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Decolonising management knowledge: a reflexive journey as practitioner and researcher in Uganda (Emanuela Girei, forthcoming in Management Learning)

Introduction

In recent years the field of management and organisation studies (MOS) has come under scrutiny for its strikingly Westocentric (especially Anglo-American) aura (Jack et al., 2011; Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Prasad, 2003). Research in diiferent intellectual streams including post-colonial theory (PCT), critical development studies (CDS) and critical management studies (CMS) finds that management knowledge has been predominantly produced in and for North America and the United Kingdom. This approach is said to ignore, silence and/or degrade the lived realities, practices and thoughts of workers and organisations from the rest of the world (Prasad, 2003; Dar and Cooke, 2008; Fougère and Moulettes, 2011; Currie, 2007; Banerjee and Linstead, 2004). Some scholars argue that MOS is predominantly ahistorical and decontextualised (Prasad, 2009; Jack and Westwood, 2006). Organisations, workers and practices are removed from their contexts to an abstract setting, bereft of wider cultural and social fabric. This obfuscates the predominantly Western focus of management knowledge, which is instead accorded a universal value. Other scholars have highlighted the limits and epistemic violence of Western knowledge systems in approaching organisations located outside the West (Kwek, 2003), which are usually known and analysed through a comparative lens, illuminating how they differ/resemble the Western model. Finally, moving towards the macro level, other scholars suggest that knowledge about organisations from the South embeds and embodies global power asymmetries, thus contributing to their perpetuation (Cooke and Dar, 2008). The field of development management is enlightening here, offering many exemplary cases of the reproduction of neo-colonial relations under the guise of technical assistance and capacity development.

These vivid debates, sparked by issues of neo/post-colonialism, imperialism and management knowledge, have taken a predominantly theoretical orientation, somehow neglecting empirical work and research practice. This article engages with this neglect, specifically addressing issues related to the distinctiveness of researching organisations outside the West. More precisely, based on my empirical work in Uganda as organisation development (OD) advisor and researcher, it illustrates and considers how I addressed the challenges I

faced, with the aim of reflecting on research strategies and approaches which might support the process of decolonising management knowledge. In particular, it recounts my journey in search of an ethically and scientifically sound methodology for studying organisations outside the West, offering three important contributions.

Firstly, the paper provides an empirically grounded example of the possibility of taking into account sensitivities coming from the PCT, CMS and CDS intellectual streams, usually known and sometimes criticised for their alleged distance from everyday practice. In this sense, it answers recent calls for a stronger engagement of critical scholarship in practical action (Murphy et al., 2013). Secondly, my research attempts to render the work of an interpretivism-oriented qualitative researcher as visible and transparent as possible, illuminating the relations between epistemology and methods, and between methods and metatheory (Westwood and Jack, 2007). In addition, this paper focuses predominantly on the challenges I faced during my work and how I attempted to address them, not only because the dilemmas I experienced far exceeded the accomplishments, but also to expose the messiness and discomfort inherent in engaged and activist research. Thirdly, the geographical focus of the study, Uganda, counterbalances the predominantly Western focus of MOS, making a small attempt to rectify the neglect of Africa within management studies.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section focuses on the intertwining of power and knowledge within MOS, especially by exposing some continuities between colonial anthropology and current management knowledge. The second section highlights some key principles shaping my methodological approach, aiming to address the main critiques articulated in the first section. The third illustrates some of the dilemmas and challenges I encountered in my empirical work and how I addressed them. The paper concludes with a summary and—notwithstanding the risk of simplistic prescriptions—six key suggestions for decolonising management research.

Power/knowledge in Africanism

The Westocentric character of management knowledge can be better understood by considering the wider asymmetries dominating knowledge production in general and academic scholarship more specifically. If we look at Africa, such asymmetries are conspicuous and can be viewed from three distinct yet intertwined angles. Firstly, academic knowledge about Africa,

whatever the field, is produced mainly by institutions and scholars outside the continent (Mama, 2007). Secondly, there are disciplines from which Africa is virtually absent, including management (Murphy and Zhu, 2012). Significantly, even the sub-field of cross-cultural management seems to ignore the entire continent (Fougère and Moulettes, 2011) and on the rare occasions when Africa is mentioned it is often with embarrassing superficiality (Nkomo, 2011). Thirdly and most importantly for the scope of this research, Africa's histories, citizens and identities have been historically misrepresented. Particularly illuminating on this and more generally on the relationship between power and knowledge are *Orientalism* (Said, 2003) and Mudimbe's (1988) work on the 'invention' of Africa.

Said and Mudimbe both build on Foucault's suggestion that truth, rather than being an intrinsic property of certain ideas and notions, depends on and is determined by the exercise of power. More precisely, power and knowledge are mutually constitutive and together shape the 'regime of truth' of a certain historical period and/or society, thus sanctioning which discourses are true, who has the authority to speak them and what truth's validation criteria are (Foucault, 2009).

Against this backdrop, Said's and Mudimbe's works reveal how knowledge about the 'Other' served to justify and legitimise Western expansion and domination. For instance, analysing the "colonial library" (Mudimbe, 1988: 175), namely the degrading representation of Africans in anthropologists', missionaries' and explorers' texts, which systematically and instrumentally portrayed them as incapable of governing their own lives, Mudimbe (Mudimbe, 1988: 20) argues that it provided the ideological explanation and legitimisation for forcing Africans into colonialism. Such distortions are peculiar neither to anthropology nor to the past, being found also in contemporary management knowledge. To illustrate this, I shall focus on two concepts, 'alterity' and 'evolution/progress', which beside being at the core of colonial anthropology are also of relevance in contemporary MOS. As we shall see, both notions remind us that when researching about Africa, whatever the specific field, a key methodological quandary concerns "the legitimacy of Africa as a unit of analysis" (Mamdani, 2004: 8).

Alterity, Otherness and Africanness

Central to the anthropological discourse of the nineteenth century (and beyond) is a starkly dichotomised thinking, i.e. a system of binary opposition that simultaneously defines both East and West, and polarises the divide between the Oriental and the Westerner (Said, 2003: 46).

Binary thinking goes beyond the individual level, as it is also largely applied to Oriental and Western societies in general, described using dichotomies such as traditional/modern, agrarian/industrial, and rural/urban (Mudimbe, 1988: 4). Such dichotomies are constructed according to a Manichaean principle, where one pole represents the essentially good (the superior West) and the other the essentially evil (the inferior Other). It is worth noting that while Western anthropological discourses were founded on the notion of alterity, management studies on the contrary seems to ignore it: management knowledge is firmly rooted in "westocentric assumptions" (Prasad, 2009), having been predominantly produced in North America and Britain, and it has hardly ever had non-Western organisations as its objects of study (Cooke, 2004; Jaya, 2001; Gantman and Parker, 2006). As Prasad (2003: 32) notes, if a non-Western organisation does not deploy practices and/or policies considered 'normal' in the West, it is considered deficient, lacking and in need of training, modernisation or innovation. Similarly, if a non-Western organisation makes use of practices or policies unknown in the West, they are considered traditional or ethnic and again usually in need of innovation.

On closer examination, however, the divergence between anthropology and management studies is perhaps less substantial than it might appear, as the silence of conventional management studies on issues relating to alterity conceals and yet exposes the underlying assumption regarding the superiority and universality of the Western standard. In this sense, management can also be seen as an Occidentalist discourse. Drawing on Frenkel and Shenhav (2003), I refer here to how management knowledge seems to be constructed by ignoring the Other yet embracing universalism and objectivity. If the Orientalist stance in MOS serves to stress the differences between Africa and the West, the Occidentalist attributes to management knowledge a universal validity. This clearly emerges in the field of development management, where mainstream management knowledge is accorded universal validity, applicable not only to African organisations but even to entire countries (Cooke, 2004).

The continued deployment of Western epistemologies and perspectives, besides perpetuating (cultural) dependence and global asymmetry, has significantly hampered the production of knowledge engaged with and responsive to local realities (Mamdani, 1993). This critique resonates with issues raised in the introduction regarding the ahistorical and decontextualised nature of management and its universalist pretensions. Lamentably, these also apply to studies concerned with the transferability of management thinking and practices to Africa (on OD, see for instance, Johnson and Golembiewski, 1992; Golembiewski, 1991). The

main problematic aspect of these studies, in my view, is that while claiming to question Western management, they continue to use it as an authoritative lens through which to view organisations around the world. For instance, with regard to OD in Africa, some studies (see for instance James, 2004; Lewis, 2002), acknowledging OD's North American origin, seem driven by questions such as whether OD can work in African organisations or whether it fits within African culture, thus using OD, a Western artefact, as the analytical lens through which to investigate Africa. Furthermore, cross-cultural management studies often rely heavily on Hofstede's work (see Golembiewski, 1991; Lewis, 2002; Blunt and Jones, 1997), overlooking its fundamentally Westocentric perspective, which emerges from its binary nature (Fougère and Moulettes, 2011) and from its underlying representationalist logic, which by imposing given categories and dimensions on the realities being studied perpetuates the construction of the Other through the Western gaze (Kwek, 2003).

The civilising mission

The second concept that reveals the continuities between colonial anthropology and MOS relates to what can be called the 'civilising mission'.

Early anthropology embraced the colonial civilising mission as it emerged from diverse nineteenth-century Africanist anthropological texts, which shared a core interest in the evolution from 'primitive' to 'civilised' and/or from 'paganism' to Christianity (Mudimbe, 1988). In Africa, evolutionist ideas of progress not only justified colonialism but have also had a crucial impact on the post-colonial era, informing both the dominant modernisation approach (Ake, 1996; Chambua, 1994) and those perspectives countering it, such as dependency and world system theories, which failed to propose an idea of history and development transcending the European myth of modernity (Lushaba, 2009). While such debates lie beyond the scope of this article, I wish to emphasise the persistence of an evolutionist approach to Africa which fails to consider Africa as a unit of analysis. Mamdani calls this "history by analogy", according to which in the binary oppositions commonly used in Africanist texts (e.g. traditional/modern), the pole denoting the West (modern) is considered both an analytical concept and a universal value, while the other (traditional) is residual and makes sense only with reference to the former (2004: 9-11). In other words, knowledge about Africa has no independent conceptual existence.

Such a 'civilising' stance is certainly not absent from management scholarship. It has in particular been argued that general management, as conceptualised in the West, can be recast

as a civilising mission embodying the cult of modernity, in which social and economic progress is virtually equated with the ability to control, predict and master the world around us, including human beings themselves (Parker, 2002: 1-16). A prominent management guru expresses such a civilising mission very appropriately:

> Management will remain a basic and dominant institution perhaps as long as Western civilization itself survives. (…) It expresses the belief in the possibility of controlling man's livelihood (…) the belief that economic change can be made into the most powerful engine for human betterment and social justice (…). This belief that the material can and should be used to advance the human spirit (…) is something new, distinctly modern, distinctly Western. (…) Prior to, and outside of, the modern West, resources have always been considered a limit to man's activity (…) rather than an opportunity and tool of his control over nature (…) And whether the formerly colonial and raw-material producing countries will succeed in developing their economies as free nations or will go Communist, depends to a larger extent on their ability to produce competent and responsible managers in a hurry (Drucker, 2007: 3-5).

A significant body of research has shown that countries receiving support from international and multilateral institutions, usually located in non-Western and/or Southern contexts, have increasingly been asked to adopt management models and approaches largely derived from Western 'new public management' and result-based management approaches (Kerr, 2008). A look at how management has been understood in the policies dominating the post-colonial era in Africa, such as those of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, reveals that management has had a distinctive role as a "modernizing change agent" (Cooke, 2004: 625), while issues such as development, management and governance have become closely intertwined. More precisely, the dominant discourse on development in Africa has increasingly overlapped with that on good governance, the latter also imbued with supposedly universal and neutral management prescriptions. However, some scholars have challenged claims regarding the universality or neutrality of the management and governance policies exported to developing countries, exposing their neo-colonial character as well as their alignment and alliance with the dominant neo-liberal culture (Shivji, 2009). Following such research, it could be suggested that development management is effectively used to continue the civilising mission, being employed to trace the path of African governments and societies, aligning them towards Western standards and interests.

Drawing on this background of management knowledge, power and (neo)colonialism, the following section focuses on empirical work and research practice, illustrating my journey in search of ethically, politically and scientifically sound management knowledge.

Bridging Theoretical Knowledge and Research Practice

The research/practice on which this article draws is my work as management and organisation development advisor with three Ugandan NGOs, Alfa, Matata and Gamma. Despite their diversity, they shared five important features: firstly, the executive director of each was also the founder, having played a crucial role in setting up and shaping the organisation. Secondly, they each had 3 or 4 members of staff and could count on additional staff/volunteers when needed. Thirdly, they were based in small towns far from the capital, with their work implemented mainly in rural areas. Fourthly, the communities they worked with mainly comprised farmers, although they often had relations with administrative public units, schools and churches. Finally, they were entirely dependent on donor funding.

In all three cases, the NGOs asked for a management/organisational development advisor and I was introduced to them by one of their donors. However, while my work with Alfa was entirely voluntary (I received no financial compensation), Matata and Gamma each paid me a local salary themselves. The empirical material presented in this article focuses especially on Matata and Gamma, although the overall reflections draw on my experience of all three NGOs.

As an organisational psychologist with more than ten years' experience in similar roles in Europe, these assignments in Uganda evoked a number of questions: If the nature of management knowledge is fundamentally Westocentric, how can I transcend it? What would this process entail? The following pages illustrate my reflections and actions around these questions. After briefly addressing key issues and principles shaping my attempt to free the research approach from Westocentric dimensions, I delve into my research practice to illustrate the challenges I faced and how I addressed them.

Research as disengagement from the colonial syndrome

My attempt to free the research approach from Westocentric dimensions can be understood as a "process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome", an expression that Loomba (Loomba, 1998: 21) deploys with reference to a process which addresses the legacy of

colonialism and decolonisation in both the coloniser and colonised, in the metropolis and in the colony. In the context of my research, my process of disengagement from the colonial syndrome implied nurturing three intertwined lines of thought, regarding i) the overarching research approach, ii) the analytical focuses employed and iii) issues of identities and positionalities. I address each of these in turn below, explaining how they have shaped my epistemological and ethical stances.

Overarching research approach.

While the overall research was inspired by critical action research (AR) (Jennings and Graham, 2003) and critical ethnography (Foley, 2002), a first key principle that shaped the methodology in my effort to disengage from the colonial syndrome was the adoption of a broad, open-ended stance, aimed at freeing the research and the OD processes from rigid design or methods so to minimise the risk of imposing comparative categories and of constraining thinking and actions. I therefore interpreted AR and OD loosely, valuing negotiation of meaning and practice over adherence to a specific design. In this regard, my approach and methodology were deeply shaped by my commitment to participation as a means to foster dialogic spaces for reflexive practice (Cunliffe, 2002) and enable shared and symmetrical opportunities for learning and acting. In this regard, participation was a key resource for decolonising my approach, inasmuch as it provided repeated opportunities for adjusting my lenses and practice throughout my research. As explained in the following discussions, in my research/practice in Uganda I thus sought to make sense of my colleagues' understandings of OD and management, which meant actively engaging with them. I interpret participation also as a political stance, asserting the right of people to shape the knowledge about them and their organisations or communities (Reson and Bradbury, 2001: 2), a proposition which, in the context of my research, assumes an even higher value and urgency if we consider the historically rooted marginalisation of African voices discussed previously.

Finally, it should be noted that despite the heterogeneity of approaches, OD places high value on participation as both a means and an end, in the sense that OD should not only unfold through participatory thinking and decision-making, but also aim to enhance an organisation's ability to work participatively and democratically. In this sense, in my understanding of participation lies an emancipatory intent, since it opens spaces of autonomy for critical

redefinitions of everyday practices and opportunities for transformative redefinition (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

Yet participatory methodologies are not unproblematic and several researchers have exposed their contradictions and unintended consequences (Hickey and Mohan, 2005; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Rahnema, 1990). Among these, those referring to the "cooptation critique" (Cooke, 2006) are particularly relevant to this research, as they show how participatory approaches can have manipulative intent and consequences, serving to obscure and sustain existing power relations, especially when associated with consensus-building intent and/or strategies. For instance, certain events during my work in Uganda highlighted the limits of my understanding of participation and tested my commitment to it, especially faced with substantially different understandings of OD and management. Similarly, it has been noted that the ostensible egalitarian stance of AR practitioners/researchers has often obscured the asymmetry of power relations between them and the other people involved (Arieli et al., 2009; Busza, 2004) as well as within the communities themselves (Cleaver, 2001; Mohan and Stokke, 2000). These critiques resonate well with my own experience and I shall return to them.

Analytical focus

In my attempt to disengage from the colonial syndrome and to reject the comparative and evolutionary lens that has characterised research in and about Africa, I have oriented my research towards a "radical contextuality" (Escobar, 2008), i.e. a continuous attention to both the historical and the emergent dimensions of the context I was involved in. I found it crucial to place my research in its political, economic and historical contexts, considering NGOs and their perspectives on management and OD as socio-historical constructions that can be best comprehended in that context. 'Radical contextuality' meant considering two levels: the micro/ meso (the NGOs I worked with) and the macro (the broader historical, economic and social contexts). Following Alvesson and Deetz (2000), it could be argued that what happens within an organisation tells us not only about that specific organization, but also about the broader socio-political system in which it operates (2000: 18). For instance, when trying to understand why these NGOs had asked for an OD advisor, it was paramount for me to engage with their understandings of OD, management, good practices and so on. However, it was equally important to understand how historically, expertise and knowledge have been constructed in the

international development sector (Parpart, 1995; Kothari, 2005; Escobar, 1997) and to place such understandings in the context of the managerialisation of the whole sector (Girei, 2016).

Identities and positionalities

Building on Foucault's and Mudimbe's insights discussed above, decolonising my approach has meant rejecting ideals of "suprapolitical objectivity" (Said, 2003: 10) and acknowledging that our identities (constructed, multiple and shifting) and positionalities play a role in the process of knowledge production, making it crucial to reflect critically on them.

Reflecting on issues of identities and positionalities meant I needed to turn the investigative gaze on myself. Self-reflexive practice entailed in particular a critical analysis of the assumptions, values and interests underpinning and guiding my actions and thinking, implying not only self-awareness about them, but also a readiness to question them (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 112-113) and to nurture the unsettling consequences, for it highlights the contradictions, messiness and complexity of the research process (Cunliffe, 2002). While I did not seek a neutral perspective, disengaged and detached from my own subjectivity, self-reflexive practice embodied my commitment to minimising the manipulative intents and effects of any given lens (see for instance Wray-Bliss, 2003) and to strengthen opportunities for a genuine engagement with the diversity of voices and perspectives that I encountered. In this sense, self-reflexive practice provided crucial support for my project of disengagement from the colonial syndrome, in that it continuously invited me to problematise my own understanding and value "arresting moments" (Greig et al., 2013), which has led me to investigate critically what I took for granted and why, what I consider relevant and why, and what I dismiss and why.

In addition, self-reflexive practice has entailed a continuous attentiveness to my identities, to those of the people I encountered (as I perceived them), to what we disclosed about ourselves and how, to how we positioned each other and to how all these factors are intertwined in the process of knowing. Among the various threads of thought regarding these issues, those related to my whiteness and Westernness have occupied a central role; existing critiques of the construction of expertise in development (Parpart, 1995; Kothari, 2005) obliged me to consider my Westernness and whiteness as relevant to endorsing/performing my role as OD advisor. Furthermore, I certainly cannot eschew critically reflecting on my position, being committed to critiques of the 'Western gaze on the Other' while being a white Western woman studying Ugandan organisations. Debates on African identity and its role in knowledge

production processes continue to be crucially relevant among African social scientists (see for instance Anyidoho, 2008; Mkandawire, 1999; Zeleza, 2005; Ochwada, 2003; Mama, 2001; Adesina, 2008; Mbembe, 2001; Nyamnjoh, 2004). These debates have contributed to an understanding of (African) identity as "multiple, fluid, historically and institutionally constructed along various dimensions of difference" (Mama, 2007: 15), while emphasising the relevance (or necessity) of endogenous and independent African knowledge. These scholars also make it clear that to subvert the Westocentric aura of knowledge about Africa, it is essential to tackle the long-standing marginalisation of African scholarship. For my part, disengaging from the colonial syndrome has implied a critical engagement with African scholarship and I understood this engagement as a bridge, acknowledging differences (of histories, backgrounds and positions) while nurturing academic and political alliances, as elucidated by the idea of "imagined communities" (Mohanty, 2002: 196):

> The idea of imagined communities leads us away from essentialist notions […] suggesting political rather than biological and cultural bases for alliance. Thus, it is not color or sex which constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender – the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. […] However, clearly our relation to and centrality in particular struggles depend on our different, often conflictual, locations and histories.

In these terms, the struggle against the dominance of Westocentric epistemologies and research practices in African studies can be understood as the basis for an alliance among diverse persons and communities, in which the different contributions, their relevance and centrality are also shaped by the identities, locations and positions of the allies. Furthermore, the notion of alliance invites us to think beyond difference, to find common ground and intersections. While reflecting on how differences shape knowledge generation, I have therefore acknowledged that Africa and the West are much more intermingled and internally diversified than assumed by Orientalism and the original formulation of Africanness (Zeleza, 2005; Appiah, 2007). As Quayson suggests, African and Western ways of knowing are both tainted by their encounter and neither of them can claim to be completely pure (Quayson, 1997). My attempt to disengage from the colonial syndrome was thus not a search for a pure indigenous knowledge, but rather for perspectives and practices which help generate knowledge that makes sense of the research in that context and for the persons concerned.

Lived Realities: Between Negotiation and Contention

The following sections explore how the above conceptual framework helped to shape my approach and methodology, and how the open-ended overall approach, the radical contextuality and self-reflexive practice were negotiated and moulded during the research process.

Competing understandings of OD

While all of my research and practice in Uganda was shaped by my commitment to participation and emergent, constructed and local understandings, it was not always easy to live up to this commitment. An example is the negotiation with Matata over the meanings of the OD process. In my first meeting with the director, she explained: "I want you to change our face […] We talk, we carry out the theory but in practice there is nothing, we don't have written documentation to market the organisation".

The director's main understanding (and expectation) of OD had to do with developing corporate documents, such as strategic plans, annual reports and policies. Placing this view of OD in a meso/macro context revealed that her expectations were driven mainly by the need to meet requirements and demands emanating from donors, from the government and from elsewhere in the NGO sector. More precisely, corporate documentation was needed to bid for funds, because when allocating them, donors assessed an NGO's capacity by examining its policies, procedures and annual reports as well as its financial audit reports. Corporate documentation was also required for the legal registration of the NGO and for participation in the self-regulating NGO Quality Assurance Certification Mechanism, promoted by the Ugandan NGO forum.

However, this expectation was problematic for me, especially because I saw my role more as enabling a building process than dispensing technical solutions. Working on my own to produce corporate documentation, on the basis of a need identified solely by the director was, in other words, substantially different from how I had envisaged my role, and more generally from how I had habitually made sense of my work. This led me to start questioning my assumptions and commitments: To what extent was I willing to free my approach from predefined dimensions? To what extent was I willing to negotiate my role according to the director's expectations?

I thus became more sharply aware of the potential conflicts within my assumptions: was a commitment to free my approach from predefined dimensions constrained by my normative

stance? Could I choose to focus on providing readymade solutions, rather than enhancing the organisation's ability to identify and address its own problems? Did my normative stance encroach on Matata's right to determine its own needs and aspirations with regard to OD? The conflict between my understanding of OD and that of Matata's director highlighted the difficulties of balancing Matata's right of self-determination with my right to live up to my professional, ethical and political principles. Dealing with these questions helped me to reflect on the shifting line between emancipatory and patronising—if not neo-colonial—approaches: while on one hand I had started with the assumption that Matata knew better than me what was needed for its development, on the other I was reluctant to accept or unable to value the director's diagnosis and requests.

Participation and power asymmetries - "I want to please you"

The second set of challenges I faced concerned the participatory dimension of my approach. For instance, when I met Matata's staff, they called me 'Madame' and it took them a while to use my first name. On the first day, Paul, the office attendant, said: "Please tell me if I don't please you. Maybe I am doing something to please you, but maybe I make mistakes. I am here to please you."

This attitude, besides increasing my unease, called into question the practicability of my participatory aspiration and my desire to minimise power asymmetries. However, while my white and foreign background certainly played a crucial role in shaping this awed attitude, the staff's demeanour toward the director seemed even more obeisant and reverential. Although Matata had only three members of staff (plus the director), it appeared to be a highly hierarchical organization. For instance, at the only team meeting held (admittedly at my request) during my four months with them, in a discussion of internal communication, Paul proposed that an anonymous suggestion box be placed in the office to enhance communication between staff and the director. Despite the director's astonished reaction and her claim that staff were free to talk to her, this proposal showed how difficult it was for the staff to engage openly with her.

The director simultaneously played the roles of founder, director, programme manager, field worker and accountant, while other members of staff seemed to have no clear roles or responsibilities, but simply did what the director asked them to do each day. When she was not in the office (which happened quite often, as she was in charge of project implementation), they had virtually nothing to do. This is not to say that they did not wish to contribute to the

organisation; but they seemed to lack even the most basic information on what the organisation was doing or had done, which significantly hindered their ability to make meaningful contributions to its work.

One day, for example, Josephine, Matata's director, asked the accounts assistant, Kath, to prepare the annual report for 2005, and asked me to support Kath, who needed "technical knowledge on how to write an annual report". However, it emerged that Kath had not worked with Matata in 2007, that she knew virtually nothing of what Matata did in that year and that there were no written records of 2007 activities. In response, Josephine complained of "poor record keeping, poor documentation. We don't have [a] record of what we do". The discussion ended without a clear way forward. A few days later, Josephine asked Kath about the annual report and when told that she had not written it, complained that "here everything must be my initiative. Staff should start owning the organisation … Matata survives only on my work …" There was a repeated pattern of setting staff tasks that they could not accomplish, then reproaching them for their lack of initiative and poor contribution to the organization.

My approach to this issue was threefold. Firstly, I had to deal with my own discomfort: I found the devaluing attitude towards the staff that I perceived in the director's behaviour embarrassing at best and humiliating at worst. My perception was that these events, rather than encouraging staff to own the organisation, allowed the director to continuously restate her authority and nurture Matata's power asymmetries. Secondly, I tried to understand how the staff felt about these situations and more generally about their work with Matata. This meant stepping back and questioning my own perceptions, acknowledging that how we feel and interpret the world around us depends on factors including individual, social, cultural and political assumptions. Thirdly, I tried to understand the director's expectations of the staff and whether and how, beside the work on corporate documentation, the OD process could address the working of Matata.

My perception from talking with the staff was that all three alternated between a desire to change the way Matata worked and to protect its status quo, which provided (although irregularly) a salary in a context where other job opportunities were very scarce. While they progressively opened up and shared with me their discomfort, they also showed little faith in changing the working of Matata or willingness to change it. In fact, one of them clearly told me: "In Matata it is like this, you can only agree with the director". They provided me a very clear example of the precarious, partial and even contradictory nature of emancipation, which rather

than being tout-court liberatory is often a "trade-off between certain gains and certain losses" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 448; see also Raelin, 2008), where the meaning and value of gains, losses and indeed emancipation are neither given nor stable.

This autocratic culture and the staff's reluctance to alter it challenged from the start my orientation towards participation and equality. I found Matata's way of working challenging at times, unpleasant and even hurtful, yet also somewhat stimulating. I spent weeks going to the office, reflecting on what was happening, questioning my perceptions and interpretations and trying to understand how I could work with Matata. Over time, I started questioning whether I could remain there. I found the director increasingly reluctant to share information and cooperate with me. She systematically postponed activities that she and I had planned to undertake together and often provided me with contradictory and ambiguous information regarding Matata in conversations that left me quite bewildered.

I initially attributed Josephine's reluctance to cooperate to her lack of trust in me, so I resolved to strengthen my engagement and to build meaningful relations with all Matata staff. Over time, however, I concluded that the director's main objective was simply to 'put the organisation right' vis-à-vis external requirements and that she had no interest in engaging in work that went beyond developing corporate documentation, despite other important issues which emerged. More precisely, with time it appeared to me that my assignment was confined to fabricating abstract policies and strategies, detached from Matata's work and practice, but which needed to be displayed so that Matata could renew its NGO permit and bid for funding. Given what I was learning about Matata, the idea of working on my own to fabricate policies and strategies appeared less and less meaningful. Thus, after several weeks seriously reflecting on my work and questioning my own approach, I decided that I should terminate my work with the organisation.

In retrospect, my experience with Matata was not entirely negative from a field perspective. It helped me to become more aware of certain aspects of my approach, particularly the difficulty of striking a balance between an open-ended orientation on one hand and a normative stance on the other. More generally, my experience with Matata also offered me rich ground-level insights into management and OD processes within a small NGO. It exposed the fragile balance between OD's commitment to participatory and democratic methodologies, ubiquitous within the development industry, and the OD practitioner's reliance on top management support (Holvino, 1996). This is especially relevant to working with organisations

whose culturally embedded power asymmetries become institutionalised, as seemed to be the case with Matata. I think my experience with Matata might help to demystify the romanticising of local communities or local NGOs while inviting us to consider seriously the political dimension of OD intervention. I think that while negotiation and mediation are crucial in the OD process, it is a necessarily political intervention which, wittingly or unwittingly, both shapes and is shaped by power dynamics, values and ideologies (à la Gramsci).

Overall, I think that I was faithful to my commitment to be sensitive to the diverse agendas of Matata, and especially to those that might be silenced by the OD processes (or development projects) which overlook power asymmetries. I also think that I respected my Ugandan colleagues' right to self-determination, especially the junior staff: I listened to them, talked with them and strove to understand whether I could be helpful, but did not feel myself to be their saviour. I understood and respected their interest in preserving the status quo and I believe that they understood and respected my decision to leave.

Self-reflexivity, whiteness and expertise

A dimension that has been central in my self-reflective practice is related to my white and foreign identity, and this not only because of my own interest in this dimension, which predated the research, but because it turned out to be a relevant issue for my Ugandan colleagues and, more widely, because I could easily feel that my whiteness was a primary mark of my identity, deeply shaping my relations in Uganda. In this sense, living in rural Uganda gave me the opportunity to experience, albeit from a very privileged position, "the gaze of the Other" (Fechter, 2005) and to reflect on fixed identities and the difficulties in overcoming them. In this sense, self-reflexive practices have implied questioning not only my own assumptions and interpretations, but also those of my colleagues, especially when the colour of my skin and my geographical origin allowed the unwarranted attribution to me of qualities and limitations.

For instance, in my first meeting with the director of Gamma, another NGO I worked with, he said: "Our biggest advantage is that you are from Europe, so your impact is totally different from ours (...). [Local communities] think that if there is a white person it must be something important. You add value simply by being there (...). Donors are white and they trust white people more than Ugandans". I was generally considered knowledgeable (except for local dynamics, as explained later), professional and honest. This was confirmed when one day a colleague told me, "I am a professional, I am serious. I have worked many years with muzungu

like you". My colleagues seemed to assume from the start that I possessed specialist knowledge on how to 'put the organization right', where what was right had been defined somewhere else and was known to me. Significantly, I was often called the "technical advisor". In trying to understand these attributions, I had to move beyond the strictly interpersonal level and I felt it important to move from a micro-focus on the characteristics of and relations between the persons involved to a macro-focus on the wider socio-political context where these attributions occurred. Thus, critiques of the construction of expertise in international development invited me to contextualise my role within a dominant development discourse which systematically constructs certain expertise as relevant for and needed by local NGOs, and which perpetuates unequal global relations through the domination of knowledge, tools and techniques created and controlled by Westerners. The hard-core technocratism of development management and the supremacy of Western donors in defining good and bad practice on one side helped me to understand my colleagues' expectations of my 'technical expertise', and conversely continuously reminded me of the need to problematise the existence of the notion of OD/management advisor and to scrutinise the claims, assumptions and truths that legitimise this widespread role in the international development sector.

To my foreign/white identity were also attached limitations, such as the inability to comprehend local dynamics or local thinking and behaviour, as if I belonged to a quite different world, usually described/imagined through words such as 'sophisticated', 'rich', 'functioning', which did not include, for instance, poor (by European measures) agro-pastoral economies and societies like the one I actually came from. However, my assumed inability to understand local things was also utilised to keep me away from tensions and disagreements. For instance, when a major conflict emerged within Gamma, the director said: "There is such a local component in this story that you cannot understand […] What is going on is so uncivilised. It would be impossible for you to take part, nobody will tell you the inside story". On that occasion, as in other tense situations, I still tried to understand what was going on by talking with whoever was willing to share their views with me, yet knowing that my understanding would have been more than usually 'tainted' by my identity.

My outsider/white identity also played a role in shaping the emancipatory stance of this research. The longer I stayed in Uganda and learnt about its history and politics, the more I felt it necessary to question outsiders' emancipatory ambitions, including mine. I increasingly lived the contradictions of such participatory and critical approaches, which simultaneously and

unproblematically focus on superseding the divide of researcher/researched and on nurturing equal relations on one side and on emancipatory ideals on the others, somehow underplaying or even neglecting the asymmetries involved in a priori emancipatory projects. Thus, concerns regarding not doing harm, avoiding misrepresentations, sharing knowledge and experience, minimising the exploitative dimensions of my research and work helped me to redefine my emancipatory intent. In addition, the reality of the relationship between small indigenous NGOs and Western donors, and its influence in shaping NGOs' agendas, roles and practice invited me to redefine far-reaching emancipatory ideals, focusing more on opportunities for micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) which recognises institutionalised asymmetries of power yet fosters the creation of spaces for increased autonomy and equality.

Finally, it was not always easy to sustain my commitment to learn and draw from local knowledge, practices and values, at the same time as fostering shared and symmetrical opportunities for learning and acting. For instance, the internal hierarchy of Gamma was reinforced by age and gender differentials: the director was a sixty-year old man, while the three members of staff were all women in their late twenties. Gamma's staff and others collaborating with the NGO usually showed respect, if not deference, towards the director. They generally addressed him as 'M'zee', a Bantu term conveying consideration and respect for a mature person. He typically dominated meetings and public events, talking for hours without any interruption or opposition. There was thus a tension between respecting local values, which in this case seemed to suggest compliance towards M'zee, and my commitment to equal and open relations. My dilemma arose more from the asymmetries between the director and the other female staff than from my own female identity, insofar as the constraints I felt upon me because of my gender were marginal, especially compared with those upon my female colleagues, whose roles, space and possibilities seemed significantly constrained by the director. Even when activities were planned in advance and when the contribution of each colleague had been agreed, the director would often intrude on their roles, with no apparent resistance from them.

On one occasion the director, a male board member and I met to plan a community event. All other staff members were too busy elsewhere to attend this meeting, during which the director envisaged himself as the main facilitator of the whole event. After much discussion, I managed to convince the two men that Gamma's project officer should play an active role, especially considering that the event was for women only, and it was agreed that the project

officer would take the lead for some of the activities. When she returned from fieldwork we shared our plans, which were agreed by all. However, when the event took place, the project officer played only a very marginal role, as the director led many of the activities she had expected to lead. I had an opportunity to talk separately with all my colleagues about this issue and more generally about gendered roles; while their explanations partly differed, the overall situation seemed difficult to change. More precisely, Gamma's director usually legitimised the peripheral roles of female staff with the argument that "In Uganda women keep quiet in public. It is not advisable to talk or expose themselves. If they do, people will think that they cause headache (problems) to their husband". My female colleagues would repeatedly say: "With M'zee it is like this… You cannot contradict M'zee …. You cannot say no to M'zee" and so on. This is another example where I had to move beyond an interpersonal micro-lens to appreciate that in this research setting, as in any social setting, there were multiple roles embedded in power relations shaped by social, gendered and cultural identities and norms. Thus, while I hope that my work with them increased opportunities for open and equal exchanges, it was crucial for me throughout to place my participatory and emancipatory aspirations within the specific context in which I was working and to adjust and negotiate them accordingly. This does not mean abandoning our aspirations for change, towards more equal gender relations or more equal research and OD praxis, for example. Rather, it means recognizing that "our relation to and centrality in particular struggles depend on our different, often conflictual, locations and histories" (Mohanty, 2002: 196), a principle that I found useful in discriminating between helpful and neo-colonial acts.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the process of knowledge production, with the aim of reflecting on research strategies and approaches which might support the decolonising of management knowledge. In particular, it recounts my journey in search of an ethically and scientifically sound methodological approach for studying organisations outside the Western environment. It has endeavoured to address an increasingly relevant concern of MOS, namely its Westocentric aura, looking specifically at methodological issues. The thread running through the article has been my search for a research approach supportive of my commitment to free my analytical lenses from both Orientalist ('othering') and Occidentalist (universalising) constraints.

Importantly, my aim was not to identify a methodological approach to discovering true knowledge about non-Western (Ugandan in my case) organisations. My interests lay in developing a research approach that could support the production of knowledge about Ugandan NGO management beyond the othering and evolutionist assumptions embedded in much management knowledge and research.

It is now possible to identify six key issues it might be useful to consider when planning and conducting empirical research committed to decolonising management knowledge.

Qualitative Approach – The dominant neo-positivism of MOS has proved unable, if not unwilling, to meaningfully engage with the diversity of organisations, workers, cultures, histories and systems of knowledge existing in our globalised world. As argued elsewhere (Jack and Westwood, 2006), decolonising management knowledge requires a stronger engagement with qualitative, inductive and interpretative approaches.

Open-ended Orientation – Social phenomena, including management practices and organisational behaviours, are multilayered, continuously in the making and thus open to a variety of interpretations. An open-ended orientation with regard to both empirical investigation and theoretical analysis helps in widening perspectives, learning from the persons involved in the research and avoiding, as much as possible, constraining the variety and unpredictability embedded in human actions and social phenomena.

Reflexivity – Decolonising MOS requires recognising that knowledge cannot be neutral, being necessarily interwoven with ethical and political threads. Requirements for "suprapolitical objectivity" (Said, 2003: 10) obscure the political and ethical dimensions of research: it is not possible to detach knowledge from the circumstances where it is produced, from the necessary involvement of the researcher in a society, at whatever level and regardless of whether this involvement is conscious or unconscious. It follows that it is important for researchers to continuously investigate whom and what specific research choices and actions they are serving, which truths and worldviews they sustain and their impact on the lives of those involved in the research, as well as the impact of their identities and positionalities in the processes of knowledge production.

Unfolding Whiteness and other Asymmetries – My own experience supports the argument that at all levels of the development industry there persist assumptions regarding the entanglement of knowledge, expertise and race and that its power relations are more generally racialised (Kothari, 2006; Crewe and Fernando, 2006). It was clear to me that this difference

was significantly outside my agency, i.e. beyond my stance, choices and acts. I was working in a context which had its own history and was indeed part of a broader social, economic and political context, one which I am certain can be changed, but only by engaging with it, rather than deleting it from the research or practice agenda, as is too often the case (White, 2002).

Radical Contextuality – Paying simultaneous attention to both the historical and the emergent dimensions of the context in which research takes place can counter limits of comparative, decontextualised and ahistorical approaches that have characterised much research into organisations in non-Western countries, and which has proved to be especially detrimental to organisations outside the West.

Micro/Meso/Macro – The commitment to engage on one hand with local meanings and practices, and on the other with the wider (academic, political, cultural and economic) context where the research takes place can be sustained by a research strategy that moves back and forth from the macro level (where, for instance, policies are decided) to the meso and micro levels (where, for instance, NGOs operate). Continuously switching lenses among these levels might help address some of the main gaps identified with MOS, such as its abstract stance, its epistemic violence in silencing alternative perspectives and its complicity in sustaining broader inequalities.

This list of issues should be understood as a humble attempt to engage in the sorely needed search for strategies for decolonizing management knowledge, looking especially at empirical work. This article has shown that notwithstanding our intellectual and theoretical orientation, engaged research praxis is messy and tough, often taking paths we would have not imagined. To decolonise management knowledge, I believe it is important to illuminate this messiness more often and more deeply, which is the overall contribution of this paper.

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