of practical social critique" (Hancock & Tyler, 2008, p. 30). They claim it moves CMS in a more 'constructive' direction (Spicer, et al., 2009), by rejecting CMS' relentless anti-performativity and explicitly "call for a re-interpretation of performative" by promoting "other values, such as emancipation, democracy or ecological balance" (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014, p. 7).

They call on critical scholars to "actively and subversively intervene in managerial discourse and practices" (Spicer, et al., 2009, p. 544), "add[ing] construction to deconstruction, problem solving to problematizing, and prescription to reflexivity" (Walsh & Weber, 2002, p. 409). Critical researchers, they argue, should thus "step beyond the generation of insight and critique and towards the process of transformative redefinition … [and have] direct engagement of researchers with organizational actors", with the ultimate aim to "become

more relevant to what managers in organizations actually do" (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014, p. 5 & 19).

In doing so, they claim that by appreciating the tensions and ambiguities of those in management positions (Spicer, et al., 2009) they "rethink some of the ideological premises of CMS" (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014, p. 19). Rather than withdrawing from "those it criticizes", (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014, p. 19), they look for *present potentialities*, to find alternative possibilities for action (Spicer, et al., 2009), to achieve small wins (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014). As Spicer et al state, it aims to "rearticulate and re-present new ways of managing and organizing. This would hopefully empower CMS researchers to not only engage in systematic dismantling of existing managerial approaches, but also try to construct new and hopefully more liberating ways of organizing" (2009, p. 555).

The performative turn however, has been criticised by Koss Hartmann for producing a "tempered radicalism" (Meyerson, 2001), where "CMS should not become more radical, but more pragmatic and more focused on dialogue with practitioners" (Koss Hartmann, 2014, p. 619). Koss Hartmann argues that the canonical theories of CMS offer "all too few resources" and "do not support practices that might be *both* performative and progressive" (ibid, p 619).

Furthermore, and of particular relevance for this paper, whilst the performative turn calls for greater intervention in practice, to date, it offers few direct examples. For instance, Alvesson and Spicer's, follow-on paper to Spicer et al (2009), claims to put "the concept of critical performativity (Spicer et al., 2009) to work" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 377). In this paper they explore how Kelvin Goodman, a manager and the subject of their analysis, could transform his situation (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, pp. 379-382). For instance they wonder if "there are other possible managerial/leadership positions and actions that co-workers would see as more important" (2012, p. 379); if it *could* be argued that "humility or skills in democratic decision-making" might be needed (p. 379); or if "a discussion in the workplace around 'hammering in the message' between the manager and the subordinate *could* take place" (p. 380 my italic). They also suggest that they "*might* also seek to expand Goodman's vocabulary by pointing out other possibilities that are already present" (p. 380 my italic). And they also suggest that "Goodman, together with others involved, *might* also be encouraged to think about organizing rather than leadership" (p. 380 my italic).

Thus, despite these tantalising possibilities for practical transformation, these suggestions remain speculations of what Goodman *could*, *would* or *should* do (I have put in italics to emphasise the tentative nature of their speculations). Thus, despite the idea of actively intervening into practice (as called for in Spicer, et al., 2009), there is no account of Alvesson and Spicer revealing their analysis to him, no discussion of Goodman's reaction to such suggestions and consequently no account of what impact these suggestions would have on his practice. We therefore do not know if he would reconsider his practice along the direction that Alvesson and Spicer suggest, or, equally, if he would find their suggestions offensive, patronising, or irrelevant or, had he attempted them, if in fact they would have resulted in unintended consequences unimagined by Alvesson and Spicer.

We see the same pattern in another recent contribution to support of critical performativity, Wickert and Schaefer admit their approach "may not necessarily work as we have depicted", however they hope that "it *could* work" (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014, p. 20 emphasis in original). The point is that by not *directly* applying these insights to practice, such claims about the impact of interventions are provisional and speculative. Indeed, as Koss Hartmann argues, "the task" of critical performativity "is hardly as straightforward as implied by Spicer et al. (2009)" (2014, p. 620).

Therefore despite the regularity of such calls for direct engagement implicit within critical performativity there have been few worked examples, let alone reflecting on and learning from the experience of such interventions (see Barros, 2010; King, 2009; Wolfram Cox, et al., 2009 for rare examples). As a result, the debate around critical performativity is held in a vacuum, where ideas are put forward but not tested leaving the practical and experiential consequences of action somewhat superficially understood.

In order to see critically engaged work by academics in action we need to look beyond CMS. Urban anthropology (Lyon-Callo, 2004; Lyon-Callo & Hyatt, 2003) and radical and feminist geography have a long tradition of engaged work, including with squats, homeless shelters, and women's groups (Chatterton, et al., 2010; Fuller, 1999; Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). For instance Urban Anthropologist Lyon-Callo worked as an assistant director in homeless shelter, using his critical insights to challenge and seek to transform his practice and those around him (Lyon-Callo, 2004). Drawing on the work of Foucault, and using "politically engaged ethnography" he examined the everyday discursive and material practices through which homelessness was produced, not only challenging them theoretically but seeking to transform his and others' practice. This led himself and shelter staff to question the practices of the shelter and attempt experimentations with alternative practices, and ways of "rethinking and redefining homelessness" (Lyon-Callo, 2004). However in undertaking these actions, including taking part in political campaigns, their funding was cut, resulting in Lyon-Callo losing his job.

Radical Geographers Chatterton and colleagues have for many years worked alongside activists and campaigners. They claim that good scholarly activism is about creating relevant and accessible knowledge, radical critiques and inspiring alternatives and to intervene and criticise (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2007, p. 219). Such an approach, though, is also complex. They also recognise the messy realities of engagement, the difficulties that it produces (Chatterton, et al., 2010) and the dangers of 'going native' (Fuller, 1999). They suggest that the research should be attentive to power-relations, the emotional dimension of relationships and the rawness and energy of being involved in social change (Chatterton, et al., 2007).

PAR is also used by feminist economic geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham, who write under the pen-name Gibson-Graham, have a long standing engagement with activist and community groups (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Through this engagement they have produced not only academic texts (Gibson-Graham, 2006b), but also books with more

practical intent (e.g. Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healey, 2013). By engaging with Participatory Action Research (Cameron & Gibson, 2005) in countries as diverse as the Philippines, United States and Australia they aim to produce help build community economies, telling the stories and the lessons learned from these engagements (Gibson-Graham, 2006b).

Urban anthropology and radical and feminist geography therefore do not provide a panacea solution and indeed do demonstrate there is still much to learn about the processes involved of direct engagement. In particular they show the value of seeking to engage directly with practice and learn the lessons from these attempts at rethinking practice and the critical enterprise.

We therefore now turn to our central focus for this paper, what happens when critical management perspectives are used to explore organizational practice? Rather than exploring these issues on an abstract level, this paper puts these concerns to the test by engaging directly with organizational practice. It does this by taking critical incidents drawn from four case studies, where, I, as a critical academic, have engaged in organizational practice. Each experience is used as a starting point to reflect on the role of the critical academic in engaging in practice. The purpose is to capture something about the nature of the engagement and the possibilities and perils that emerged from these various encounters, exploring the implications on CMS practice before offering some practical suggestions for future actions.

Methodology

The fundamental objective of this paper is to examine what happens when one seeks to engage critical perspectives of management with organizational practice. This research therefore cannot be conducted from the viewpoint of a detached, impartial observer, who stands outside of struggle in an external and privileged position (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997), rather it seeks to explore ways of directly working in organizational practice. Building on the participatory action research used with radical and feminist geography (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Chatterton, et al., 2007; Chatterton, et al., 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2006b) and urban anthropology (Lyon-Callo, 2004; Lyon-Callo & Hyatt, 2003; Singer, 1990) it seeks to work in and alongside the communities being studied. It is thus conducted as part of an engaged, political ethnography (Lyon-Callo, 2004; Lyon-Callo & Hyatt, 2003).

This direct engagement with organizational practice is a prerequisite for this paper. Rather than focusing on how others might react, the following accounts draw directly on my own experiences. The paper therefore uses an auto-ethnographic approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), to examine what happens when critical perspectives are applied to practice. As such it provides an truly 'insider' perspective, offering insights that cannot be seen from a distance over an extended timeframe (Bell & King 2010; Brunwick & Coghlan, 2007; Cunliffe, 2010; Karra & Phillips, 2008).

Auto-ethnography offers many advantages for exploring the impact of practice. It can enhance the representational richness and reflexivity of qualitative research (Humphreys,

2005), drawing on the authors own experiences (Learmonth, 2007), capturing emotions (Bochner & Ellis, 2002) in a manner that resonates with readers (Cohen, Duberley, & Musson, 2009). As such it provides a way of getting across the "intangible and complex feelings and experiences that somehow can't be told in conventional ways" (Muncey, 2010, pp. 2-3), thus providing nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in applying critical thinking to organizational practice (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch, 2003).

Auto-ethnographies have, however, been subject to a number of criticisms, including that they are self-indulgent (Sparkes, 2002), the researcher can 'go native' (Alvesson, 2009), and are not representative. One of the central criticisms is that certain forms of auto-ethnography, for instance that provided by Ellis and Bochner (2006) reject analysis because they fear this kills off the story, in doing so leave ideologies unexamined, which Learmonth and Humphreys argue can be "politically dangerous" (2012, p. 105).

Mindful of these concerns this paper, following Learmonth & Humphreys, therefore seeks to maintain a balanced between to evoke and be analytical (2012), by "provocative weave of story and theory" (Cohen, et al., 2009, p. 233). This is done through the use of vignettes (Bell & King, 2010; Finch, 1987; Humphreys, 2005), which provide snap-shots that seek to capture key elements of the experiences I underwent. These vignettes are then followed by brief analysis which draws out some of the significant issues raised by the experience and connects it to the literature. It therefore seeks to remove the dangers of being self-indulgent by using the experiences as a starting point for analysis.

Over the last ten years I have worked in a range of settings jointly as an academic and practitioner, seeking to engage with and possibly transform organizational practice. I have been involved in each of the following four cases for between 2-5 years. Some have been intense, working almost daily for months at a time, whereas others have been more sporadic, fitting in around other commitments. I have conducted all of them whilst undertaking other roles within the Business School (PhD student and university lecturer). They also represent a spectrum of types of intervention from small scale organizations to national campaigns, conventional recipients of state funding to self-identified radical/anarchist groups. All the cases occurred in two medium sized industrial cities in the UK.

The following four cases have been selected in part because they are all ones that I have been actively involved in where my personal and academic interests have coincided. They also represent a range of different modes of engagement including being a manager, academic-activist, community organizer and critical consultant.

Throughout all of these cases I have used my own experiences, understandings and struggles, as the starting-point for inquiry. Whilst I have elsewhere sought to explore theoretically the implications that these issues raise (see King and Learmonther 2014), this paper concentrates specifically on the challenges and possibilities that emerged from attempting to engage with organizational practice from a critical perspective. Each account provided captures a key feature of that particular engagement. From this case study some of the central issues will be

pulled out and discussed before the central implications for an engaged critical practice is analysed.

The case studies

Case Study 1: Applying critical perspectives to my management practice: Providing insight but unable to change practice

Case background and critical incident

This first case study captures a time in which I, as a practitioner, had my practice challenged by reading critical management perspectives for my PhD.

Between 2001 and 2004 I co-founded and managed a small therapeutic arts Voluntary and Community (VCS) Organization called Creative Arts (CA) (a pseudonym). Inspired by reading CMS literature as a student (see King 2009) I had become angry with how I perceived conventional management practice (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996) and felt the need to do things in a different way (see King and Learmonth 2014). I believed, armed with the insights I had gained from reading CMS, that I could set up a voluntary organization that could escape many of the problems I thought existed within conventional management.

CA employed 6 part-time creative therapists, worked with 5 partner agencies and received funding from colleges and government agencies, and its clients included substance users, women recovering from domestic violence and mental health service users. It was publicly deemed a success, with excellent feedback from partner agencies and individual clients and receiving over £65,000 funding. However, one particular incident caused me to question if I was really doing things differently:

> *Everywhere I look there is paperwork: Piles of reports, monthly review forms, client feedback, agency feedback, goal setting, progression forms, self-evaluation forms, attendance registers and certificates of absent, funding forms, leaflets, budgets and payslips. All these forms seem to have taken over. I feel I'm running a bureaucracy not a charity. How did we get into this mess!*

Impact of critical perspective

The above vignette captures my realization that, contrary to the principles by which I began Creative Arts, I had replicated many of the pathologies of conventional management. As a practitioner I felt frustrated by the seemingly endless array of forms I had to complete, an annoyance my fellow practitioners shared. I found the bureaucratisation and managerialism of the sector quite troubling (Lindsay, Osborne, & Bond, 2013), stifling innovation and dominating my thoughts and activities. However fellow practitioners appeased me, reassuring me they were only a bureaucratic hurdle to overcome to make CA successful.

However, whilst reading critical management literature for my PhD, my understanding of these evaluation and monitoring forms began to change. No longer did I see them simply as a

bureaucratic headache as my practitioner colleagues had informed me they were, but as forms of discipline and control. By reading critical literature, particularly inspired by Foucault, I saw them as micro-practices that "shape, sculpt, mobilise and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups" (Dean, 1999, p. 12). In short these frustrating, but seemingly harmless practices, were, through the critical literature, recast as ways of producing both our clients, and me, to work and act in particular ways.

Reading critical social theory thus made me problematise the entire basis of Creative Arts. This had benefits. It gave me a new language and perspective to make sense of my experiences, providing me comfort that my challenges within CA were not personal failings but part of the wider transformation of the sector towards managerialism (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). However, despite the perceptiveness of these insights, I felt they were unable to provide me with alternatives. This negative critique (Gibson-Graham, 2006b), resulted in me feeling stuck, producing what Eve Sedgwick calls "paranoia" (2007 see page 16 for more discussion). I was critical of the practices I was involved in but felt unable to change them. As a result disheartened I left Creative Arts frustrated that I could not act differently (see King and Learmonth 2014 for an extensive discussion).

Implications for engaged critical practice

My experience as a VCS practitioner reading critical perspectives raises a number of issues for engaged critical practice. Contrary to critical literature only being of interest to a small band of followers (Phillips, 2006), it spoke directly to my practice, challenging and politicising everyday practices. Indeed, as a practitioner I did not need critical perspectives of management to tell me evaluation and monitoring procedures were problematic, it was apparent to everyone I spoke to in the sector. However, what it did give me was an alternative discourse to articulate my feelings and a way to explain them than was not simply a result of personal failings. This awareness of the wider contradictions that my role as a manager of a small Voluntary Organization though did not help me to overcome the challenges I experienced, indeed arguably it intensified them. Applying this critical perspective directly to my own activities as a voluntary sector manager was messy and complex and even small changes were complex (King and Learmonth 2014). As a practitioner working alone, I felt unable to make much impact.

Case Study 2: An academic joining a national campaign against managerialism

Case background and critical incident

Having felt isolated as an individual practitioner and unable to make an impact by myself, when undertaking a post as a full-time academic I started engaging in a national campaign group, the 'National Coalition for Independent Action' (NCIA), to try to bring the issues of managerialism within the voluntary sector to a broader audience. NCIA describe themselves as an 'alliance of organisations and individuals who have come together out of frustration and anger to object to the state of UK Voluntary and Community Sectors'

(http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=3). With over 500 members across the VCS many of whom are local activists and practitioners the NCIA was able potentially to act as a vehicle for wider social change.

For about a year I self-consciously undertook a role as an academic-activist, seeking to bring my experiences as a practitioner and critical academic to a broader audience. I worked as part of a collective writing a pamphlet critiquing managerialism called 'Managing for independence and social action' (see http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/managerialism2011-web.pdf). I ran a workshop with NCIA bringing together over 20 practitioners and 10 academics exploring managerialism in the VCS.

At this event we began to discuss what could be done to transform our practice away from managerialism. After a wide-ranging discussion I asked, 'What, if anything, can we as academics do? What help can we provide?'

> *'We need you', was the quick response from the floor. There was, it seemed genuine interest from the practitioners in working with academics. 'You can provide us with legitimacy' one practitioner suggested, 'nobody will listen to a youth worker from Bolton, but they would listen to you'. 'You can tell them what we think' another echoed. However, others had concerns. "We're too busy to read your long articles. We need short summaries of what they say".*

> *After the event a practitioner came up to myself and a fellow academic. "Can you tell me how we can design evaluation and monitoring procedures that don't fall into the trap of managerialism?"*

Impact of critical perspective and implications for engaged critical practice

Whilst critical management scholars can sometimes dismiss their own work as lacking relevance to practitioners or as unable to contribute due to being locked in the ivory tower of academia (Parker, 2002), as the above vignette illustrates, these practitioners and activists in the VCS had considerable interest in academics helping them rethink their organizational practice. Far from being a hindrance, being located within universities, particularly Business Schools, was seen by these activist/practitioners as providing institutional legitimacy and the potential to voice concerns that individual practitioners were unable to achieve alone (cf. Parker, 2002; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011).

However, critique alone was not enough. My experience suggests they also wanted pragmatic solutions and even a new version of evaluation mechanisms and short, quick to digest information that they could apply to their campaigns or organizations. In other words they were seeking an affirmative critique (Gibson-Graham, 2006b), that offered new possibilities for action. Whilst practical useful, these demands potentially sidestep the wider social critique critical studies of management made. There are therefore considerable opportunities in these forms of engagement and the institutional legitimacy of academia can be useful.

Nonetheless there are significant challenges in translating critical insights into something useable for campaigners.

Case Study 3: An academic trying to work with DIY activists: A mixed reaction

Case background and critical incident

My experience working with NCIA as an academic made me concerned that I was too detached and thus unable to directly influence practice. As a response, I became involved in a collective community project that was seeking to set up a social centre. Acting simultaneously as an academic and community member, this experience highlights the mixed reaction, within this DIY/alternative community, to my academic status in trying to intervene in such settings.

In early 2009 I hastily called a meeting of a few people I knew who were interested in 'alternative organizations'. Over 20 people came, including local activists, squatters, VCS practitioners and social entrepreneurs, crowded into a tiny upstairs room of the local, independent, food cooperative. The meeting was intended to discuss what alternatives to capitalist forms of organizing existed in the city and what we could learn from them (Reedy, Coupland and King 2012).

It quickly materialised that there was a widespread interest in a collective venue – a social centre – that was not run by 'mainstream' 'capitalists'. I suggested that we held another meeting, agreeing to coordinate it and a further meeting to develop these ideas. It was at this third meeting that this vignette occurred:

> *"Hi everyone" I open the meeting. "Today we agreed we would continue to explore setting up a social centre. Before we begin, can I record this meeting? As you know Paul [pseudonym] and I are academics, and we would like to learn from this experience".*
>
> *Reaching to turn on the digital recorder I suddenly stop, the atmosphere has become hostile and divisive. Whilst some members of the group welcomed the opportunity to engage in a research project and think it interesting to have an academic perspective or that recording this experience might be helpful for other groups to learn how to successfully set up a 'social centre', other group members have become angry and distrustful of our intentions. In particular they are concerned about the motives of my colleague – 'we don't know you' they argued, 'how do we know that you won't just leave when you have the information that you want'. Some in particular were concerned that some of their potential actions – particularly squatting – might not be kept confidential, and that they might be compromised.*

Impact of critical perspective and implications for engaged critical practice

The reaction by this group of activists was diametrically opposed to that illustrated in vignette two. The relationship between the critical academic and the practitioner/activist is a complex

one. These grass-roots activists were, contrary to what I expected (following Willmott, 2008), highly suspicious of our motives and resistant to any involvement by the critical academics. Such a reaction restricted to the Business School academics. As Chatterton *et al* have also found, within certain activist DIY communities, there is a suspicion of outside 'experts' coming in. Indeed they often see academics as "exploitative, unaccountable, managerialist, and compromised by our academic status" (Chatterton, et al., 2010, p. 251). These DIY communities are often driven by the belief in personal experience and personal learning and so are quite opposed to the (perceived) expertise and hierarchical position of the academic. The academic, even if they get fully involved in the day-to-day practices, are often considered economically and socially privileged, not engaging just for the 'cause' but for their own career (see Chatterton, et al., 2010 for a similar example working with a radical land project; and Wray-Bliss, 2002 for a discussion).

Consequently, this vignette suggests caution in adopting Willmott's claim that critical academics should work with activists (2008), demonstrating that within certain activist cultures there is a suspicion of academics. As academics we do have a privileged position, and arguably might be seen as representing authority and officialdom, which might be considered divisive with those activists who are often living hand-to-mouth existence within a DIY culture (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010). Therefore, as critical academics we need to be mindful of the cultures which we are working within and the power-relations our involvement produces. Thus we cannot take for granted that those with a similar ideological perspective will necessarily always welcome us.

Case Study 4: A critical management consultant: Realigning values with practices within the Voluntary Sector

Case background

Having found the activist community challenging to work with for our final case I returned to the Voluntary Sector. This final case study is about, World Education (a pseudonym), a global education charity that aims to create "personal, local and global change to produce a world which is fairer and more sustainable" (World Education Website[1]). WE are involved in global youth work and schools work. They currently have 6 part-time employees and 10 management committee members.

A couple of years ago their then Chair invited me for a meeting where he said they wanted help restructuring the organization. They had been through a period of 'crisis' where they had recently lost their Director, Chair and many members of the Management Committee. They were looking to set themselves up in a way more fitting of their values.

World Education, I was told, had become a rather hierarchical and bureaucratic organization. It installed a director, layers of management and the Management Committee had become

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[1] In order to protect the anonymity of the organization the exact wording has been changed here

separated from the staff, in order to appear more 'business-like' and thus appeal to funders. However, many staff said it created significant distress and conflict as they often did not feel listened to, valued or treated equitably (the Director was rumoured to have been paid significantly more than any other staff member). This 'business-like' approach also meant that World Education, at least according to the new Chair, had lost its values.

World Education had emerged from a 'social centre', animal rights and anarchist background and its education work is based strongly on the participative critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970). The hierarchical approach was seen as contrary to these principles and therefore World Education was at a crossroads. As the Annual Report put it "do we return to our social activist/outsider roots, or try to find a new niche and stay within the education mainstream?" The remaining staff members and management committee have all stated they wish to work in a non-hierarchical way.

The intervention and implications for engaged critical practice

Over the last two years we have worked with World Education to help them restructure their organization. Alongside a fellow academic I have conducted SWOT analysis, run visioning sessions, set up working groups to reconsider their structure, conducted interviews and made connections with other organizations who are working in non-hierarchical ways (see Land and King 2014). One of the central pieces of research has focused on the multiple understandings of what they mean by 'non-hierarchical' and how it might operate in practice. Through the interviews we have discovered a wide variety of interpretations of this phrase from laissez-faire management to ideas grounded in anarchism and the alterglobalization movement (see Graeber, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2009). We have also sought to introduce practices such as those within consensus-based decision making, although some members have interpreted it simply as an alternative way of voting, but with 'Jazz hands'.

This intervention is ongoing and we continue to work with World Education to help them rethink their organization. This approach has brought a number of benefits. We have been able to introduce them to ideas from the alterglobalization movement and its academic literature such as prefiguration (Maeckelbergh, 2009) which have chimed with their goals of matching their values with their structures. We have also been able to use research tools such as interviews to provide a deeper account of members' interpretation of their values. Finally our academic status has also been utilized by World Education to provide institutional legitimation (by two Business School academics) to funders and sceptical management committee members, that the new non-hierarchical structure is valid.

This approach has also introduced challenges we had not considered at the outset. World Education members have struggled to have a common understanding of non-hierarchical structures, and organizational members are lacking a consistent and coherent political theory of organization. This has resulted in a shared, but empty, language as consensus without engaging in serious discussion about what others understood by these terms (see Land and King 2014 for a discussion). We therefore have to engage with considerably more work with the organization to help create this fuller understanding of the terms.

Being located within the Business School, contrary to being a barrier from engaging in action, as is often assumed (Parker, 2002), this case (and case study 2) suggests that was this institutional position is actually an advantage for many practitioner/activists. The institutional legitimacy seemed to help our participants make cases to their funders and policy makers for the changes they were making stronger than if they did it alone. Therefore rather than working against us, our institutional location, the legitimacy and space that working in the Business School affords can be a significant advantage.

Discussion

So what do these four cases tell us about the possibilities and perils of critical engagement and the possibilities of applying current CMS theory into organizational practice?

As we have seen all of these cases reveal that whilst the critical perspective could provide insights and challenges to my practice, it was less able to provide tools to know how to change practice. Indeed, the refusal to prescribe alternatives or blueprints, made it harder, as an individual practitioner, to know how to do things differently. Contrary to the assumptions within critical performativity, one cannot simply apply CMS theory to practice (Koss Hartmann, 2014). Indeed this raises broader questions about how, if we are seeking to change practice, critical thinking could operate. It is to this topic we now turn.

Critical management studies is schooled in the tradition of thinking which privileges critique, explanation and caution (for a similar argument see Gibson-Graham, 2006b). This perspective does not, as it is currently constructed, provide an easy way to rethink organizational practice. As we have seen in case one, a critical perspective is powerful, denaturalising existing taken-for-granted practices (Fournier & Grey, 2000), destabilising existing conventional management theory and practice and revealing sources of oppression, exclusion and co-option. In short, it is good for asking practitioners (and students) to question the assumptions that they hold (Akella, 2008; French & Grey, 1996). However, whilst this questioning of existing practices can produce a desire for an alternative, the negative CMS theory is unable to articulate alternative practices that provide positive examples.

This makes CMS as a discipline poorer in two key regards. Firstly without the suggestions of alternatives it potentially might be seen as irrelevant (Walsh & Weber, 2002) as it is unable to make an impact on existing management practices (Reedy & Learmonth, 2009). Secondly the relentless drive towards critiquing all aspects of management practice, including humanising management or practices within alternative organizations (Kleinman, 1996) might put a perceived limit on the action that a practitioner can take. Whilst arguably theoretically 'correct' or pure (a position that du Gay, 1998 calls a form of secular holiness), this view potentially destroys the ground for any positive action as all alternatives and actions are able to be critiqued, nothing is beyond reproach, and could, even, potentially by co-opted or produce oppressive power-relations (as an example see Kleinman, 1996). As case study one demonstrates, continual negative critique can make practitioners feel guilty about any actions they engage in as it always provides the illusion that there is something better than the existing way of organizing but continually refuses to offer any suggestions of how to produce

it. Consequently rather than being emancipatory, as is CMS' espoused ambition (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b), this negative critique could be seen as immobilizing, debilitating and ultimately destructive to any positive action, leaving few possibilities for positive or creative action and ultimately leading to despair (see King and Learmonth 2014).

At the heart of the negative critique is what Eve Sedgwick describes as theorizing as a form of "paranoia" (2007). Seeking to protect the theorist against any surprises, the critical theorist wants to know everything in advance, to be 'right', beyond reproach, and cannot cope with the unknown or incongruous (see Gibson-Graham, 2006b for a discussion). It has three key characteristics, fuelled by a "righteous anger" firstly its subject is that of the victim (the oppressed, duped, controlled or co-opted), secondly its mentality is that of judgement (the critique standing over others, finding fault with their actions, theories or practices) and thirdly its response is that of protest (saying what is wrong and requesting alternative action) (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). This negative critique has what Nietzsche calls the victim mentality (1990), one of revenge, which blames others but refuses to put into action anything new. This negative 'paranoid' critique crushes alternatives by stifling creativity by seeing problems and wanting to know, in advance, the right way to act.

As Gibson-Graham have argued, for alternatives to emerge a new sensibility to theorising and practice is required. This view, which they call the "politics of the affirmative" and the "politics of the possible", sets out to explore new practices and possibilities for action (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Rather than knowing in advance what to do, or seeking to find the correct, unimpeachable action, the politics of the possible explores and acts on what *can* be done in a given situation. It focuses on emergent ideas, on the *here and now*, on what can enable action. However, as Gibson-Graham argue, this "orientation towards possibility does not deny the forces that militate against it − forces that may work to undermine, constrain, destroy, or sideline our attempts to research economic futures … [rather it] encourages us to deny these forces a fundamental, structural, or universal reality and to instead identify them as contingent outcomes of ethical decisions, political projects, and sedimented localized practices, continually pushed and pulled by other determinations" (2006b, p. xxxi). The sensibility of the *politics of the possible*, therefore, rather than dismissing alternatives because they might lead to co-option or produce oppressive power-relations, instead sees them as openings of ethical choices for action and thus focuses on what can be achieved. This, it could be argued, reduces the guilt that practitioners or activists might experience.

The *politics of the possible* presents a number of opportunities for CMS, to facilitate the production of alternatives. It would require an alternative way of thinking, a new vision of what critical thinking is about. Such an approach would not mean making blueprints for change, rather, working alongside practitioners to explore and enhance alternatives, coping with and even embracing some of the struggles that arise when engaging in critical practice (Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b, 2008).

One such way could be working with practitioners and activists to develop campaigns or new practices around the dilemmas that practitioners face (see case studies 1 and 2). Academics,

working in Business Schools, can provide legitimacy and institutional resources for campaigns. CMS academics could also work directly in organizational practice to rethink existing practices in new, creative and empowering ways (see case study 4). Also, in doing so, engagement can provide the openings for new theoretical developments and understandings of practice.

The critical scholar can also work as a form of translator (see case study 4), taking ideas from one arena (such as social movement theory) and then trying to place them in the context of another (such as the voluntary sector). The CMS scholar therefore works as what Grey and Willmott call a node within a network (2002), a relay point cross-fertilising ideas from one situation to another. Indeed CMS does not have a monopoly on alternatives, as many of the ideas that I have worked with the World Education have their origins in New Social Movements (Maeckelbergh, 2009). Working with groups, such as World Education, it is possible to put new ideas into their agenda, opening up possibilities for new practices.

CMS academics could also learn from other fields who are aiming to engage with organizational practice. Areas such as Radical and Feminist Geography (Chatterton, et al., 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b; Kindon, et al., 2007), and Urban Anthropology (Lyon-Callo, 2004; Lyon-Callo & Hyatt, 2003) have more experience of working with and engaging in organizational practice. Working with and learning from such fields can provide the opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of engaged critical practice and performative knowledge.

Conclusion; towards a mature engaged and performative CMS

This paper has empirically explored the possibilities and perils of critical performativity and engagement in practice by CMS academics. Currently this debate is polarised around whether one should be for or against engagement, for or against producing performative knowledge. Such a split is largely based around the assumption that there is a right approach to these challenges, which, if worked out in advance, will produce positive intervention and transformation of organizational practice. This paper, however, by directly exploring the possibilities and perils of engaging with organizational practice, argues that although there are a number of possibilities to produce transformation in organizational practice, at the same time, engagement and performative knowledge can also be messy and confusing. Whilst engagement with practice always carries with it the danger of co-option, such potential difficulties, should not be seen as prohibitive, but as a normal part of engagement (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). The critical academic therefore has two options, either to withdraw, for fear that the actions which are taken might lead to compromise, or to find ways to live with and transform these power-relations and challenges which come with engagement. As other fields have shown (Chatterton, et al., 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Kindon, et al., 2007), such tensions are in fact integral to any engagement. By engaging in organizational practice and/or producing performative knowledge the critical academic will be placed in potentially difficult situations as an intrinsic part of any engagement. The ability to cope with these tensions

therefore is part of the maturity that will come with greater engagement with organizational practice (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

Consequently by learning how to engage and cope with these dilemmas, these numerous small scale interventions that can have a positive impact on how small (or even large) organizations are run. Working alongside practitioners, particularly within alternative organizations, the CMS academic has many opportunities to intervene and gradually work with others to change the way organizations are run. As this paper has argued, small scale interventions provide the starting point for attempts by CMS to struggle around and seek to change management practice towards more progressive ends. Not only is this more realistic that the grand transformations that CMS academics sometimes call for (e.g. Walsh & Weber, 2002), as it is potentially more achievable given CMS' stage of development (Phillips, 2006). As I have sought to argue in this paper, by embracing the "politics of the possible" (Gibson-Graham, 2006b), there are multiple opportunities for critical scholars to engage in practice and struggle alongside others to generate alternative ways of living and working.

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