

Organization

<http://org.sagepub.com>

Signing My Life Away? Researching Sex and Organization

Joanna Brewis

Organization 2005; 12; 493

DOI: 10.1177/1350508405052760

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://org.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/4/493>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Organization* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://org.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://org.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://org.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/12/4/493>



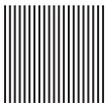
articles

Signing My Life Away? Researching Sex and Organization

Joanna Brewis

University of Leicester, UK

***Abstract.** My personal and professional lives have blurred into each other throughout my academic career. This paper focuses on one aspect of this blurring—that certain colleagues believe I am intimate with my co-authors, and that I engage in or have experienced the sexual activities which my research has explored—and seeks to account for this interpretation of my private life through the lens of my public endeavours. In discussing such ‘signings’ of my work, I suggest that they are underpinned by the heterosexual matrix, and perhaps ratify my participation in the academy as a woman. Moreover, such attributions of authorship point to interesting questions concerning the methodology of sex research and the influence that an author’s biography has on their research direction. I also contend that these constructions of me as an author indicate that organization studies still struggles with the idea of sex representing a meaningful topic of enquiry. **Key words.** signing; author; reader; gender; sex; public; private*



Signing In

Derrida (1991) has noted, in his concept of signature, that texts are littered with signs deployed by those who write, or taken by those who read, to imply the presence of an author in and behind the text; someone writing in a certain context, about certain referents, who has had certain experiences and wishes to convey certain ideas. Authors leave such signs, or signatures, both deliberately and accidentally—so, even though they may literally *sign* a piece of work as their own by putting their name



Organization 12(4)

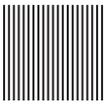
Articles

to it, others may 'sign' it differently by reading other inferences into the traces of authorship within and (I would add) outwith the work. As a result:

The absence of the sender, the addressor, from the marks that he abandons, which are cut off from him and continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning . . . this absence . . . belongs to the structure of all writing . . . (Derrida, 1991: 87–8)

Foucault (1986), in his discussion of authorship, also shows how readers create the 'author' as an effect. He argues that the use of an author's name in conjunction with a piece of work is more than just indicative—instead, it is assumed to describe the person to whom reference is made, marking them as having written other works, belonging to a particular intellectual 'camp' or even (I suggest) having certain personal proclivities. Derrida and Foucault therefore contend that the question of 'who is the "author"?' is never fully resolved: instead, the text becomes a crowded place where there are potentially as many authors as there are readers. Writing in their estimation does not consist in the straightforward transmission of meaning, neither is reading some form of 'hermeneutic deciphering' or 'decoding' of the author's intentions (Derrida, 1991: 108). We could suggest, then, following Stanley (1992), that readers are also *biographers*, shaping and constructing authors as particular types of individual.

In the light of these arguments, my purpose here is to explore some of the conditions that have led to a specific type of 'authorship' being attributed to me, across a body of work produced solely and jointly during the last ten years, by looking at the interpretations occasioned by particular signs inside and outside that work. That is to say, I have become aware that some of my academic colleagues believe I am involved in the various practices which my work interrogates and/or that my co-authors are also my intimates—in other words, that there is a certain blurring of my public and private worlds. To be sure, the relationships I have with my collaborators are not easily categorized as purely public. Writing with others for me is always based on and reinforces a pre-existing connection. We have become co-authors on the basis of some kind of initial empathy, both intellectual and personal (if indeed the two can be disentangled—and I am not entirely sure they can be). Co-authorship also requires a great deal of contact. I have become closer to everyone I have written with, perhaps not least because our research has required frequent discussion, with the usual sprinkling of gossip and personal titbits that tends to leaven work-related conversations. Moreover, writing together fosters closeness in another respect: in order for the piece to work, co-authors need to arrive at some joint understanding of the material they are focused on, which in the case of my collaborative work has often necessitated impromptu seminars on particular theoretical concepts or frameworks. There is also the issue of the relationship between collaborators providing a buffer against the slings and arrows of academic life—for example, dealing with a disappointing set of reviews



Signing My Life Away?

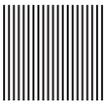
Joanna Brewis

is much less stressful when there is someone to discuss them with who knows the work as well as I do. And of course academic work, especially when it is collaborative, often takes place outside of standard working hours, and in unconventional 'workplaces'—in a hotel room at a conference, perhaps, as last minute overheads are scribbled or division of labour finalized regarding who is going to say what the following morning—which further destabilizes the personal–professional boundary.

My private and public lives are also bound up with each other in other ways. For example, the research I do impacts on my being-in-the-world more generally, an issue which feminist researchers have discussed at length. Dworkin (1981: 302–4), for example, writes powerfully about how her research into pornography infuriated, scared and nauseated her in equal measure; produced a sense of isolation and desolation; occasioned vivid nightmares; caused her to see the most mundane objects in frightening new ways; and affected her relationships such that she became unable to trust others' motives. Ramazanoğlu and Holland (1994) and Kelly et al. (1994) offer similar commentary on the emotional distress that being told about their respondents' sexual experiences—including abuse and rape—generated for them. In a different context, Hochschild's classic text *The Managed Heart* (1983) also suggests how professional demands can affect the private self. Her flight attendants were trained to engage in 'deep acting,' to actually conjure up the emotions they were supposed to be feeling towards passengers (e.g. being flattered by and interested in their sexual attentions) in order to offer the highest level of service. Hochschild discusses the psychological effect that this had on the workers concerned in some detail—such as suggesting that some flight attendants sought therapy because they lost interest in sex.

Likewise, I have reacted in various ways to the subject matter of my research—horror at a sexual harassment case involving repeated assaults over a period of years; squirming discomfort when exposed to accounts of certain sexual practices; empathy when talking to women about their experiences of their bodies; sadness and anger when reading of the violence which haunts the working lives of prostitutes, as well as profound admiration for the intelligence and spirit of those earning a living in the sex industry. I have also taken out some of these feelings on family and friends, especially the men amongst them.

What I am interested in here, then, is a specific aspect of this intermingling of personal and professional worlds in academia. As Katila and Meriläinen (2002: 344) put it, 'We are all aware of the theoretical distinction between the private and individual realm and the public and political realms . . . [But, if we think of our academic lives, it becomes clear that this distinction is difficult to make'. Moreover, and as a reviewer of this paper suggests, such issues have not been widely discussed in organization studies. In what follows, I therefore ask why others make certain assumptions about my personal life based on my



Organization 12(4)

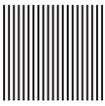
Articles

public life, why they 'sign' my work in specific ways, and what this might mean for me as an individual, for academic collaboration more generally, and for my area of organization studies.

With regard to this last, my work has dealt in the main with sex and organization, including topics that may appear unusual to an organization studies audience such as sexual harassment and sadomasochism. These various foci seem in themselves to reinforce a sexualized reading of my authorship. Of course, the arguments presented by Derrida and Foucault suggest that speculations about the author responsible for a text are far from exclusive to writings about sex. There are, moreover, documented instances in academia where such speculations have been very overt. Back (2002) recounts an amusing instance following a seminar where he was told by a reader of his work on racism and ethnicity that they expected a shorter, slimmer author. Similarly, Collinson and Hearn (1994: 2) report, after giving a conference paper on men's workplace discrimination against women, that one of them was asked whether his collaborator was homosexual. As they suggest, this particular episode 'revealed the way in which some men academics try to make sense of other men who write critically on gender, men and masculinities'. It has also been reported to me that 'signings' of this kind may vary depending on those exposed to the research in question—e.g. whether they are heterosexual men (as, Collinson and Hearn imply, the questioner in this instance was) or feminist women (who may, I contend, make other sorts of assumptions, perhaps that men writing on masculinity either succeed or do not in reflecting on their own behaviours in this regard). Additionally, I have been told about comments regarding the personality of an academic writing on charismatic leadership—presumably regarding their own charisma, or lack thereof. I am therefore unable to claim that my experience is in any way unique. But what I would argue is that organizational research on sex is particularly likely to be subject to signings by others. There seems to be, in my experience at least, an assumption amongst some organization studies academics that one cannot examine sex without engaging in some form of participant observation, with respondents or (in my case) collaborators. Consequently, this paper examines why this assumption is made about authors who write about sex and organization *in particular*—i.e. on the basis of what I have referred to above as 'the traces of authorship within . . . the work'. Second, and with regard to those 'signs' of authorial identity which lie outside my work, it also attempts to relate such readings to the context of a modern West intent on differentiation on the basis of gender *and* on 'knowing' others in terms of their sexuality. It is to this issue that I now turn.

Gender, Sexuality and the Heterosexual Matrix

According to Gherardi, gender is the primary mechanism by which we attempt to classify each other in the West: she suggests that 'our first act



Signing My Life Away?

Joanna Brewis

of social categorization when encountering the other is to ascribe a gender identity' (Gherardi, 1994: 600). But sexualizing—attaching a label of heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual (amongst others)—is, I would argue, as common a practice in the discursive location of other people as gendering, and inextricably bound up with it. First, we are preoccupied with sexuality just as we are with gender as a means of 'knowing' others (and 'knowing' ourselves). As Foucault (1979: 78) points out, 'the West has managed . . . to bring us almost entirely—our bodies, our minds, our individuality, our history—under the sway of a logic of concupiscence and desire'. Second, he suggests that the ways in which sex was put into Western discourse from the end of the 16th century onwards, the proliferation of discourses around sex during the 18th century and the modern incitement to discuss sex in endless detail have simultaneously established heterosexuality as the unassailable norm and constituted other sexualities as abnormal. This analysis suggests that what Butler (1990) calls the *heterosexual matrix*—the interpretation of all relationships, including our own, through a web of discursive meaning which identifies sexual attraction as naturally occurring between men and women—is a recent, but nonetheless impactful, social phenomenon. Foucault also claims that the concept of sexuality itself is specific to time and place; that as recently as two hundred years ago an individual's sexual behaviour was understood as an active choice, not something deriving from an inborn predilection. Thus, the heterosexual matrix is only some two centuries' old—as, indeed, is the process of sexualizing *per se*.

These closely related processes of gendering-and-sexualizing draw on data which vary depending on how we encounter other people—on how they appear in our *sight*. In 'real-life' meetings, for example, these data might include their physiological characteristics, their dress and demeanour, the personal information they vouchsafe and so on. These *sights* are read as *signs*, and the reading at which observers subsequently arrive is one which they can claim as an *insight*. Moreover, this sort of 'detective work' is part of the everyday process of 'naming' others, of 'fixing' and being 'fixed' as one thing or the other, not just male or female, straight, gay or bisexual, but black or white, old or young, and so on (Hughes, 2002: 110). And gendering-and-sexualizing takes place in academia just as it does elsewhere. Consider, for example, Moreno's account of being raped by one of her research assistants during ethnographic fieldwork, and her subsequent claim that:

In the field the false division of time and space between the 'professional and the private' that underpins the supposedly gender-neutral identity of the anthropologist collapses completely. In the field it is not possible to maintain the fiction of a genderless self. In the field, one is marked. (Moreno, 1995: 246–7, cited in Coffey, 1999: 93)

Quite apart from the undeniably pathological effects of the rape, Moreno also emphasizes that the unsustainable division between her public and

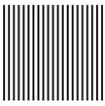


Organization 12(4)

Articles

private selves was thrown into relief as a result of this experience. Her story tells us in no uncertain terms that, for the fieldworker, it is impossible to enter the research context 'unmarked' by gender and sexuality, to present a 'neutral-researcher-body' which goes unnoticed by others, whether respondents or colleagues. Relatedly, Coffey (1999: 82) notes the cultural significance of such responses to the fieldworker, suggesting that the way respondents interpret and react to a researcher's gender and sexuality is important in itself because it illuminates the norms and institutions within the research setting. Gummesson (2000: 18) makes a similar point with regard to researchers, suggesting that the analysis in which we engage is based in part on a sociocultural 'paradigm', on spatial and temporal 'value judgments, norms, standards, frames of reference, perspectives, ideologies, myths, theories, and approved procedures that govern . . . thinking and action'. This paradigm is often unconsciously adhered to, indeed to the extent that it seems like the 'natural' way to understand the world. Coffey and Gummesson's arguments also recall the discussion above of the heterosexual matrix, and its specific milieu of the modern West.

Extending these arguments, I contend that other academics who encounter me or my work inevitably understand me as an author through their own paradigms, and thus come to gender-and-sexualize me in particular ways, to create 'me' as an effect of their own readings. In other words, although my own experiences are scarcely comparable to Moreno's, and my arguments pertain to being 'marked' in a different setting, I would nevertheless draw some parallels between her account and the way in which certain colleagues appear to have constructed me as an author in the Derridian/Foucauldian sense. What I am claiming here is that, whether others meet me in settings such as conferences, listen to my presentations, read or hear about my work, their constructions of who I am and what I do derive in no small part from the ways in which they attribute a gender and a sexuality to me—even when we do not meet face-to-face. To borrow from Coffey (1999: 73), as an academic, I am therefore a 'visible' as well as a 'writing' and 'speaking' body—my authorship is marked by both gender and sexuality. Indeed, as I have suggested, these automatic processes of gendering-and-sexualizing have produced, in some cases, a very particular reading of me and of my work. Certain deeply embedded paradigms seem to have constructed me as the kind of author who has intimate relationships with her collaborators. Because I am gendered-as-female, and because I tend to collaborate with others who are gendered-as-male, these signs have apparently been read—through the heterosexual matrix—to imply that my relationships with these individuals go further than straightforward 'professional' contact. In other words, I have been 'named' in some academic quarters as a 'heterosexually active woman', based on the data that my being-in-the-world presents for others.



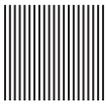
Signing My Life Away?

Joanna Brewis

The implications of the ways in which I have apparently been gendered-and-sexualized in the course of my profession are also interesting. Gherardi (1994: 601) asserts that confirmation of the gender order, the 'ceremonial work' of gender, is important in the sense that 'we feel pleasure at being momentarily part of the sacred . . . For an instant we are no longer just a sexed body but part of the "mystic body" of "Male" or "Female"'. So when men or women somehow breach gender 'rules', others are compelled to *ratify* or *repair* the symbolic damage done, to reassure themselves that no long term disruption to gender roles will result. Indeed, women who participate in public arenas like the academy arguably rupture the prevailing gender order in the West—which conceptualizes the masculine and the feminine as irreducibly separate *and* positions the feminine as subordinate to the masculine—simply by so doing. As Gherardi points out, 'An inner symbolic coherence ties the masculine to the public, to production, to the word, to command, and opposes it to the female, the private, reproduction, silence, obedience, and so forth, practically ad infinitum' (1994: 595).

The 'biographizing' of me as an author who has more than 'academic' interactions with her co-writers, the reading of my personal life on the basis of publicly available signs, arguably performs such 'ratification work' in that it has a certain redolence of the casting couch. The inference appears to be that I am, consciously or unconsciously, trading on my sexuality in order to get on. If I have achieved any measure of academic success, then, the interpretation which suggests I am engaged in such relationships with my collaborators perhaps serves to discount the merits of this success. Maybe it confirms that women can only progress in organizations if they ally themselves with men, as well as mitigating against any 'threat' that my participation in the public space of the academy—my publications, my presentations, my attendance at conferences—may pose.¹ Gherardi (1995: 128–9) claims that the ways we 'do' gender in organizations—including ratification work—help to maintain or even to increase sex inequality. It is therefore worth noting that only five of 80 British Vice Chancellors and Principals are female and, in the pre-1992 universities, women make up just 9% of the professoriat—despite 36% of academics in the UK being female (Knights and Richards, 2003: 216–17).

Relatedly, the kind of 'semiotic sleuthing' which creates me as an author who is intimately involved with her collaborators may serve to confirm Warren's (1988: 18, cited in Silverman, 2000: 207) claim that the sexist belief that it is solely men who participate in 'important business' still prevails. Warren suggests that female academics can use this positively, because their resulting 'invisibility' allows them to merge into the background when conducting fieldwork, and thereby to collect more interesting data. However, it still constructs women in a 'service' role to their male collaborators and reinforces the pattern of disadvantage—'rational' men being read accordingly as the senior partners in these



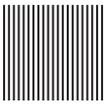
Organization 12(4)

Articles

relationships. Perhaps I am therefore viewed as riding on others' coat-tails, with little hope of my work being taken seriously without their participation, and relying upon their greater sagacity and experience. This, of course, also implies that my collaborators would be comfortable with such quasi-feudal patronage.

Nonetheless, my own dress and demeanour are in all likelihood also responsible for readings like those described above. I have already argued that we make use of such data in the processes of gendering-and-sexualizing others, and my personal style is casual, familiar, almost 'studenty'. This perhaps attests to my 'junior' status in the research relationships in which I am engaged. It is well established in studies of gender and organizations that working women often feel compelled to manage their bodies in ways that detract from their physiological sex, to prove to others around them that they are capable of the masculine behaviours apparently required in the modern workplace—although they must at the same time not stray too far into the masculine domain lest they threaten the gender order (see, for example, Sheppard, 1989; McDowell and Court, 1994; Collinson and Collinson, 1997). But I seemingly do *not* dress or behave to emphasize my capabilities when I am at work. Certainly, my appearance has been the subject of comments from students throughout my career—at best I have been described as eccentric in my choice of dress, at worst as wearing inappropriate clothes (too informal/tight/revealing) for someone 'in my position'. The subconscious expectations of those who encounter me in my teaching are fairly obvious here, and similar beliefs may well be held by some of my fellow academics. However, I would freely admit that there is also a certain satisfaction in confounding such expectations—first, simply by virtue of being female and, second, by conducting myself in ways which are not especially 'businesslike'.

What I am suggesting here, in sum, is that my experiences of being categorized as a particular type of 'heterosexually active woman' may to some extent illuminate the norms and institutions around gender and sexuality (gender-and-sexuality) which are at work in Western academia, as a microcosm of wider Western society. I have attempted to locate the reactions of those who view me as an author with a particular kind of personal life in the heterosexual matrix, based on my being gendered-as-female and my collaborators as-male. I have also outlined what I see as the implications of these attributions of authorship. As Ellis and Bochner (2000: 749) suggest, personal narratives such as mine may 'help us understand how culture and politics are written on the body'. Indeed, it is possible to argue that those who do not conform to the cultural diktat of the mainstream—e.g. female academics—have an insider-outsider status which allows them better purchase on the ramifications of the dominant culture than those who are fully and unproblematically part of it. Stanley and Wise (1990: 33), following Riley (1987), have it thus:



Signing My Life Away?

Joanna Brewis

'usually . . . [women] are "ourselves", "just a person"; but then some sexist intrusion forces us back into a sense of ourselves as *Other*'.

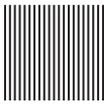
However, as Alvesson and Billing (1997: 12–17) and Silverman (2000: 207) point out, it is possible to overstate the importance of gender in academic analysis. So I could be accused of making too much of a minority of reactions to my work during the last decade. Nonetheless, I believe the arguments raised are still important in that these attributions of authorship are undeniably gendered, and therefore have consequences in terms of reproducing the gender order, as well as simultaneously evoking and reinforcing other powerful conventions around sexuality, status and so on.

I now move to consider the apparent effects of my research interests on assumptions made about my personal life—that is, to examine what it is that my *work* seems to 'signal' about me as a person—and the possible implications.

Sex and the Organizational Research Agenda

Coffey (1999: 83) argues that 'The relationship between the personal and the ethnographic is exaggerated in those settings where sex forms part of the explicit research agenda or context'. Here, she is speaking of data gathering and how researchers negotiate the moral, practical and personal features of working in such erotically charged situations. Nonetheless, given my argument that I (/we) cannot participate 'unmarked' by gender-and-sexuality² in either the field or the academy, I suggest that 'the relationship between the personal and the ethnographic' (or any other form of research) is also 'exaggerated' in the publication of academic work—especially where it deals with gender and/or sex. That is to say, because we rely so heavily on the inextricably linked 'codes' of gender-and-sexuality in our interactions in all aspects of social life, it is probably inevitable that a researcher who takes sex and organization as their main topic of study will be subjected to scrutiny regarding their 'own' gender-and-sexuality. I have, it could be argued, foregrounded these aspects of myself (my 'self') in the course of investigating what they mean for others. However weakly, I am therefore complicit in this process to the extent that I have identified gender-and-sexuality as important enough to qualify for interrogation.

Relatedly, as Coffey (1999: 85) argues, again with regard to gathering data in overtly sexual environments, 'Sexual reputation is a gendered concept, with gender-specific routes (sexual prowess versus sexual purity)'. Relatedly, a woman *presenting arguments* about sexual issues may be thought, perhaps especially by heterosexual men, to be inviting through her texts (the Derridian 'marks' that she leaves) aspersions about her personal concupiscence. Such an interpretation does seem to have been made in my case: indeed, it has been intimated that I do myself no favours in this regard. Male academics working on the same topic might, of course, find that their authorship is sexualized by others in a similar



Organization 12(4)

Articles

way; that they are understood as deploying their research to convey a fascination with sex and a desire for sexual attention. An analogous signing might be that the man or woman in question is not sexually satisfied in their existing relationship and therefore 'gets their kicks' from such research. However, it seems to me that, given the enduring double standard in this area (which in itself stems from the heterosexual matrix and the associated stereotype of sexually active man/sexually passive woman), women are more likely to attract derogatory sexual labels in this instance—author as promiscuous versus author as manly stud.

Nonetheless, men could also suffer from such constructions of their authorship in that they may be judged as indirectly boasting about their sexual talents if they write about sex, or even as attempting to understand or alleviate their inadequacies in this regard, using their academic work as a form of intellectual Viagra. Alternatively, one could speculate that male organization studies researchers in particular are less likely to have their authorial identity constructed by readers in negative ways when producing work on sex—because being gendered-as-male prompts an interpretation by others which allows their work to be taken seriously. In other words, the discursive association of sex with the private sphere, with the feminine (and therefore as irrelevant to organizations), may be much reduced in such an instance, and the work accepted as a genuine contribution to the field, given that the writer is coded as masculine and therefore as interested only in what it is 'proper' for organization studies academics to investigate. Then again, male organization studies researchers writing on this 'non-mainstream' topic, especially when collaborating with more junior colleagues, might equally be read as frivolous, marginal or wasting their time. As a result, such men may be associated, especially in masculinist organizational cultures, with the degraded sign of the feminine.

These many potential signings of sex research, and specifically of research dealing with sex and organization, evoke the aforementioned idea of the text as a crowded place. Just as readers interpret texts differently based on their own ways of being-in-the-world, so do they, I suggest, construct the authors of those texts in myriad ways on the same basis. Perhaps this 'biographizing' therefore says as much, if not more, about them as it does about the authors (Stanley, 1992). Further, it is worth reiterating Derrida's claim that the 'marks' which we as authors produce are 'cut off' from us and 'continue to produce effects beyond [our] presence and beyond the present actuality of [our] meaning'—so we have little control over the ways in which others sign our texts in terms of categorizing us as particular types of author.

That said, is it not also the case that academics' personal lives *actually* have a significant bearing on their choice of professional direction? Morgan (1998) certainly suggests that both the big events and the minutiae of our existence, the things which trouble and fascinate us in making our way in the world, exert an indelible influence over our



Signing My Life Away?

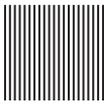
Joanna Brewis

scholarly activities. This claim suggests an additional way in which the academic's public and private lives merge, and of course it is far from new. As Silverman (2000: 200) points out, Max Weber insisted a century ago that our values inevitably encourage us to select and investigate research topics in certain ways, and to draw specific conclusions.³ Indeed, some feminist academics (e.g. Marshall, 1994: 114) have expressed concern that their biographies have influenced their research to such an extent that they are exploring issues which are *only* significant to them and perhaps a very small minority of others.

However, the lives of social scientists are often insufficiently documented for us to be aware of this process: organization studies in particular has largely ignored the biographies of those who contribute to the discipline, however illuminating these may be. In attempting to rectify this omission, Roper (2001: 184) claims that 'Theory production needs to be seen as an existential project; a form of self-assertion which . . . has an "emotional a priori"'. He presents an account of Lyndall Urwick's work during the late 1920s and early 1930s to suggest that a sensitivity to biography might highlight how a writer's origins inform their ideological stance, as well as speaking of their emotional or unconscious 'pre-dispositions and conflicts' (Roper, 2001: 185). For example, Roper contends that the struggle that Urwick faced to create time for his research in a life beset by competing loyalties—to his mother, his family and the International Management Institute in Geneva—may be reflected in a body of work which 'reached more than ever towards a vision of the organization in which personal demands were contained' (Roper, 2001: 193). Bologh (1990), similarly, suggests that Max Weber's thinking was influenced by his formative experiences—his tense relationship with his mother, his experience of a cold and formal college fraternity where male friendships were regarded as effeminate, his military training, his upper middle class background and its emphasis on duty and honour.

Here, then, both Roper and Bologh make a case for the connection between biography and theorizing, which can be developed to reflect on the reasons why I personally have chosen to research sex and organization. Perhaps it is due to being raised as a Catholic, with all the complexities that growing up in this religion implies for its female faithful, especially those of us who came to adulthood in the wake of the 'Second Wave' of feminism. Perhaps it is because I spent my first eighteen years in a village where teenage girls were by and large classified as either 'frigid' or 'loose', and had to negotiate their way through the resultant sexual minefield. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I have been a serial monogamist, producing a concomitant desire to explore other people's sexual experiences, whether they were similar to or different from my own.

However, Roper and Bologh also suggest that the connection between the researcher's private and public selves is always attenuated. Roper tells us that Urwick's letters to his mother in England suggest he longed



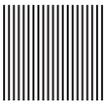
Organization 12(4)

Articles

for a close relationship with her *at the same time* as he sought to disavow it by constantly emphasizing that his public commitments came before his private life. These letters are long, chatty and contain many anecdotes about Urwick's children, as if to make his mother feel part of the family's life in Switzerland, but also to evoke her memories of him as a child and to reinforce their consanguine bond. As Roper (2001: 184) asserts, this warns us that theorizing is not simply a 'psychic reflex', that we cannot straightforwardly assign authorial identity based on what someone publishes. Relatedly, and whilst acknowledging that 'the outlook that informs his thinking develops in part as a response to those experiences . . .', Bologh also rejects the notion that Weber's ideas derive from his biography in 'some reductionist or determinist way' (1990: 31).

Likewise, and without wishing to deny that my work suggests something about me as an individual (regardless of whether what I have 'revealed' above about myself is the 'truth'), I would argue that my persona is open to varied interpretations in terms of how it affects my choice of research topic and is also always in flux. In other words, my work does not, if we follow Roper and Bologh's logic, offer an unproblematic indication that I engage in the aforementioned intimacies. The links between my life story and my research, whilst they indubitably exist, are not causal or easily drawn. One could just as well argue that my biography (at least insofar as I have constructed it above) would have *deterred* me from interrogating a subject that has been such a preoccupation, that I would seek a form of intellectual escape from something so personally sensitive. Alternatively, if I have indeed led such a life and it *has* prompted me to examine sex and organization, why does it necessarily follow that I would seek to further blur my professional and personal lives in the ways suggested by some of my colleagues—through intimate contact with co-authors and/or some form of participant observation? I am not suggesting here that these signings of my work are unfounded, that there is nothing in what I do which sends such signals. Instead what I am attempting to argue, following Stanley (1992), is that biographies of whatever kind, even when they are autobiographies, can only ever represent a partial representation of who and what the person is and does. All accounts of this kind leave out as much as they include and can only ever constitute a snapshot taken of that individual at a particular moment in time. Moreover, the conclusions we draw from someone's research about them as a person must always be deemed provisional, open, incomplete.

But regardless of what kind of person I am, and how that informs the work I do, might the investigation of sex nonetheless be enhanced by the researcher's active participation? Sex of whatever kind, even when it is commercial and impersonal, is still a particular and private experience, not easily available for public scrutiny. Thus, one could argue that, to understand its various forms in depth, one needs to have experienced them—especially since this may be, as researchers like

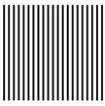


Signing My Life Away?

Joanna Brewis

Bolton (1995, cited in Coffey, 1999: 83–4) and Lunsing (1997, 1999) suggest, a means of permeating the boundaries between researcher ('self') and respondent ('other') in sex research. In other words, if such work is about understanding the sexual experiences of others, then there is some sort of rationale for participating in these others' activities so as to immerse oneself in their sexual realities (leaving aside the attendant ethical issues, which Bolton and Lunsing also discuss). It is true that the suggestion that *I* am involved with my informants has not been made—perhaps because only a relatively small proportion of my work has relied on primary data. But it *has* been insinuated that my collaborators and I are not merely intimate but also engage in or have experienced the kinds of sexual activities—for example, sadomasochism and sexual harassment—discussed in our research. So, if some of my fellow academics assume that (my co-authors and) I have engaged in sadomasochism, or been harassed, or whatever, maybe this is because my research focuses on exactly these topics: maybe it is a kind of backhanded intellectual compliment to the plausibility and depth of my work (!), a suggestion that I am genuinely qualified to make the claims that I do about sex and organization.

However, it seems to me that precisely the opposite reading is also possible. The construction of knowledge gathering as necessarily scientific and objective (and its opposite as unscientific, subjective and therefore flawed) is, I would contend, still at large—even amongst my own academic community, a group of organization studies researchers who share a commitment to interpretive forms of investigation. Constructing someone as the kind of author who has intimate contact with their collaborators (or respondents) may therefore also construct their work as less valuable. In other words, perhaps it represents a subtle critique of bias, implying that the author in question is not to be trusted because they are insufficiently detached from the topic they are examining. Relatedly, and in the field of organization studies in particular, the sexualization of others-as-authors appears to point to a certain discomfort with the idea that sex is a viable topic for research at all. Although there have been a number of very valuable contributions to this area in the last twenty years or so, the flow of which continues, I would suggest that sex is still not necessarily widely accepted as an appropriate subject for those interested in the supposedly 'rational' and 'asexual' world of organizations. Perhaps the discipline still has some way to go before those of us writing in this area are no more subject to speculation about our proclivities than organization studies researchers studying any other topic. Rumours about sexual involvements are of course part of human life, and may be more or less harmful depending on the context. Nonetheless, it seems to me that one way of defusing what might be seen as subversive work on sex and organization is to render its authors discursively 'manageable' by sexualizing them—thereby consigning them to the ranks

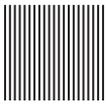


of those unhealthily preoccupied with sex, not to be taken seriously, dismissible.

Moreover, the claim that sexual intimacy with respondents or collaborators produces better truths about sex is in any case a contentious one. Indeed, whether the researcher participates as an academic ‘sex tourist’—engaging in activities which in the normal run of things they would not usually contemplate or experience—or as a ‘regular’—bringing together their private sexual predilections and public academic life, as Bolton and Lunsing did—for me they would still be telling *their own stories*. That is to say, the resultant analysis would still be produced through and irrevocably informed by *that researcher’s* subjective viewpoint. This is not to suggest there is no possibility whatsoever of understanding how others think, feel and behave. As social beings through and through, and with the measure of intersubjectivity this generates, the recognition of ourselves in other people and the common experiences we share, we are able to grasp some part of what life is like for others—in research as in the everyday. What I am instead casting doubt on is the privileging of ‘immersed’ methods such as sexual participant observation: the argument that we can thereby *transcend* self-other boundaries in research appears to underestimate the ways in which we always interpret what we experience through our own subjective lenses. Indeed, these arguments, for me as for many other commentators, apply to *all* research. Researchers are not merely conduits for others’ viewpoints and experiences—we cannot somehow ‘leave ourselves behind’ when gathering or interpreting empirical data—and our consciousness of the world around us is in the final analysis the only research medium that we have available. The understandings of the social that we arrive at are ‘necessarily temporally, intellectually, politically and emotionally grounded and are thus as contextually specific as those of the researched’ (Stanley and Wise, 1990: 23). Just as our own stories inform the research we choose to do, then, so are they built into the analysis that we produce—as indeed I have already argued with reference to Gummesson, amongst others.

Signing Out

This paper is not intended to dispel the assumption that there is more to my research than meets the eye. Indeed, I have deliberately (albeit perhaps unsuccessfully) avoided providing answers to the question of who I ‘really’ am as an author in an attempt to throw into relief some of the issues associated with the ways we seek to pin each other down to static and immutable identities. But I also realize that I cannot sidestep such efforts to classify me, to read the signs that my being-in-the-world provides—and these semiotic games lead to all sorts of attributions. Perhaps I would not have written this paper in the first place had I been read, both literally and metaphorically, in different ways. Indeed, there is an interesting tension here in the sense that I fully acknowledge the



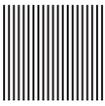
Signing My Life Away?

Joanna Brewis

intersections between my private and public lives, in my relationships with my co-authors and the topics I choose to examine, just as in other ways, yet have chosen to critically unpack one aspect of this blurring as I have experienced it. In that sense, I am equally subject to the various assumptions that I have outlined throughout this discussion, such that I could be read as protesting (perhaps too much?) against them as they have been applied to me.

Nonetheless, and to reiterate, arguments of the type presented here are still for the most part lacking in organization studies. The fragility of the public/private divide, a much discussed topic in organizational research on work-life balance, parenthood, stress and so on, bears a good deal more analysis as it relates to *academic* lives. More specifically, what I am suggesting here is that, as a member of the academy, I have found it impossible to go 'unmarked' when publishing research, presenting papers, attending professional events or being read or talked about in other contexts. Indeed, the powerful character of the discourses of gender and sexuality (gender-and-sexuality) has resulted in me being assigned a sexualized form of authorship by some of my audience. My being gendered-as-female is apparently closely followed by a reading which, noting that I tend to write with men, concludes that my relationships with these men go beyond the 'professional.' Moreover, I contend that this may serve a ratification function in the sense that it seeks to rectify any damage done to the Western gender binary of dominant masculine/subordinate feminine by my participation in the public arena of the academy. This gendering-and-sexualizing process not only reproduces the gender order, but it also speaks of and reinforces associated beliefs around sexuality.

Further, what *does* our choice of subject matter say about us as individuals? In my case, by choosing to research sex and organization at all, I have arguably thrust these aspects of myself into the limelight, and I am therefore complicit in the aforementioned signings because I see sex as warranting academic exegesis. Moreover, whilst I would caution against reading too much into the connection between biography and choice of research direction, not least because our life histories can be read in different ways and are never comprehensive or static, it would be utterly disingenuous to deny any such link. There also seem to be important issues here in terms of the methodology of sex research: is my research on sex and organization considered more credible because I am assumed to be personally involved with specific others or, conversely, does this reading actually imply some form of bias on my part? Finally, given what is apparently a residual unease with the entry of sex into the organization studies canon, I suggest that some of my fellow members of the academy have, albeit unconsciously, perhaps sought to ward off the psychic threat that work of this nature presents by painting me into a very specific, and somewhat dark, corner.



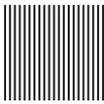
In conclusion, and to underline the need for us to turn the academic lens back on ourselves from time to time, I would like to extend Markowitz's (1999: 174, *n*9) call for 'an overt recognition that gender categories and sexuality have an impact not only on social relations between individuals in the societies being studied but also between the researcher and the researched'. My discussion here suggests the same recognition is due in terms of the way that 'gender categories and sexuality' impact on the judgements which we academics make of each other, and of each other's work. These, I suggest, represent a specific and important aspect of the permeability of the public/private divide in academia.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to those who commented on an earlier version of this paper, presented to the *Rethinking Gender, Work and Organization* conference at Keele University, June 2001, especially Christina Hughes. Wim Lunsing, Martin Parker and Edward Wray-Bliss who kindly reviewed various drafts and made very helpful suggestions. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous *Organization* reviewers, whose constructive criticism has enabled me to reconsider and improve my argument.

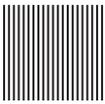
Notes

- 1 Other apparent instances of ratification work in academia include a doctoral student's story of how she was effectively ignored by a senior male academic to whom her supervisor had introduced her at a conference. This individual seemed to think she was the girlfriend of her supervisor's son, who was only present as his father's guest (quoted in Brewis, 2001: 297). The data here—a woman, accompanied by two men—were read by the senior academic as signifying that my respondent was in a relationship with the younger man, rather than being at the conference on her own merits. A more extreme case is described by Katila and Merläinen (2002). They recount having their work volubly criticized in a bar by a male colleague, an evening which ended with him making an offensive sexual remark to Katila. The authors suggest that this represents 'an attempt to secure the dominant role by emphasizing the sexuality of the female colleague who is not behaving according to the "correct" gender role' (p. 346).
- 2 Or indeed ethnicity, age, class . . . —the list is a lengthy one.
- 3 Weber, however, also asserted that individual greatness in public life, which he saw as central to the political position of the nation state, is only achievable if the person in question distances themselves from their 'body, from personal longings, personal possessions and personal relationships . . . in order to serve some impersonal cause—a masculine, ascetic image' (Bologh, 1990: 17). Rationality, restraint and a strict separation of personal and professional are the watchwords here, in direct contrast to his claim that one's research is always and already imbued with one's persona.



References

- Alvesson, M. and Billing, Y. D. (1997) *Understanding Gender and Organizations*. London: Sage.
- Back, L. (2002) 'Soapbox: The Shape of the Author', *BSA Network* October: 32.
- Bologh, R. W. (1990) *Love or Greatness: Max Weber and Masculine Thinking—A Feminist Inquiry*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Bolton, R. (1995) 'Tricks, Friends and Lovers: Erotic Encounters in the Field', in D. Kulick and M. Willson (eds) *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, pp. 140–67. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brewis, J. (2001) 'Telling It Like It Is? Gender, Language and Organizational Theory', in R. Westwood and S. Linstead (eds) *The Language of Organization*, pp. 283–309. London: Sage.
- Butler, J. P. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Coffey, A. (1999) *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: Sage.
- Collinson, D. and Collinson, M. (1997) "'Delaying Managers": Time-Space Surveillance and its Gendered Effects', *Organization* 4(3): 375–407.
- Collinson, D. and Hearn, J. (1994) 'Naming Men as Men: Implications for Work, Organization and Management', *Gender, Work and Organization* 1(1): 2–21.
- Derrida, J. (1991) 'Signature Event Context', in P. Kamuf (ed.) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, pp. 82–112. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dworkin, A. (1981) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. London: The Women's Press.
- Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. P. (2000) 'Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, pp. 733–68. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Foucault, M. (1979) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. London: Allen Lane.
- Foucault, M. (1986) 'What is an Author?', in P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 101–20. London: Penguin.
- Gherardi, S. (1994) 'The Gender We Think, The Gender We Do In Our Everyday Organizational Lives', *Human Relations* 47(6): 591–610.
- Gherardi, S. (1995) *Gender, Symbolism and Organizational Cultures*. London: Sage.
- Gummesson, E. (2000) *Qualitative Methods in Management Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983) *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hughes, C. (2002) *Women's Contemporary Lives: Within and Beyond the Mirror*. London: Routledge.
- Katila, S. and Meriläinen, S. (2002) 'Metamorphosis: From "Nice Girls" to "Nice Bitches": Resisting Patriarchal Articulations of Professional Identity', *Gender, Work and Organization* 9(3): 336–54.
- Kelly, L., Burton, S. and Regan, L. (1994) 'Researching Women's Lives or Studying Women's Oppression? Reflections on What Constitutes Feminist Research', in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, pp. 27–48. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Knights, D. and Richards, W. (2003) 'Sex Discrimination in UK Academia', *Gender, Work and Organization* 10(2): 213–38.
- Lunsing, W. (1997) 'Are We All Prostitutes? Taking Sex in Fieldwork Seriously', paper presented at the First International Conference of the International



Organization 12(4)

Articles

- Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (July–August), Amsterdam.
- Lunsing, W. (1999) 'Life on Mars: Love and Sex in Fieldwork on Sexuality and Gender in Urban Japan', in F. Markowitz and M. Ashkenazi (eds) *Sex, Sexuality, and the Anthropologist*, pp. 175–96. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- McDowell, L. and Court, G. (1994) 'Performing Work: Bodily Representations in Merchant Banks', *Environment Planning D: Society and Space* 12: 727–50.
- Markowitz, F. (1999) 'Sexing the Anthropologist: Implications for Ethnography', in F. Markowitz and M. Ashkenazi (eds) *Sex, Sexuality, and the Anthropologist*, pp. 161–74. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Marshall, A. (1994) 'Sensuous Sapphires: A Study of the Social Construction of Black Female Sexuality', in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, pp. 106–24. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Moreno, E. (1995) 'Rape in the Field: Reflections from a Survivor', in D. Kulick and M. Willson (eds) *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, pp. 219–50. London and New York: Routledge.
- Morgan, D. (1998) 'Sociological Imaginings and Imagining Sociology: Bodies, Auto/biographies and other Mysteries', *Sociology* 32(4): 647–63.
- Ramazanoglu, C. and Holland, J. (1994) 'Coming to Conclusions: Power and Interpretation in Researching Young Women's Sexuality', in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, pp. 125–48. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Riley, D. (1987) *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*. London: Macmillan.
- Roper, M. (2001) 'Masculinity and the Biographical Meanings of Management Theory: Lyndall Urwick and the Making of Scientific Management in Inter-War Britain', *Gender, Work and Organization* 8(2): 182–204.
- Sheppard, D. L. (1989) 'Organizations, Power and Sexuality: The Image and Self-Image of Women Managers', in J. Hearn, D. L. Sheppard, P. Tancred-Sheriff and G. Burrell (eds) *The Sexuality of Organization*, pp. 139–57. London: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.
- Stanley, L. (1992) *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1990) 'Method, Methodology and Epistemology in Feminist Research Processes', in L. Stanley (ed.) *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*, pp. 20–60. London and New York: Routledge.
- Warren, C. A. B. (1988) *Gender Issues in Field Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Joanna Brewis is a Reader in Management at the University of Leicester, UK. She has previously worked at UMIST and the Universities of Portsmouth and Essex. Joanna's research interests centre on the intersections between gender, sexuality, the body, identity and processes of organizing. She has published in journals including *Human Relations*, *Gender, Work and Organization* and *Sociology*. She is also the co-author, with Stephen Linstead, of *Sex, Work and Sex Work: Eroticizing Organization* (Routledge, 2000). **Address:** Management Centre, Ken Edwards Building, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, UK. [email: j.brewis@le.ac.uk]