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JMS Says

Rana Plaza Fieldwork and Academic Anxiety: Some Reflections

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The Rana Plaza collapse, which took place in Bangladesh in 2013, killed and injured at least 1135 and 2500 people respectively. Although the structural fault with the building had been identified before the collapse, the owner of the building and five garment factories housed in Rana Plaza had forced workers to continue production for 31 Western multinational corporations (MNCs). It was the deadliest structural failure in modern history, and resulted in a horrific rescue operation. First, the fire brigade did not have the necessary training and equipment to rescue the victims, and so the general public also participated in the rescue operation. Second, when victims were rescued, it was found that many of them had lost their limbs or suffered severe internal injuries, including internal organ failure, due to several days without water. After the completion of the rescue, the victims received neither appropriate compensation nor rehabilitation to overcome their psychological trauma and physical disabilities.

As a Bangladeshi, I had always been accustomed to what poverty could mean to someone. I recall a huge slum behind our home in Chittagong. From the second floor, I observed what happened there: the way people lived their lives, what they cooked, how they shared moments, laughed, cried, quarrelled, and fought. One night, I even observed a huge fire, a significant event to witness as a child. I saw people trying to save their belongings – whatever small items they had in their tiny homes. I could hear the screaming of elderly people, children stuck in the fire, and relatives rushing to save their loved ones. The next morning, I saw no trace of the victims' houses. Some slum-dwellers were crying, others staring at the sky because they had no roof over their head. I saw some start building their places again. They could not go elsewhere as they had no other shelter or help from the local authority, government, or private landlords. I heard some of their conversations. One of them observed: 'In this world, no one looks after the poor, not even God'. I also spent a great deal of time with the children from this slum as my playfield was close to it. I knew how these children felt, thought, and saw the world.

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They did not have anything like an American dream to inspire them. They knew one brutal truth: poverty endures and there is no way out. What mattered to them was how they could live today and forget about tomorrow.

Until I started researching the Rana Plaza disaster, I did not know that talking with victims could be totally different from talking, sharing feelings, and spending time with people who suffer from extreme poverty. My world turned upside down when I started talking with the victims and rescuers. Those I interviewed were traumatized in the extreme. I often felt they did not know what to do with their lives as they could not leave behind what they had experienced. The victims had had unique and varied experiences, and the disaster had had immeasurable consequences on their lives. For example, one young female victim, aged 18, was so traumatized that during the interview she started talking about her sexual and marital problems. She told me the disaster had affected her badly; she suffered every second of the day. While that was likely true for many young, female victims, I was surprised that she spoke so openly to an unfamiliar male researcher such as me given how conservative Bangladeshi society is.

Talking with rescuers was no less distressing. By rescuers I mean local people such as rickshaw pullers, butchers, small business owners, shopkeepers, football players, artists, university students, photographers, and street children who helped rescue victims. One such rescuer took me to the Rana Plaza site. He showed me how ordinary people like him had rescued the workers. The stories he told were upsetting, but also showed courage. On the day of the collapse, while he was watching the live TV news on the Rana Plaza collapse during his lunch break, he suddenly stopped eating and watching. He took a small cutter (a small knife that is used for paper cutting) with him without knowing what he would do with it. When he reached Rana Plaza, he saw a girl's hand trapped in the wreckage and she became his first rescue operation. He used his cutter to begin cutting the girl's hand free, but then realized he could not cut through the bone. Blood and flesh were everywhere. The girl was crying and screaming. He went to look for a larger cutter to cut through the bone and reduce the girl's pain. He rescued about 13 people in three days. He received no help, not even psychological support, from the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), MNCs, or local firms. Before the disaster, he had played professional football and been involved in amateur dramatics. He has since stopped doing both. He does, however, hope to stage a drama about Rana Plaza one day. He cannot sleep or forget the experience of those three days. I did not know how to comfort him during the few days he spent with me; I simply listened to him.

When I returned to the UK after my first round of fieldwork, I was not sure how to reflect upon my experience in Bangladesh. I was overwhelmed. I was so shocked about so many findings that I was unable even to be angry. I felt I had failed the victims and rescuers as I could not help them. I was not sure how to begin writing. I found all my previous research work to be irrelevant, as it did not reflect reality. I could not even find a reason to write. This was a very difficult time.

However, since the fieldwork was ongoing, I could not escape talking to and thinking of the victims and rescuers. I was working on this project with four anthropology students (referred to as research assistants or RAs; so far they have helped me to collect more than 350 interviews). I had to continue talking to my RAs every two to three days for updates on the fieldwork in Bangladesh. This took its toll on me, too, because engaging in research where one constantly encounters emotional accounts is challenging and demoralizing, sometimes to the extent that going on with it seems unbearable. I had endured depression because of this research work. When I say 'depression' I do not mean merely disruptive sleep patterns, not taking time off, or avoiding superficial conversations with colleagues. I also mean spending hours walking around the British Library or the streets, feeling hopeless while thinking about human cruelty, recollecting the emotional phone conversations I had had with victims at the airport before leaving Bangladesh, and feeling guilty about having so much privilege but too little power to help change victims' lives. These thoughts were recursive. Over time, they combined with different anxieties and concerns. They meant I could not concentrate on writing or reading for more than five or ten minutes at a time. This situation pushed me to sit in front of a desk for much longer than usual; I was not productive. It affected my social and family life, too. For example, I soon felt frustrated at spending time with my parents or close friends. Since my depression had begun, I had been on the run. Even though I would readily waste time at the British Library, being on the run all the time, paradoxically I became impatient and calm at the same time, for I knew I somehow had to tell these victims' and rescuers' stories. Although the depression was difficult, I decided not to take any medication or to seek psychological help. Taking anti-depressants and forgetting what I had observed would be an extravagant luxury; I did not want that privilege.

VEIL OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

My experience of my ongoing Rana Plaza fieldwork, which began in 2014, made me reflect on Du Bois's (1903) concept of double consciousness, Du Bois applied the idea of double consciousness to race relations in the USA. He discussed how the identity of black Americans occurred in different forms, making it impossible for them to maintain a single, unified identity. Du Bois (1903, p. 8) wrote: 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder'. In other words, he argued that double consciousness forces black people to perceive themselves not only from their own perspective (within the veil of self-consciousness) but also through the eyes of the white world (without the veil of self-consciousness). As these two perspectives collide, black Americans lead a double life. Their self-image is damaged by the perceptions and treatment of white people. Over time, they encounter stereotypical biases in mainstream culture. Du Bois's conception of the veil of self-consciousness helps me make sense of my own experience because I feel that my multiple identities – for instance, who I am, what I think about myself, and how I am perceived by fellow academics – has resulted in a double life that I am forced to lead in Western society and academia.

While living that double life, I consistently see myself beneath the veil as a Bangladeshi (I spent my childhood there) who talks to victims and rescuers through the soul and mind of a Bangladeshi as described earlier. Without it, I am considered to be British (having spent the last 15 years in the UK), and I was educated and work in elite institutions; my survival in academia depends on my performance.

WITHOUT THE VEIL OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Being Cambridge-educated and British, I naturally qualify for certain privileged interactions that are not accessible to many others. However, this does not mean that powerful friends or actors see me as one of them. My dual identity as both Bangladeshi and British is indivisible no matter how I engage with powerful actors. Thus, the feeling of having a dual consciousness is a given in my case, and yet these two sides of my consciousness collide, leaving me aware of how powerful actors translate the misery of victims. In particular, when I started interacting with elite respondents, my Bangladeshi consciousness came into conflict with my British one. I realized that in the West we have a great deal of faith in the powerful institutions and actors that mobilize moral values but we often do not recognize that placing so much trust in them is problematic from the victims' perspective. There was a particular moment when I became more aware of my double consciousness. One of the most shocking discussions I had was with a prominent human rights lawyer. When I asked about compensation for the victims, s/he stressed that the victims complained about everything, mainly because they were poor and therefore 'want more'. S/he suggested I should not listen to them. I was astonished by her/his conviction that all the victims were receiving the right amount of compensation, as this ran entirely contrary to our findings. Moreover, not once had we felt that the victims were asking for pity; they were simply seeking due compensation.

As the days pass by, I become more frustrated. I feel that our academic system fails to take researchers' feelings seriously. In the name of performativity, the system creates a discourse that promotes materialism alone. For example, all the academic conferences I attended in 2015 made me more depressed than ever. Wherever I went and whomever I met, the conversation revolved around the number of top publications, tenures, promotions, special issues, and networking. There was no human dimension. Moreover, I found that a much bigger problem exists in our field, namely that an academic is highly regarded only if they publish many articles in top-ranking journals. There are exceptions where academics create impact without doing so, but they are mostly anomalies. I considered publishing articles that reflect emotional truth, but as soon as both emotion and truth appear, readers dismiss them as subjective interpretation. However, in order to understand the victims and their reality emotion is a necessity. Without it, I could not connect with the victims in the first place. The girl who talked about her personal problems would not have spoken to me. The victims who indicated NGOs' complicit behaviour in relation to MNCs and victim compensation would not have mentioned it. If victims' voices matter at all, an imperative question arises: What is the point of writing about the victims and their lives, agony, and grievances, and theorizing these, if I am not allowed to conceptualize the emotions of these victims in academic writing? I have been advised by many scholars that writing a book would be appropriate in my case, but in academia, where the number of top-ranking publications is valued above all else, how would a book help an untenured faculty member?

ACADEMIC ANXIETY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

I now encountered a new and unexpected type of problem. An academic friend of mine nervously called me after a conference to warn me that if I wanted to publish in top-ranking journals, I should be careful how I criticized other work on Rana Plaza. Another friend was worried because I often visited Bangladesh for fieldwork and he believed that I should avoid criticizing powerful people and institutions given that fundamentalist attacks on secular bloggers and academics and unlawful killings by government forces had been on the rise. Both friends may be right; if I write critically, I may be alienated by fellow colleagues who do not promote certain ideas and who label me as a problem in the research community. However, as a Bangladeshi, if I fail to report my observations accurately in an attempt to attract potential top-ranking publications or to avoid being targeted by powerful actors, I betray the traumatized victims and rescuers whom I met and violate my moral conscience. I argue that this puts a junior researcher like me (non-white, from an ethnic and religious minority, non-tenured) in danger of double alienation. It causes what I call 'academic anxiety', where no one forces me not to write but they could potentially punish me for doing so. I am leading a double life, trying to juggle both the truth and the peers and senior colleagues who will shape my career. I am at the mercy of others. At one point in 2016, I even considered leaving academia and concentrating on publishing books. I decided I wanted be true to myself and to the victims through my writing.

There is much talk about paradigms of thinking in management research; for instance, the economic perspective on shareholder profit-maximization and the social perspective on welfare-maximization. Within these broader perspectives there are sub-disciplines such as corporate social responsibility and institutional theory that academics focus on to publish articles. It is sometimes assumed that one should limit oneself to a particular paradigm rather than challenging the status quo, especially if one is an untenured faculty member or is not positioned in elite academic circles. One senior scholar seriously discouraged me from undertaking my Rana Plaza research, citing two arguments: I would waste valuable time if I became involved in a new project before publishing my dissertation articles, and I would not uncover anything new from the project, as management scholars already know why and how such incidents occur in developing countries. From a strictly economic perspective, I certainly wasted time conducting my Rana Plaza research: I am way behind my peers where publications in top-ranking journals are concerned, and I am far from achieving the requisite number of journal articles in a given period of time. In the end, however, the *only* reason I chose to undertake Rana Plaza fieldwork was that if I did not go into this field as a native researcher, there would not be few (if any) native researchers from the fields of management to talk with the victims. A researcher has a pressing moral responsibility to undertake work that will help his/her people and society. I did not want to shirk that responsibility despite the risk for my academic career that was involved in doing so.

SPEAKING OUT; SPEAKING WITH THE VICTIMS

We need a paradigm shift in terms of how to be open-minded about work on marginalized actors so that management research can make a positive impact on people whose lives are still a constant misery. To achieve this, we must consider two urgent issues. First, management research needs to go beyond the simplistic divide between economic and social perspectives. For example, I do not want to box myself in or be known as, say, a critical management scholar just because I write a few critical articles. What matters to me is not to live a contradictory life (I suspect I cannot avoid my double life because of my multiple and complex identities); I should be able to express the truth without fear. If Du Bois, as the first black Harvard graduate, could make extraordinary contributions to black lives in the USA in more difficult periods (late 1800s and early 1900s), in this modern era junior scholars should be able to produce valuable work to avoid another Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh or elsewhere. Our scholarly work should exhibit the courage to conceptualize victims' suffering rather than forgetting them after a month or a year.

Second, we require a truly enlightened research culture in business schools and need to bring back free thinking and diversity in academic journals. At present, top-ranking journals encourage researchers to follow strict formats to develop or test theory. Here, making use of oral history, literary theories, art work, and alternative philosophies is almost roundly rejected as a means of narrating a unique phenomenon or developing a completely new (nonconformist) theory. The focus of our research avoids the bigger picture of social problems as we are forced to use a narrow theoretical lens to fit homogenous reviewers' tastes. Top-ranking journals must break free from the narrow, orthodox way of publishing research and accommodate, for instance, observations on how the victims interpret their own situation and the role of powerful actors so that we generate nuanced arguments and atypical theory rather than limiting our research to a particular paradigm or considering a well-regarded theory as a religion and the only means of publishing articles. This will increase the chances of marginalized groups' being better represented in scientific work. However, this requires business schools to change their research culture, because these types of research are time-consuming and laborious and do not generate quick publications. Inevitably, business schools need to encourage novel research so that management scholars can contribute to positive societal change.

In the face of a deadly industrial catastrophe, how can management scholars possibly narrate and theorize the suffering of the victims and the role of powerful actors such as MNCs and government agencies without violating victims' rights? The conceptualization of victims' accounts is not easy as it requires emotion, empathy, sacrifice, and courage to tell the truth, challenge powerful actors, and overcome the narrow language game that top-ranking management journals impose as a means of objectifying research. Statistics, archives, and jet-plane ethnography are not enough to conceptualize victims' suffering. It is not enough to make incremental theoretical contributions in the guise of prominent theories such as institutional or agency theory; we need to venture beyond the ivory-tower mind-set and see, sense, experience, and share the victims' pain while explaining it open-mindedly to the wider world. But then a pressing question arises: how is it possible to achieve such an academic objective given the soulless, performance-driven research culture that prevails in the field of management?

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