

‘Motivation Toilet the Best Toilet’ – An Analysis of Organizational Lives Written on the Stall

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of gradually evolving set of bathroom graffiti of a single female stall located in the main building of a university and discuss what kinds of insights this wall of bathroom graffiti can offer to critical leadership and management studies. Albeit somewhat an unconventional source of information, graffiti can provide interesting insights into the social context and the very culture of an organization (Green, 2003; Islam, 2010; Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974; Schreer and Strichartz, 1997; Taylor, 1999). Graffiti written on walls of bathrooms, then, are especially intriguing, as they are, quite naturally, written anonymously (Escudero, 2013; Gach, 1973; Islam, 2010; Schreer and Strichartz, 1997). This anonymous nature of bathroom graffiti enables writers to express their attitudes, wishes and thoughts safely without the fear of public judgement (Gach, 1973; Islam, 2010; Schreer and Strichartz, 1997). Consequently, these sorts of organizational spaces may contain extremely honest statements that offer unique insights into everyday organizational life. As it is, graffiti in general, and bathroom graffiti in particular, are often characterized as a form of self-expression (Gach, 1973; Halsey and Young, 2006; Islam, 2010; Schreer and Strichartz, 1997).

The empirical material for this paper consists of photographs taken from the stall over several years (May 2016, January 2017, September 2017, May 2018). While the intent of graffiti writers cannot be assessed due to the anonymity, the effect of bathroom graffiti can be analyzed (Marche, 2012). The analysis of photographs, then, shows that there is a strong discourse going on in these graffiti and this discourse advocates for acceptance of oneself and others as they are, as well as living a life “worth of living”. Furthermore, the follow-up photographs show that while some of the graffiti have worn away, the discourse stays virtually the same, as new graffiti writers embrace the themes of previous graffiti. While the formation of conversation chains is common in bathroom graffiti (e.g. Escudero, 2013), generally they tend to cover more negative themes and be more heterogenous and altering (e.g. Bartholome & Snyder, 2004). The abnormally strong focus on the above-mentioned themes makes these bathroom graffiti peculiar when compared to typical writings on bathroom walls, but what is even more interesting is that through the act of writing these graffiti, the users of this organizational space are actively transforming the space to (literally) embody the values they advocate in their writings. This ongoing sociomaterial process, then, offers some interesting insights for critical leadership and management studies.

First, the existence and content of these graffiti inform us about the processes related to the construction of alternative organizational identities that actively resists identity regulation as a form of organizational control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and the leadership-followership dynamics this control entails. As both employees and students alike face higher and higher performance expectations, universities as organizations increasingly produce such identity regulation that champions efficient and highly performing individuals as appropriate members of the organization. Instead of accepting this regulated identity and the type of followership it demands, the anonymous writers of the analyzed bathroom graffiti actively engage in an ongoing identity construction that encourages acceptance of self and others as they are. The construction of this alternative identity is feminine in that all the writers are female, but also in that sense that the themes covered in these graffiti are such that are typically considered as feminine. Indeed, the bathroom graffiti analyzed here advocate for democratic and collaborative values that are often associated with feminine leadership (Kirtan and Healey, 2012). Moreover, as this space is always occupied alone and as the graffiti writers clearly aim to influence others through their graffiti, some characteristics of absent leadership can be seen here, as these graffiti have potential to lead their readers even without the presence of a leader-individual (Eslan-Ziya and Erhart, 2015).

Second, the analysis of these bathroom graffiti also offers some insights related to how and where *communitas* can be experienced within an organization. While not often utilized in leadership and management literature, *communitas* is conceptualized as a strong sense of fellowship, a potentially transformative moment during which people see each other as equals instead of through their normal

roles and ranks they held in their organizational lives (Bathurst and Cain, 2013; Hawkins and Edwards, 2017; Turner, 1979). Edith Turner (2012) notes that *communitas* arises most often through working together and, more importantly, that this experience is needed so that people are able to continue to organize and work together. For her the experience of *communitas* is, in a sense, a potential starting point for the formation of organization with its rules, ranks and, eventually, hierarchical structures. As such, a greater understanding of this concept could offer us some interesting new perspectives on how we work together, organize and form hierarchical structures (and how we then go against these structures). The bathroom graffiti analyzed here, then, show us that the experience of *communitas* can occur even during most private moments, as both the graffiti writers as well as other users of the space are always alone in this space. Moreover, due to the anonymous nature of bathroom graffiti, the users of this space experiencing *communitas* do not know the identities of the people they feel extremely close connection while occupying the space and reading the graffiti. In this they seem to form an imagined community, that is a community that involves strong feelings of comradeship even though the other members of the community are unknown (Anderson, 1991). As such, the bathroom graffiti analyzed here show us how *communitas* – with its potential to form new communities, even organizations – may arise from the unlikely places. Moreover, these graffiti also inform us how alternative communities may exist within an organization.

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