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Us, them, and others in management research

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US, THEM AND OTHERS IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

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US, THEM AND OTHERS IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

The commentary, *Titles Matter: Addressing the normalization of othering*, brings our attention to the issue of *othering*, referring to the process by which people are made to seem like an out-group, 'them', who are different from 'us' (Vinkenburg, forthcoming). The commentary points out that I refer to multicultural employees – individuals who identify with two or more cultures and have internalized two or more cultural schemas – as 'they' in the title of my article, setting up multicultural employees as the other against which we (implying monoculturals employees) are compared (Fitzsimmons, 2013). I agree with Vinkenburg's argument that we need to pay attention to unintended meanings implied by our labels, but disagree with her proposed solution.

Within Academy of Management publications, 'they' or 'them' have been used to refer to groups of people, including entrepreneurs (Martens, Jennings, & Jennings, 2007), CEOs (McDonald, Khanna, & Westphal, 2008), management educators (Clair, MacLean, & Greenberg, 2002) and even Academy of Management reviewers (Jauch & Wall, 1989). However, the terminology is rare, and feels different when referring to a group of people who have the potential for lower power, such as culture-based groups, rather than high-status professional or activity-based groups (Fine, 1994).

'They' implies that individuals are members of an out-group, which is not inherently problematic. Out-groups membership shifts across contexts and identity domains; one individual may see others as part of an out-group if they belong to different organizations, cultures, genders, professions, or generations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, implying out-group membership can be problematic if it is not purposeful, due to the tendency to then view 'them' as inferior to 'us'. As argued by Vinkenburg (forthcoming), and within social identity theory, in-group

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members often perceive a hierarchy, where 'we' are contrasted to the inferior 'them' (Tajfel, 1981). Thus, when I referred to multicultural employees as 'they' in the title of my article, it became possible for readers to infer a hierarchy I did not intend, where monocultural employees became the de facto 'us'.

Despite agreeing with the commentary's primary argument, I think there are better solutions; Vinkenburg proposed changing 'they' to 'we' in the title of my article. This would work, if I were a member of the group of multicultural individuals. I am not. This solution resolves one issue (that of *othering*) by introducing another (that of construct definition drift) (Suddaby, 2010). Groups exist, and scholarship is done a disservice by pretending they do not, or pretending that all individuals belong to all groups. Even if the author's intent is to take the perspective of the researched group, and not to claim group membership, it would be easy for readers to misinterpret this use of 'we' as meaning that the authors also belong to the researched group, thus unintentionally expanding the construct definition. In my article, I would resolve the issue of *othering* by changing the title to "How Multicultural Individuals Contribute to Global Organizations" (Fitzsimmons, 2013).

How to Mitigate the Issue of Othering

Despite the problems associated with othering, researchers who do not belong personally to the social groups they study cannot avoid representing the 'other'. Although the issue may be familiar to ethnographers, it is not commonly discussed in the context of other methods of management research (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013), so I propose here solutions that might be useful for researchers who want to reduce the potential negative outcomes of othering in their

own research. Researchers can actively work to avoid unintentional othering during planning, data collection, analysis, and writing stages.

When planning a research project, and throughout data collection, researchers ought to become aware of their expected relationships with research participants – called hyphen-spaces – just as ethnographers are trained to be reflexive about how these relationships influence their research, and pay particular attention to potential power differentials (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). This awareness might influence what research questions are asked (e.g. 'how do they contribute' becomes 'how do multicultural individuals contribute'), and how data are collected (e.g. observing as an outsider versus asking for input from members of the observed group) (Jonsen et al., 2010). Researchers who want to take a more active approach might consider interacting with members of the researched group outside the context of a research project, reducing the tendency to see group members as interchangeable or passive (Bach, 2006). At a minimum, researchers should ask themselves if they are treating research participants as out-group members, and if so, whether it is intentional (Fine, 1994; Fürsich, 2002).

When othering is done intentionally, it can be a strategic tool for data analysis that draws strong boundary conditions around a construct, similar to the strategy of *making the familiar strange*, or using etic perspectives to develop arguments across groups (Mills, 1959; Zhu & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013). One example of purposeful othering is an examination of consumers in downtown Denver, where othering is used as a tool to bring distance and perspective to their analysis (Jones & Foust, 2008). Alternatively, researchers can study the process of othering, as a research object in itself. Examples include examining how western culture is othered at the Disney theme park in Tokyo (Brannen, 1992), and how female academics are othered by deans at two Dutch universities (Bleijenbergh, van Engen, & Vinkenburg, 2013). Although

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intentionality does not necessarily reduce the undesirable consequences of othering, it requires researchers to develop a high level of awareness about their approach. This in turn allows researchers to attend to potential consequences more easily than those who are less mindful about their othering.

In contrast to these purposeful examples, where othering can be a useful theoretical tool, unintentional othering may facilitate undesirable outcomes such as those described by Vinkenburg (forthcoming), without researchers' awareness. Thus, researcher reflexivity becomes even more important when othering is not useful as a research tool (Jonsen et al., 2010). Whether or not othering is intentional, researchers can directly target the undesirable outcomes of othering during data analysis. For example, researchers might seek out reasons 'they' are superior to 'us', to combat an implied hierarchy of 'us' over 'them'; researchers might draw clearer boundary conditions around a sample to combat inappropriately extrapolating findings from a sample to a larger group, due to the tendency to see more variation in in-groups than out-groups (Au, 1999); and researchers might look for contradictions and ownership over one's actions within the target group to combat the tendency to see others as passive and interchangeable. This approach – targeting undesirable outcomes – may be more feasible for researchers who cannot avoid representing the other.

Finally, writing techniques can be used to mitigate othering. These include allowing multiple voices in the final research paper, making power differentials among researchers and researched explicit, or using narrative, dialogue and reflexivity (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). For example, Fürsich (2002) argues that it is impossible to avoid representing the 'other' in travel documentaries, so he demonstrates how specific techniques can improve representations by presenting multiple, nuanced, critical and even contradictory representations of the other. Three

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of his techniques could also be applied to management research: situating specific observations within their historical and political context; pushing readers (viewers) to take a critical distance from the text (program) by purposefully taking them out of the narrative (e.g. when locals do not play along with interviewers, showing outtakes, showing the production and camera crew); and playing with alternative or critical representations of the 'other' (e.g. comparing tourist images of a location with the variety of realistic images of the same location).

The solutions proposed here will be more familiar to constructivist researchers, who are more likely to recognize the knowledge embodied in constructs and terms, than they will for positivists (Gergen, 1985). Indeed, many of these solutions will be challenging for research based on the assumption of objectivity. However, regardless of research orientation, it is useful for researchers to think critically about the terms we use, especially when labeling groups of people. Beyond taking issue with the title of my article on multicultural individuals, Vinkenburg highlights reasons why we ought to be concerned about *othering* in our research. To the extent that researchers study groups to which they do not belong, some degree of othering is inevitable, and may even be valuable when used purposively and with caution. Thus, my intention here is to build on the commentary by proposing potential solutions for mitigating the negative consequences of othering, where solutions involve more than changing one term for another. Researchers would be wise to reflect on our relationships with research participants, and the meanings implied by the terms we choose to use. I will be more careful to do so in the future.

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