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Chapter 4

Examining branding in organizations by using critical organizational ethnography

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Introduction

> *We need ethnography more than ever to build up an alternative to this mass manufacturing of control technologies that we experience today. We do not need it in order to build better control technologies. In fact a main business of ethnography is critique [...] of the control technologies imposed on people. Perhaps we only need it in order to confirm that there is life and meaning beyond the rationalities that we encounter every day in the business of organization and management. (Jørgensen, Henriksen and Denbek 2015, 2)*

Kornberger (2010) argues that the world today is increasingly being taken over by a 'brand logic'. While early literature on branding was focused primarily on the customer, from its first conception as a physical mark on a product as a certification of standard and quality (Willmott 2010), today branding has also become "management's weapon of choice to structure the *internal* functioning of organization" (italics in original) (Kornberger 2010, 10). These observations occur after the rise of a new body of so-called 'integrated' branding literature (Hatch and Schultz 2003; Schultz, Antorini and Csaba 2005; Schultz and de Chernatony 2002) stipulating the importance of alignment between the externally and strategically communicated brand promise and the organizational behaviors in the 'moments of truth' between the organization and its environment. The simple fact that customer often have to interact with employees as part of their purchase of (and on-going relationship with) a company's product or service, has led branding experts to ask: how can we ensure that employees "internalize brand values" and "live the brand" (Ind 2001)? As a result of this shift, the marketing field has become increasingly engaged in theories and practices of management to control not only the 'hands' of employees, but also their 'hearts' (Hochschild 1983).

This systematic shift in contemporary employment relations has been highlighted by the increase in aesthetic, emotional and identity work, particularly prominent in the context of interactive service work (Brannan, Parsons and Priola 2013). Value is extracted from employees not only through the exchange of wages for physical labor, but also work performed in and through employees' thoughts, feelings, manners and physical appearance. Many of the qualities and attributes that makes us 'human' – the way we think, feel, speak and look – are now turned into a 'tradable' aspect in the name of the brand. However, the voice and experience of the organizational agents in question, the employees, are largely overheard in the existing research and to date the literature on branding has yet to link branding practices targeting and involving employees with the analysis of the forms of domination, control and exploitation that are well-established in Critical Management Studies (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott 2002).

Spicer (2010) argued that serious investigation should be made into "how brands work as new form of power in the workplace and how they are resisted" (p. 1740). This chapter respond to this call, in that I advocate for the use of critical organizational ethnography as a way to illuminate tensions, struggles and ambivalences that emerge when lofty ideals of branding meet the reality of the day-to-day working life of the service employees. Critical ethnography is a certain genre that seeks to "describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain" (Thomas 1993, 3). A critical organizational ethnography of branding thus contributes to the existing functionalistic and interpretive literature on internal branding by giving voice to the employees, and paints a more diversified portrait of implications of internal branding practices as a form of managerial control from the employees' point of view.

Empirically, I study an internal brand process in a telecom corporation and the fieldwork is based on observations, shadowing and interviews conducted during the planning process of the brand and in the 'implementation' phase, with specific attention to the reactions of service employees in the company's call center. Vignettes from the study demonstrate the employees' struggle to enact the new brand and problematize how internal branding as a dominating control practice conflict with the technocratic forms of control and bureaucratic systems of work-organization leaving the employees entrapped between contradictory logics. The chapter concludes by summarizing the implications of a critical perspective in ethnographic research on branding, before discussing the role of ethnographic research in the emancipating project of critical management studies.

The organizational phenomena under study: Branding

Despite the widespread agreement that employees play a vital role in successful corporate branding (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Ind 2001; Olins 2003, Schultz et al. 2005), there is a striking absence of voice of employees in both the marketing and organizational studies literature on branding. Thus we have little knowledge about the intra-organizational effects of corporate branding from employees' point of view. The marketing literature produce a 'romantic' discourse of employees who are eager to be part of their employer's branding activities and who long to "live the brand" (Ind 2001; Olins 2003). Ind (2001), for instance, argues that

> *People need an outlet for their passion and their intellect. One outlet can, and indeed should be, the world of work. Brands can come to life if organizations engage with people's deeper needs and if they help to fill the vacuum that has emerged within the lives of many. (Ind 2001, 27)*

Yet, this ‘romantic’ discourse seems to leave in the dark the everyday power struggle of enacting, embracing, refusing, or resisting the brand logic. Therefore, there appears to be good reasons for taking a “up-close” look at the internal branding practices and the implications of these practices from the employees’ perspective.

Internal branding practices are designed to facilitate brand value internalization amongst employees by enhancing employees’ awareness, knowledge, understanding, involvement, commitment and identification with the brand values (de Chernatony 2002, Hatch and Schultz 2003, Ind 2001), in order to generate ‘on brand’ behavior (Barlow and Steward 2006). The marketing literatures descriptive focus centers around a plethora of examples and advice of how to produce this “on brand” behavior. These include transferring more traditional means of external marketing – persuasion, imagery, emotional arousal - to target an internal audience (Kelemen and Papasolomou 2007), high frequency brand messages using multiple channels (Bergstrom, Blumenthal and Crothers 2002), and incorporating various HRM practices that enable a firm to attract, retain, train and motivate employees based on brand values (Lings 2004).

Internal branding is also proposed to align the corporate culture, identity, symbols and stories with the desired brand values in order to ensure that employees “live the brand”, “enact the brand” as “brand evangelists” (de Chernatony 2002; Ind 2001; Olins 2003). As a result key concepts from organization studies – culture, symbols, stories - along with a ‘fantasy’ of managerial control of organizational processes linked to identity formation (Christensen and Cornellisen 2010) has entered the corporate branding vocabulary and transformed corporate branding from a marketing- and campaign-orientated set of activities towards customers to an organizational phenomenon with wide-ranging implications internal to the organization.

Interestingly, the so-called ‘integrated’ approach to branding emerged as a counter-perspective, to the very descriptive, rational, functionalist traditions of the marketing literature (Schultz et al. 2005). Yet, while the ‘integrated’ approach highlighted the need to study organizational processes and meaning-making inside the organization to ensure aligned behaviors with the externally communicated branding practice, this literature tend to use empirical material of case studies (Hatch and Schultz, 2003), anecdotes (Ind 2001; Olins 2005) or interviews with consultants (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2002), that lacks the ethnographic depth, diversity and polyphony. Instead this tradition reproduce ‘the romantic’ discourse of the employees that willingly engaging in the organizations brand work, without attention to the tensions, struggles and ambivalences of service employees expected to enact the brand. The ethnographic methodology is capable of uncovering these micro-level issues, by observing and documenting people’s actions and accounts in their every day contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Jørgensen, Henriksen and Denbek (2015) argue that ethnographic approaches to study cultural management such as internal branding is demanded to provide organizational subjects with voice and to discover a different type of meaning with organizational life than proposed in ‘logics’ of branding, lean, total quality management etc. (See the quote opening this chapter).

The current literature do hold a few exceptions of ethnographic studies of internal branding practices, yet they all focus on primarily on prestigious, highly-skilled, professional or ‘knowledge’ work, such as Kärreman and Rylander’s (2008) study of an IT/management consultancy firm, Kelemen and Papasolomou’s (2007) study of bankers, Andriopoulos and Gotsi’s (2001) study of corporate identity consultants and product designers and Brannan, Parsons and Priola (2015) study of graduates doing call center work in a highly prestigious IT consultancy corporation. In all these studies, the branding is seen as a form of socio-ideological form of control, which has taken over - or work in tandem with - more traditional forms of technocratic control and work-organization

(Alvesson and Kärreman 2004), and which positively infuses the sometimes meaningless work with positive (branded) meaning embraced by the employees. Yet, at present we have little insight in the implications of the brand logic in the context of low prestige, low skilled, low paid service work, where the work-organization may be bureaucratically structured and work against socio-ideological messages of in example empowerment and quality in service.

The case

Call Centers represent a 'critical case' for exploring such questions, because they have been identified as the modern day electronic 'sweatshops' exhibiting some of the most extreme forms of (electronic) control and surveillance systems. (Taylor and Bain 2003). Technocratic forms of control based on standardization and Tayloristic principles ensuring streamlined labor processes and limited personal involvement in the work dominate the call center environment, despite concurrent pressures to also grow employees' 'on brand' service mindset through empowerment, internalization and personification of the brand values (See also Frandsen 2015b). To employees, this mean that they are expected to simultaneously step forward as a subject to personify the brand, while also stepping back and machine-like following official scripts, procedures and guidelines to ensure a streamlined, consistent brand experience. Ethnographic research showing how employees respond in various ways to such contradictory technocratic and socio-ideological forms of control in these 'customer-oriented bureaucracies' (Korczynski 2001), is, however, still scarce – particular in the context of internal branding practices.

The empirical setting of my study was MGP (pseudonym), a European-based telecommunication provider with app. 2.5 million customers spread over a variety of telecom services. In October 2009, a new corporate brand was launched after MGP had experienced years of battling a stigmatized brand. According to the Marketing Director, MGP, as a former state-owned telecommunication corporation, was perceived by customers to be bureaucratic, old-fashioned, clunky and arrogant. A new brand was to change that. The new slogan was “us with MGP”. The idea was to break down the negative associations of MGP and instead build up new associations of MGP as a cooperative community embracing all customers with MGP subscriptions, hence the new slogan. In order to deliver on this brand promise, several initiatives were taken to change the culture of the organizational frontline, the call center, for employees to act more in line with the new brand. The critical ethnographic study of this chapter examines how the brand was implemented and assesses its implications for the call center employees. Before engaging more with the empirics, I introduce the critical analytical framework, which guided the generation and analysis of the empirical material.

The analytical framework: A critical approach

In this chapter I argue for a critical approach to understand the implications of internal branding among service employees in a call center context. By attending to the more ‘dark sides’ of internal branding and challenge the ‘romantic’ taken-for-granted discourse about employees’ engagement with the brand, I follow the footpath, of other scholars within critical management studies, who have previously engaged in critique of ‘culture management’ in its various forms within literature on organizations, labor processes and organizational communication. Critical management studies emerged in the late 1970s in light of emerging globalization, increases in the size and power of corporations, implementation of information technology, widespread ecological problems and turbulent markets, which altogether significantly changed the mode of managerial control, the nature of the work and the professionalism of the workforce (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). *In search of excellence* by Peters and Waterman (1982) marked a new era, where organizational culture was seen not only as a route to corporate success, but also as something that could be engineered, managed, amended and adjusted to serve the interest of the corporate elite. Critical organizational ethnographies surfaced to shed light on the dark side of culture management and its implications for low skilled, low prestige workers on the shopfloor, those in call centers and those doing other service jobs in example flight attendants (Collinson 1992; Fleming 2005; Hotchchild 1983) as well as knowledge workers (Alvesson and Kärreman 2004; Kunda 2006; Costas 2012).

I was initially drawn towards critical management studies, because these provide a vocabulary with which I could illuminate the tensions, struggles and ambivalences I experienced when observing brand implementation among the call center employees. Having observed how the 'romantic' discourse of employees were repeated by the directors of Marketing Communication and Corporate Communication departments in their planning of the new brand, I was surprised, to observe how the lofty ideals of branding clashed with the reality of the day-to-day working life of the service employees. The attention to various forms of control and resistance – and to identity regulation and negotiation – became cardinal for me to make sense of and give sense to the empirical mysteries I encountered. In the following, I briefly introduce some of the central terms of critical management studies along with examples of other critical organizational ethnographies that have trampled the path before me.

Socio-ideological control

Critical management studies see the organization as socially constructed through processes of power and control (Mumby 2013). While there may be many different forms of control, critical management studies are in particular preoccupied with the more hidden forms of socio-ideological or normative control forms including themes of organizational identity, quality management, service management and management orientation towards leadership, soul, charisma and corporate religion (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Socio-ideological control targets the mind, emotions, beliefs, values and self-image of employees, in contrast to technocratic forms of control, which are used to guide the output or conduct of employees (Alvesson and Kärreman 2004). Such socio-ideological forms of control are often celebrated as easing the technocratic forms of control and thus empowering employees and ensuring a more democratic workplace – similar to the 'romantic' discourse of the employees in the branding literature (Ind 2001). Critical management studies, nevertheless, unpack or deconstruct such popular 'buzzwords' of recent leadership styles to expose the implications of the more symbolic forms of control over employees' cultures, identities and values. The ethnography by Kunda (2006) serves as a prime example. Kunda examines normative control and its consequences among knowledge workers in a high tech corporation. He illustrates how, on the one hand, top management attempts to 'engineer' a high commitment organizational culture around keywords and strong images of the organization, which serves – through repetition and rituals – to manage the meaning of who *we* are. On the other hand, Kunda also uses ethnography to demonstrate the micro-emancipatory efforts taken by the members of the organization to resist, to distance themselves from and to escape the corporate colonization.

Identity regulation

Critical management studies, also, see organizations as important sites of the creation of human identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The more fluent boundaries between time at work and off work and increased demand to invest personality and authenticity while aligning 'personal' values and identity with that of the organization make employees' subjectivity the new locus of control in the managerial 'search for excellence'. The concept of identity regulation is often used among critical management scholars to understand how management's socio-ideological or technocratic forms of control produce a subject position of the 'appropriate' employee, which seek to regulate employee subjectivity celebrating the appropriate mindset and behavior, while punishing those who deviate (in material or symbolic ways). For example, Costas and Kärreman (2013) demonstrate how the management of two consulting firms use CRS as a specific type of aspirational control aimed at producing an appropriate 'ethical' employee subjectivity. The critical ethnographic study is also illustrative of the variety of responses ranging from believers over straddlers to cynics. In addition, Thomas and Davies (2005) study, at a micro-level, the identity regulating practices of New Public Management and how these are resisted by four individuals: a civilian manager of the police, a uniformed police officer, a social worker and a head teacher. In sum, the critical management perspective draws attention to the struggles inherent in the management's identity regulating activities when individuals resist and evade their organization-defined identities.

Resistance

Much of the research on resistance with a critical orientation does not view resistance as an ineffective reaction to organizational change or as a psychological defect of employees, but rather as a natural part of the power relations in any organization. In fact, Fleming and Spicer (2003) argue that cynicism, as a form of resistance, is not only a typical reaction to socio-ideological forms of control, but also one that inevitably sustains the power asymmetry. With the ambition of challenging the status quo and supporting silenced or marginal voices, critical organizational ethnographies have increased our attendance to organizational resistance, dissent, cynicism and counter-narratives on behalf of the oppressed, namely employees. For example, Collinson's (1992) ethnographic work of shopfloor workers is illustrative of the various forms of resistance to managerial domination. Also an appreciation of the local understandings and lived experiences of employees play a significant role to van Maanen (1991) in illustrating 'mental numbness' of employees in the 'smile factory' of Disney Land. Similarly, Costas and Fleming (2009) seek to understand consultants' self-alienation as a result of the intense work pressure caused by long working days, the failed search for authenticity outside work and the managerial neo-normative control system targeting employees' "real self". Resistance, here is portrait as employees' subtle strategies to protect a "real self" from a management designed "fake self" through surface-acting (Hotchschild 1983) and/or cynical distancing in the form of limited psychological investment and involvement in their jobs (Fleming and Spicer 2003).

In the following I use the critical approach to ethnography to attend to the creative forms of resistance through which work identities may be embraced, negotiated or resisted by the employees' in the context of internal branding.

The critical organizational ethnography

As is evident in the previous section, a critical orientation is characterized by a questioning of the dominating logics, ideologies, discourses and narratives to examine how these constrain or suppress human beings' (in an organizational context often employees') freedom, autonomy, values, identities and cultures. One can say that critical social science is a discourse of suspicion (Mumby 2013), because focus is on the asymmetry in power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. The critical orientation is, in other words, preoccupied with breaking up or opening up established traditions and conventions to expose and critique the underlying structures of repression. Ethnographies plays a vital role in this quest, van Maanen (1988) in example defines ethnographies as " portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogenous world. They display the intricate ways individuals and groups understand, accommodate, and resist a presumably shared order". (p. xiv). The intention is to expose power asymmetry and leave it open for critique and change in order to emancipate the oppressed. As such, the critical orientation is motivated not only by theory development or empirical investigations, but also by a political purpose of achieving a better world marked by democracy, empowerment, participation and freedom.

The critical approach has certain implications to conventional ethnography. The critical ethnography draws upon the same qualitative methods as conventional ethnography in terms of both data collection and grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). What distinguish conventional and critical ethnography are its political purpose and the pre-existing assumption that our world is dominated by broader structures of social power and control (Thomas 1993). Conducting critical organizational ethnography may in various ways be more difficult than conventional ethnography given its ambition to reveal the at-first-glance unnoticeable and unsettle the taken-for-granted 'truth' by bringing to light the underlying, hidden and obscure processes of power and control. Madison (2005) argues that this means that the critical ethnographer must "use the resources, skills and privileges available to her to make accessible – to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defence of – the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach" (p. 5).

Methods and the role of the researcher

In the following, I briefly introduce my research design before turning to two sets of dilemmas that I faced as a critical ethnographer doing fieldwork at MGP.

Research design

I was engaged with MGP as an in-house ethnographer for 25 months, which was roughly divided into three phases based on the acute concerns of the corporation in 2008, 2009 and 2010. In Phase 1, MGP's organizational image was under siege and the company experienced a reputational freefall. In Phase 2, the management attempted to deal with this reputational freefall by designing a new corporate brand. In Phase 3, the new corporate brand was 'implemented' in the organization with a particular focus on the call centers. The remainder of the chapter focuses specifically on the fieldwork and analysis based on the latter phase (for more information on the entire project consult Frandsen 2011).

The fieldwork centered on a team of 13 newly hired employees and it started on the first day of employment at MGP (See also Frandsen 2015b). First, participant observation used during the full time training sessions of weeks 1–3 to document and examine how the corporate brand was presented to the newcomers and it was perceived and adopted - or perhaps even embraced - by them. Second, interviews were conducted in weeks 2–3 in order to explore participants' motivation to and expectations of their new jobs. Third, I individually shadowed five of the new staff members for three days. I shadowed participant number 1 on Mondays of weeks 5, 10 and 13 of his employment, participant number 2 on Tuesdays of weeks 5, 10 and 13 and so on. During the three months, I also collected training material, newsletters from senior management and emails sent via the teams' distribution list.

The role as a *critical* ethnographer created some challenges and I continuously found myself in dilemmas centered around conflicting expectations of producing corporate-useful versus academic-useful research as well as balancing between the inductive, ethnographic research approach and the 'deductive' approach of critical management studies.

Corporate-useful vs. academic-useful research

The role as a critical ethnographer calls for some consideration of "usefulness" and my experience is that particularly for critical researchers the question of corporate vs. academic useful research is a delicate one (for an additional case see Frandsen 2015a). Often the discourse on usefulness in a corporate setting means that research has to pay off in terms of increasing the company's productivity or revenue. To do so requires the delivery of simple, tested, comparative and absolute results (Staunæs and Søndergaard 2005). This discourse clashes with the critical, academic discourse on ‘usefulness’ or ‘relevance’, in which simple, tested, comparative and absolute results would be seen as useless in an increasingly complex and diverse corporate world. In critical management research, the germ for useful knowledge lays in the ambiguities, mysteries, struggles and micro-emancipations (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman 2009).

In MGP, the corporate discourse was naturally dominant. At the beginning, I was asked to produce business cases based on my research. The usefulness of my research in terms of these business cases was evaluated based on its abilities to produce an “employer-branding balanced scorecard”, to develop employer-branding concepts and activities to increase the number of applicants to the management trainee program, to improve MGP’s rankings in various reports and even (ironically) to ‘grow’ MGP ambassadors among managers and employees.

At the same time, my own perception of usefulness began to move in the direction of the critical, academic traditions. While I was still motivated to investigate problems that were of acute concern to the organization (and possibly of relevance to other organizations), I wanted to use my privileged access to MGP to examine critically the brand logic and the ways in which employees responded to this logic. Thus, I became increasingly interested in what was taken for granted – the ‘truth’ about branding among MGP managers and employees – as I believed that the underlying assumptions about employees’ roles in the corporate branding process may have prevented the organization from succeeding in its previous branding attempts. However, this interest was difficult to express as arguments of usefulness in the logic of MGP.

Therefore, I tried to be useful in other ways, such as by examining areas that were known to be problematic but where the complexity of the situation was not well understood (such as motivating and retention of call center employees). In this regard, my ethnographic approach could provide a more comprehensive picture of the issues and problems from different angles. Furthermore, in my feedback to the organization, I tried to be useful by challenging the basic assumptions made about employees, management and control, which I had come across in my interviews and observations. There were some indications that this approach worked. After finishing my fieldwork, I presented the results to the call center director. We discussed my findings, and he asked me to conduct a new action research study in the call centers. He wanted to hire a new team of call center employees to be exclusively trained and managed, based on my recommendations, and separated from the rest of the organization. The idea was to evaluate whether this experimental team would perform better or worse than the ordinary teams I had observed. Although this was a compelling offer, it came only five days prior to my planned research stay in Australia and thus I could not accommodate his wishes. I did, however, view this offer as an indication of the usefulness of my research results for MGP's call center.

The inductive ethnographer vs the 'deductive' critical researcher

A different set of tensions emerged as a result of the inductive approach of the ethnographic work and the 'deductive' approach of the critical orientation. The analytical process was guided by an inductive approach, moving from the empirical observations and towards more theoretical abstractions and contributions. As such, I was in search of a theoretical vocabulary, which could inform my empirical observation and bring forward what has previously been unexplored or unchallenged in the previous research on branding within organization studies as well as marketing. However, with the theoretical vocabulary of the critical management studies also comes a certain political, epistemological and ontological perspective (as described above), which may on one hand 'illuminate' empirical findings, while also holding the potential risks of 'taking over' the empirical findings.

By focusing on control-resistance dynamics in example, there is a danger of *only* examining 'control-resistance dynamics' in an almost deductive fashion, and thus missing important insight to understand the processes studied in the empirical field. Thus, in the attempt to counter the dominant ideals and understandings, the on-going challenge of a critical approach is to strike a balance between a critical orientation informed by theoretical and political ideas on the one hand and remaining open and sensitive to the empirical phenomena brought about in the empirical work on the other (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). To avoid a 'self-fulfilling' approach to the empirical field and phenomenon under study reflexivity is imperative as a critical ethnographer, entailing an increased awareness of "an interpretive, open, language-sensitive, identity-conscious, historical, political, local, non-authoritative and textually aware understanding of the subject matter" (Alvesson and Deetz 2000, 113). In reflection upon this balancing act Watson (2001) writes in this critical ethnographic study of managers that his critique of contemporary managerial work is "a critique which emerges from my dialogues with organizational managers, rather than one imposed on the world by a holier-than-thou radical or critical sociologist (Italics in original) (p. 7). Similarly, I found that my own critical orientation emerged when making sense of the lived experiences of the call center service employees, on not from a pre-existing theoretical position.

In my own ethnographic work I found that the critical perspective was valuable for challenging the 'romantic' discourse of employees prevailing in the branding literature and highlighting the negative implications of the internal branding practices, which were otherwise celebrated as empowering and engaging. Giving voice to the employees became important. Yet, the voice given did not only 'speak' in terms of repression and resistance, but also produced as reality for the employees marked by a passion for customer service and embracement of the brand. Such ambivalences and the positive, self enhancing dimensions of dominant branding discourse challenged the usual focus on the resistance, cynicism and self-alienation of critical management studies. This will be elaborated more in the following empirical insights, but first an introduction to the control mechanisms dominating the service employees' of the call center, when the new internal brand practices were 'implemented'.

Vignettes from the field

Producing efficient identities

The call center work environment at MGP is designed to produce efficient employees, who focus on the time and quantity of service encounters. Traditional technocratic means of control are used to 'encourage' employees to adopt this efficiency path. Employees are measured and rewarded according to no fewer than nine different parameters including time on log on the phone, punctuality, use of freeze (stand by), number of customers handled, average handling time, number of redirections, customer service index and first call resolutions.

All these criteria and the individual's performances are listed in a "coach report" on which a biweekly "performance dialogue" between team leader and employees is based. Some of the parameters are also directly observed by managers and coaches, while time on freeze is managed by a tone, which sounds every few seconds if a customer is waiting. In terms of the number of customers being served, a screen in the middle of the room displays the number of employees on the phone, the number of customers waiting and the average waiting time. The numbers update in real time every second or so. The individual performance statistics are sent to the team leader daily and she or her coaches[1] put them on the whiteboards for everyone to see. Some are part of the team provision so everybody seemingly has an interest in high numbers for these targets. The exact targets to be met are sent out every month by email by the team manager. The email usually also contains sales targets. If employees fail to meet the performance targets, this could result in a

[1] Coaches are experienced employees who have privileged responsibilities and act as the team leader's deputy.

subtraction of their salary, while exceeding expectations may lead to an additional bonus. A further bonus can also be achieved by selling products to customers; the more premium the product, the bigger the cash bonus.

Producing 'on brand' identities

The new 'community' brand "us with MGP" is launched internally through a 'culture change program', Take Responsibility for the Customer (TRC), initiated to ensure 'on brand' behavior among the service employees. The CEO himself emphasizes the importance of the culture change programs associated with the new corporate brand. The monthly nomination and celebration of "The TRC Employee", who has done something extraordinary to "take responsibility for the customers" becomes an organizational ritual demarcating for both employees and visitors (as the TRC employees' photos are framed and put in the lobby) the managements' and employees' dedication to the new values called "rules to live by", "customer first", "cooperation" and "simplicity". The new employees are naturally unaware of this when they first begin their jobs at MGP's call center; however, in the call center job ad, the socio-ideological messages sketch the path of appropriate employees to potential employees (i.e. before entering the organization). The MGP call center job ad contains clear messages of the importance of the required customer oriented mindset: "The goal is to give the customer a superior experience with focus on individual counseling and identification of needs. This requires ambitious employees, who are eager to reach their goals – and show happiness when you succeed. The appropriate employee is furthermore described as ambitious, eager, happy and successful. More of these adjectives follow in the ad, positioning the employee as "positive", "full of initiative", "self-driven" and with "a desire to reach individual and team goals".

In the training sessions for the new comers they are presented to video material of *Pike Fish Market* illustrating the ‘fun spirit’ of selling fish at the Seattle Pike Market, and how the employees there are allegedly enthusiastic and passionate about providing a superior customer service. Also the New Age film *The Secret* is used to convince the employees, that by thinking positively (about work, the customers, the calls) they will change their (work) lives to entail positive work experiences, positive customers and positive conversations on the phone. As such they are made individually responsible for their own success and the outcomes of the interactions with the customers.

The socio-ideological identity regulation focusing on “serving customers” and “selling” manifests it self in several ways in the daily routines of MGP’s call center. Each employee’s sales results and service performance are listed and updated every day on the whiteboards next to the efficiency-statistics. Daily rituals of sales competitions propel the employees to compete against each other to improve sales. As described in Frandsen (2015b) the atmosphere is intense during such competitions and the room filled with human noise. A small reception bell is located next to the boards, and every time a team member manages to sell, he/she rings the bell and the rest of the team will loudly applaud and cheer for him/her – while still being on the phone with customers.

In sum, employees’ ‘on brand’ identities are regulated by promoting the brand values and ‘rules to live by’, by making the employees’ individually responsible for a positive spirit and ‘tone’ towards the customers, by applying rituals of celebrating appropriate brand behaviors, by a persuasive brand discourse, and by reports, checklists and direct surveillance. Yet, the ‘brand’ is not truly imbedded into the actual work process of the call center that are set up to produce ‘efficient’ employees. In the following I will draw an ethnographic portrait (Frandsen 2015b) of Marianne to illustrate, the ambivalent nature of the responses to the ‘on brand’ identity in the time-efficient work environment - and also the development of responses during the three months.

The responses to the 'on brand' identity

The newly hired call center employees were surprisingly positive towards their new job. The interviews revealed that for many the brand of MGP had influenced their decision to take the job, and they narrated themselves as highly motivated to make a difference to customers and improve the brand through their service. Marianne was 20 years old and one of the most customer-service-oriented newcomers. She was known to take pride in making even the most 'angry' customer happy. The performance monitoring data showed a high customer service index for Marianne, which presumably reflected her customer-oriented behavior. Marianne appeared to be a perfect case of a 'brand ambassador'. The story of Marianne show an initial positive embracement of the brand values of 'taking responsibility of the customer', in spite of the technocratic forms of control which limited the brand value enactment through the job-design and work-organization. In she beginning of the observation she states:

> *I like the challenge, and it may take a little while, because you have to handle all sorts of problems. You need to help the customer, right, and I like being a peoples' person. You need to talk to him. To solve the customers problem and establish a strong connection. And then I really like the variations of situations to handle. They are just as varied at the people, right. Plus, you should also try to make a sale. There are many levels in this job, which makes it challenging, exciting and fun.*

During the three months of observation, I did, however, experience a decrease in their enthusiasm as a cynical distance developed. One of the members of the team left, while others had sick leave or went on holiday; an apathetic and resistant attitude was detected among the once positive newcomers. I became increasing curious about why this development took place. Taking a closer look at the customer interactions revealed how these often were experienced as stressful.

Extract: Marianne, is everything under control?

"The customer (an elderly lady) is interested in a mobile broadband subscription, but she is unsure if there are enough signals in her summer cabin. Marianne is unable to answer, so she calls 'technical support' who tells her that the customer can use a mobile broadband because there is 3G coverage, although she may experience problems with her mobile phone if it only runs on 2G. Marianne calls the customer back and repeats the message she got from 'technical support.' The elderly lady asks if Marianne can send her an offer on a mobile broadband and also for a new mobile phone that has 3G. Marianne asks for the lady's email, but she does not have an email account.

Marianne: *"Maybe you can ask in one of our shops then? We usually only send out offers by email."*

Customer: *"Can't you just send it to me by post?"*

Marianne: *"I don't think so but I will ask."*

Marianne again puts the customer on hold, and asks her coach if it is possible. She returns to her desk and explains to the researcher:

Marianne: *"Oh no, I have to find the [standard] email and print it out myself, it is not good for my freeze[2] time."*

Marianne explains to the customer that she will receive the offers by post within a few days and she ends the call. While taking off her headset, she exclaims:

Marianne: *"We can put them [the headsets] down now, we will not need them for a while. This is shit! And I have a break in five minutes. Maybe I can just finish beforehand."*

Marianne locates the standard emails and starts reading them. She corrects them and adds "Visit us in our store." She then looks up prices on a mobile handset and finds a cheap one. She adds its details to the letter. Marianne finds more details on the mobile broadband connection, adjusts the information to suit the elderly lady's needs, and then finally she starts printing. At this point in time Marianne is red in the face, working fast and almost running to the printer. Time is ticking. The printer is located in another room, and when she arrives she discovers it is not working. She returns to her desk, and tries again. This time with more success. Now she tries to find an envelope, so she is walking about in the office room. While putting the papers into the envelope she is interrupted by the coach:

[2] Freeze" means that an employee is logged onto the system but his/her calls are directed to other colleagues.

Coach: *"Marianne, is everything under control?"*

Marianne: *"I had to send something to a customer."*

Coach: *[upset, irritated voice] "Next time you should log out. You have been on "freeze" for 20 minutes. It is bad for our average handling time."*

Marianne posts the letter and rushes to the desk and immediately starts answering calls. She does not have her break that day." (Frandsen 2015b, 6)

During my fieldwork, I observed many interactions similar to Marianne's, when the employee seemed torn between competing expectations and a cynical distance emerged.

Cynical distance: a response to conflicting identities

Comparing the 'on brand' identity and 'efficient' identity produced by the management through both socio-ideological and technocratic forms of control shows that they not only stand in contrast to each other but that they are also mutually exclusive. It is impossible to be both 'on brand' and 'time efficient'. Indeed, the conflicting character of the appropriate organizational identities seems to create vast challenges for employees. While Marianne in the above example provides good customer service and takes responsibility for the customer's problem, she is aware from the very beginning that this is not good for her quantitative performance measurement documenting her success as a 'time efficient' employee. She is stressed and, in the end, she decides to suggest a handset that does not match the customer's needs. She also suggests that the customer should visit one of the company stores. By doing so, she avoids a negative impact on her First Call Resolution statistic, even though she will also not be able to log the call as a sale. Perhaps Marianne in this case expects that a new encounter with this customer will cost her more on the performance targets than on her sales account. The fact that she follows through on the customer's request to print (and thereby overlook the standard procedures) shows that Marianne is committed to the brand values of ‘serving customers’ and wants to take responsibility for the customer. She uses her own judgment to adjust the letter so the information is relevant to the customer and she agrees to post it, as the customer has no email account. In the end, however, she is not rewarded for embracing ‘serving customers’ as a value. Instead, she is punished by the management.

The consequences of the conflicting identities promoted by management are already evident within the first three months of employment, as described at the beginning of this section. In one case, an employee quits her job, as she feels she is trapped between conflicting messages and she therefore can not live up to her own expectations of ‘serving customers’. Others keep going, and cynical distancing seems to be the preferred coping strategy when they are not rewarded for embracing the ‘on brand’ identity because it inherently involves disengagement with the ‘efficient’ identity. Lars dryly states to me: “They [the management] say we are MGP’s face to the outside world, but really we still get a low base salary and I have to go through sales pitches and three systems before I can get [0,4 Euro] for the sale of a simple subscription. I might as well not do it.”

What is significant in this study is that the resistance did not arise because employees did not identify with the brand values, or because they sought to protect their ‘real self’ from the intrusions of a managerially-design “fake-self” as found in previous studies (ex. Hochschild 1983). Nor did the employees seemed bored or apathetic about their jobs, or had an instrumental orientation towards their work (Ogbanna and Wilkinson 1988; van Maanen 1991). Most had a keen sense of passion and pride about their work. Rather, cynicisms emerged precisely because they genuinely wanted to “live the brand” and provide good customer service, and were frustrated by the technocratic control that worked against it. Positive self-images were nurtured through providing good customer service and gaining appraisal from customers. Thus, instead of ‘resisting’ the brand values as such they simply ‘twisted’ them in a manner that worked from them, rather than for management. The employees would actively and knowingly ‘bend the rules’, such as by issuing credits or refunds to satisfy unhappy customers. The internal branding program was thereby "turned on its head" and used to legitimize their subtle resistance.

Contributions

At the present time, we have little empirical knowledge on what kind of organization the corporate branding logic creates. Theoretically, the literature on corporate branding offers a logic under which management is able to define and communicate an idealized organizational identity, to close gaps between the internal and external perceptions of "who we are" and to align organizational behavior with the brand promise. The "organization" we find in the corporate branding literature is, thus, "an organization defined, shaped, and controlled by its overall corporate message" (Christensen and Cornelissen 2010, 12). From a critical perspective, the 'organization' is seen as the site of a struggle over meaning, identity, value and cultures. The brand domination lies in its discursive, narrative and mythic characteristics, which attempt to control the hopes, desires, longings and aspirations of both consumers and employees (Kärreman and Spicer 2010). Here, I advocate that we need to focus on brands as powerful carriers of meaning that regulate the identity of not only consumers but also employees working in the frontline 'living the brand', in order to challenge the 'romantic' discourse of employees' longing for and embracement of the brand, which is dominating the branding literature. We need not only insight to how management actively use branding as a way to manage meaning, but also its implication for employees in order to gain new knowledge on the intra-organizational consequences of the corporate branding logic. In particular, we need to understand the brand logic from the perspective of employees, who despite their centrality in corporate branding efforts are largely overlooked in the literature.

The chapter contributes in multiple regards. First, the chapter demonstrate how the brand functions as a socio-ideological form of control internal to the organization, yet only on a discursive and symbolic level, while the work-organization is dominated by more technocratic forms of control to ensure efficiency. The contradictory logics at play leaves the employees entrapped. Kärreman and Rylander's (2008) ethnographic work among knowledge workers shows that the brand – as socio-ideological control – is seemingly supplementing and even substituting the more technocratic forms of control and thus deeply inserting the brand logic into the organization. The case of MGP, however, presents a different situation of co-existing yet clashing forms of control, a case, which contributed to the academic conversations of the ambiguous organizational implications of branding. Here, branding – as a socio-ideological form of control - is decoupled from the technocratic forms of control put in place to propel a standardized and efficient working call center. As such, it demonstrates the implications of the brand logic for employees in a situation of contrasting logics by highlighting the cynical distancing, but also engagement that arise in response.

Second, in critical management studies, branding may also be considered to be 'the new kid on the block' in regards to the various forms of 'culture management' previously investigated. The 'living the brand' construct is conceived within the branding literature as empowering employees and liberating them from technocratic forms of control (de Chernatony 2002; Ind 2001; Olins, 2003). The present study demonstrates, alongside Brannan et al. (2015), that the brand *is* a powerful discourse, which informs and directs employees' organizational identification. The employees' are initially willing to 'live the brand' and embrace the discourse of 'taking responsibility for the customer'. As such the case of corporate branding at MGP also highlights that the implications for employees may not be rightly understood if only examining employees' resistance and dissent towards the dominating brand logic, as is common in critical management studies. The edited volume by Brannan, Parsons and Priola (2013) show that employees' relationship with the brand of their organization may be far more ambivalent and complex – even positive – as it is seen to provide meaning in otherwise mundane types of work, which was also the case in the Marianne example presented in this chapter. The critical ethnographic approach therefore holds potential to further explore the multiple and diverse forms of responses to corporate branding.

Third, this chapter draws attention to the necessity and opportunities of using critical ethnography to explore the implications of corporate brand. The chapter highlights the need to hear employees' voice, which has largely been overheard in the typical functionalist and even interpretative studies of branding. Such voice gives us insight to the dynamics of organizational control and varied forms of resistance, ambivalence, identification and any shades in between in contemporary corporate life, which has been taken over by a brand logic. I concur with the quote opening the chapter that we need ethnographic research to confirm that there is life and different type of meaning in organizations and work beyond the rationalities prescribed in mainstream marketing and management literature on branding.

On a final note it is appropriate to draw attention to one of Brookfield's (1987) characteristics of critical social science researcher and the obligation to "imaging and exploring extraordinary alternatives, ones that may disrupt routines and established orders" (cited in Alvesson and Deetz 2000, 8). The political ambition of doing critical ethnography entails a preoccupation with giving a voice to the marginalized and silenced - and to contributing to their emancipation by imaging and exploring extraordinary alternatives. Yet, critics of critical management studies have pointed out that critical management studies often fail on this ambitious promise (Klikauer 2015; Foster and Wiebe 2010). This chapter points out the difficulties, dilemmas and paradoxes one may encounter as an ethnographer and their implications for the emancipatory vision. In my case, I continuously found myself in a double role of both critiquing internal branding and adding to the development of the very same practices. While I did aim to give voice to employees and successfully convinced management of the problems with their current branding strategies, management instead asked me to take over the initiative of producing employees that were even more "on brand". On this basis, I propose that future research engages more in the ethical dilemmas of critical approaches to organizational ethnography.

The power of findings

Discussant Dan Kärreman,

One of the biggest irritations with contemporary organization and management studies is the way we are encouraged – indeed, forced - to chop, slice and mix our empirical findings in ways that support an abstract argument: the holy contribution. It is rare to find someone, anyone, that tells a straight story. It is even rarer to find someone that speak out and support the telling of stories from the field in the name of finding out about social phenomenon.

Suffice to say, we can't avoid abstractions all together. After all, our job is to speak to larger issues, as well as reporting our findings. However, at this moment in time, the larger issues are (mis)-interpreted in ways that clearly overwhelm the reporting of findings. Today we think of larger meaning as more abstract and specialized meaning, as almost devoid of broad meaning and consequence, and as a product for the consumption of a hyper-specialized tribe with its own language, set of beliefs, and rituals.

It is unusual to find a study that ponders the importance of the object under study on its own merits, in contrast to endless jockeying for positions in various hyper-specialized debates. The question hanging over the researcher in organization and management studies is rarely "what is going on here?" but rather "how can I make this to contribute to contemporary micro-debates and nano-controversies in institutional theory, critical management studies, identity theory, entrepreneurship, innovation studies, gender at work, leadership", and so on, as if social reality neatly reflects today's division of labor in academic work.

Ethnography, of course, sits uneasily to the hyper-specialization of academic work. It forces the researcher to 'follow the animal': to pay attention to local meanings and behavior. It is not often clear how ethnographic data will speak to the latest vexations in organization and management studies. In fact, when doing organizational ethnography most intra-academic debates and controversies seems baffling and absurd. The addition of yet another state of identity work, leadership fad, and mode of isomorphism seems pointless and mis-leading when contrasted to what is going on in the organization, where these abstractions supposedly are playing out. That makes ethnography a poor fit for pursuing the average academic career. It takes too long time to do well, and the data is never going to have a good fit for wherever the intra-academic hemline is at any moment in time.

However, ethnography does make a good fit if you are in for understanding organizations, and for revealing findings about organizational life. Sanne Frandsen's chapter is a strong reminder of the value of findings. I want to put particular attention to how Frandsen use ethnographic data to show, rather than tell. The key passage is the thick description of Marianne's struggle with, on one hand, the new branding initiative's call for customer care, and, on the other, the mechanics of an instrumentalized work place. We can intuitively understand the tension that this would entail, and we can perhaps also guess the various responses different employees would engage in. We are however at loss, without the ethnographic account, to understand the meaning of this struggle, and how it affects an individual and the work place on the level of lived experiences.

Frandsen’s account makes it possible for us to understand Marianne’s wish to help the elderly customer and the consequences of actually acting out the imperatives of customer care. It also makes us understand exactly why it is so costly in terms of the instrumental imperatives of the work place. Marianne’s heeding of the call for superior customer care is costly for her, for her managers and her co-workers. We feel her pain, and theirs. We now have an understanding what it means to live the brand without the necessary support. We now are in a better position why individuals cynically distance themselves, why they feel unsupported and why they burn out.

Showing this, rather than telling it, is the true advantage of a compelling finding. In this sense, a finding compels because it is specific and concrete, rather than abstract and general. A finding speaks of larger issues not because it provides a hyper-specialized abstraction, but because it gives insight to the moment and meaning of actual social reality. It speaks to larger issues not because it reveals mechanisms and patterns, but because it shows the layered minutiae of interactions and dynamics in everyday settings. A finding speaks to larger issues not only because it can be used to fire academic controversies – although it certainly is able of doing that – but, more importantly, because it can put them to rest.

I think it is clear that we focus far too much on contributions, rather than findings, in organization and management studies. This is not to say that contributions, in the form of abstract concepts, vocabularies and theories, are bad or useless. On the contrary, we need them to do our job. We always should try to trade in poor concepts and theories for better ones.

However, for now we are preoccupied with creating concepts that cover less and less, and reveal almost nothing. We need to move out of this dead end. We need concepts that are attached to findings. We need methods and techniques that provide findings. This is why I find hope in the work Frandsen and other organizational ethnographers are doing. It is my belief that organizational ethnography is well-positioned to provide findings – findings that can give access to and insight in the strange world of organizations.

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