

The wall speaks: analysing power in ethnographic material.

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This paper presents a concept that assists the analysis of power in ethnographic material and briefly illustrates its usage. Power is typically understood through the three circuit framework (Clegg 1989, Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips 2006), emphasising facilitative power or the making, communication and breaking of systems of meaning. Accordingly, by adopting a broadly social constructionist stance, we seek to understand the flux of meaning and consequences of that flux, through an analysis of cine-ethnographic material. We are concerned with meaning making in what we term as 'the extra-organisation' in order to recognise the importance of organizations within a context of meaning making that spans boundaries. We are therefore interested in what organisations do and what they achieve as part of a broader networks of actors.

The term sensemaking (following Weick 1995) has been widely applied amongst management scholars and described through several metaphors including maps and pictures. The picture has recently gained currency in the study of inter-organisational relationships (Mouzas, Henneberg and Naude 2008). The cognitive basis of this usage has been criticised (Geiger and Finch 2010; Colville and Pye 2010) because it fails to adequately account for the social processes in meaning construction. In effect, the picture presented is an atomised form inside managers' minds; an image capturing a slice of life from an angle. Interrogating the metaphor, however, allows that line of enquiry to lead through to alternative depictions. Here we propose that meaning is socially constructed and permanently emergent, both built from and building power. We propose sensemaking, particularly in the extra-organisation, can be better understood through the metaphor of graffiti. This metaphor captures the social and political aspects of meaning making as well as the continuous emergence of a meaning that is always provisional and always ambiguous. The notion of a public canvas provides a means for us to analyse power from a sensemaking perspective.

In the paper we expand upon the metaphor through a somewhat disparate literature based largely upon ethnographic work amongst graffer sub-cultures (eg Lachmann 1988, Schacter 2008, McCormick and Jarman 2005). Aspects we highlight include: territorial marking through tagging; different audiences' reading of the meaning/message of a piece; the ideological role of graffiti in a community, eg in a conflict zone; the alteration or subversion of meaning through revisions; and the social creation of different identities and status amongst graffers within different communities (eg crew members, other graffers, local authorities and police). Additionally, graffiti itself may be seen as subversion, laying claims to a cityscape, interacting with an environment and critiquing and disrupting extant systems of power or social organisation, for example by jamming 'brandsapes'). The core point, for us, is that whatever the wall says – and this will vary for different people – it speaks always through conversation between other artists, authorities and the elements. Graffiti is

transient yet leaves traces. Meaning draws upon previous and frames future understandings. Graffiti allows us to see meaning as made “out there” through multiple interactions in the social world.

We show how this understanding of graffiti informs an analysis of meaning making in an extra-organizational context through documentary film (*‘Jimmy and The Giant Supermarket’* – channel four 2012). This depicts the interaction between various organisations and groups (eg Tesco, the Milk Farmers’ Union, consumers and Jimmy) concerning the introduction of welfare meats. The field of cine-ethnography highlights common ground between documentary and ethnography (Margolis 1994, Heider 2007, Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009). What is clear to us is that this cine-ethnography gives us some observational access to a range of meetings and contexts, many of which we would have been excluded from as researchers. Although those occasions have been mediated by the filmmaker (rather than us, as in other forms of ethnography), we are also able to consider the film as a participant, or as a graffer. Working via the shaping of meaning amongst consumers, for example, the film appears to have provoked new product introductions of specific high welfare products in other supermarkets.

In our analysis we focus upon alternative meanings (eg of a food stuff as cruel or humane, of the consumer as ethical or economic being) that arise through juxtaposed claims to be able to speak on a topic and in a context (to mark territory and frame ideology) and the negotiation between multiple interpretations given to core ‘facts’. Use of material from a cine-ethnography allows us, therefore, to extend an ethnographic understanding of food cultures amongst consumers (eg, Cronin and McCarthy 2011; Clark 2004) by incorporating the organisational elements that are critical to the shape of food meanings.

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