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What is This?

The Tyranny of Distance: Kafka and the problem of distance in bureaucratic organizations

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Abstract

Inspired by the insights of Franz Kafka, this article explores the problem of 'distance' in a UK bank, particularly by focusing on one of its back-office processing centres. Distance refers to a way of *not* seeing those below us in the hierarchy; this might mean that we act in ways that display little thought or concern for the experiences of others. It is argued that the 'distance' created between human beings through bureaucratic ways of organizing is potentially debilitating. Academic accounts often strive for objectivity and, in doing so, they tend to stand at a distance from the suffering of those they seek to represent. By contrast, fiction elucidates distance in a more emotional, passionate and, therefore, engaged and engaging way. This article draws on Kafka because his work is subversive and it highlights the need to create ways of organizing and being that promote empathy with 'others'. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that distance can be eliminated because it is fundamental to how we develop our sense of self and it is ingrained within processes of rationalization. The article is distinctive because although numerous accounts have used fiction to theoretically analyse organizations few have sought to use fiction to analyse empirical material.

A number of scholars have drawn on the work of Franz Kafka to illuminate different aspects of organizational life (see Burrell,1997; Fromm,1942; Hodson et al., 2012; Keenoy and Seijo, 2010; Kornberger et al., 2006; Munro and Huber, 2012; Parker, 2005; Pezler, 2002; Ten Bos, 2004; Warner, 2007). This article seeks to add to this literature through focusing on the problem of distance that arises between human beings in bureaucratic organizations. Although Merton (1940) identified some merit in bureaucratic structures in that they serve 'to minimize friction' through establishing the 'calculability of others' behaviour and a stable set of mutual expectations' (Merton, 1940: 56),

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the distance between human beings that they exacerbate is a central problem in advanced economies. Ritzer's (2008) work provides an excellent illustration of this when he argues that in healthcare, for example, 'patients are apt to be controlled increasingly by large-scale structures and institutions, which will probably appear to them as distant, uncaring, and impenetrable' (Ritzer, 2008: 160). These insights echo the work of Kafka and yet, as Munro and Huber (2012) have argued, 'there has been little sustained analysis of this author within this field' (Munro and Huber, 2012: 526).

This article does not focus on distance for the purposes of improving 'the efficiency' of 'HRM issues' (Napier and Ferris, 1993: 322) nor is it intended to enhance the leadership of organizations for economic ends (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002). Instead, the concern is to elucidate the condition and outcome of distance and the enduring problem that it presents for those at the front end of organizations. The problem of distance is not new to the study of organizations. Indeed Marx (1844) argued that through capitalism 'each man (sic) is estranged from the others' (Marx, 1844: 330) and he points towards the distance created between 'wage slaves' and those who possess capital. Braverman (1974) asserted that there is 'a profound antagonism between those who do the work and those who manage them' (Braverman, 1974: 318) and in doing so he highlighted the distance between managers and employees. Braverman (1974) considered the 'marketplace' to be 'both chaotic and profoundly hostile to all feelings of community' (Braverman, 1974: 195) and, in this way, he indicated that the market severs the bonds that bind people together.

Max Weber (1947) was acutely aware of the distance that arises between individuals through bureaucratic systems of governance. He posited that the bureaucracy 'develops the more perfectly the bureaucracy is "dehumanized", the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation' (Weber, 1947: 239). As Srinivas (1999) puts it 'bureaucratic organizations increase social distance. The division of labour, the hierarchy of command and execution, privileging of expertise all render the objects of action remote and invisible, increasing our distance from the Other' (Srinivas, 1999: 611). Weber was nonetheless critical of the distance that bureaucracy creates between individuals and this is evident when he asked 'what we can oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of humankind free from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life' (Max Weber and German Politics, 1944 in Victor and Stephens,1994: 480).

Foucault's (1977) work also highlights the problem of distance but he goes beyond the workplace by considering how power is exercised through institutions such as schools, prisons and hospitals. Hence power is exercised through observing, measuring, comparing, rewarding and punishing pupils, prisoners and patients in ways that 'individualize' or, in other words, reinforce distance between people. These processes of 'individualization' have been explored in the contemporary workplace whereby employees are subject to intense individual scrutiny and surveillance (McCabe, 2007a). Through 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 1991:208) and techniques of 'partitioning' (Foucault, 1977) the distance between employees is intensified as individuals are marked out and forced to compete with one another. Simultaneously, they reinforce the distance between those who exercise power and those who are subject to the disciplinary gaze.

Ezzy (2001) is critical of contemporary ways of organizing and argues that 'even amongst those workers in secure employment, the transformations in the meaning of work encouraged by teamwork and flexiblization result in a more individualistic cultural orientation among these workers' (Ezzy, 2001: 631). This fracturing of social bonds reinforces distance between individuals but this is not new. Indeed, Ezzamel and Willmott (1998) found that teamwork was resisted because 'machinists' had already 'vested a sense of self-identity in a system that emphasized and rewarded individual performance' (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998: 380). In a review of the leadership literature, Collinson (2005) argues 'that the organizational effects of distance have been under-explored'

(Collinson, 2005: 236) and it is certainly the case that 'leaders may be very detached from employees' (Collinson, 2005: 236) but it is also important to recognize that the damaging consequences of distance are pervasive and can be found at all organizational levels.

Distance is an intractable problem and yet it is integral to our subjectivity hence Mead (1934) asserted that individuals develop their sense of self through learning to differentiate themselves from 'others'. Likewise, Fromm (1942) refers to our 'subjective self-consciousness, of the faculty of thinking by which man (sic) is aware of himself as an individual entity, different from nature and other people' (Fromm, 1942: 17). Moreover, as one of the reviewers of this article pointed out, it is difficult to imagine how contemporary bureaucratic organizations can operate without an element of distance between human beings. Nevertheless, what concerns me is the way in which contemporary bureaucratic organizations exacerbate this distance between human beings through splintering a concern for others. Of course, this does not mean that we should simply embrace contrived cultures that endeavour to forge collective bonds in the name of the customer for the narrow end of corporate profitability (see Willmott, 1993).

The 2008 crisis in the financial services sector illustrates the problem of 'distance'. In particular, the distance between city speculators and the needs of the 'real' economy; the distance of financial institutions from those who were sold financial products that they could ill afford; the distance of politicians, as regulators, from the operation of financial services; the distance between the packaging and marketing of financial products from their actual meaning/value. This distance has caused enormous damage leading to the vilification of bankers and yet, what is often missed, is that the majority of those who work in the financial services sector are also victims of decisions taken by distant others. Indeed, the UK financial services sector has undergone a major transformation in recent decades leading to redundancies; the loss of job security and career ladders; work intensification, and more generally, deteriorating terms and conditions of employment (see McKinlay, 2002; Tempest et al., 2004).

One of the greatest tragedy's of modern times is that those who profited from a system that promulgates a callous disregard for others, escaped unscathed, whilst globally society is still paying the price. This article is concerned, however, with the problem of 'distance' for the frontline staff that work in financial services. It is the 'distance' perpetuated through hierarchy and culture that is of most concern and yet this is fundamental to bureaucratic organizations, for as Merton (1940) puts it, 'The structure is one which approaches the complete elimination of personalized relationships' (Merton, 1940: 561). This depersonalization can contribute to the reproduction of unnecessary suffering and to dehumanizing working conditions. In the case study to follow, distance between the concerns of those at the top and those at the bottom, pervaded strategic thinking, the organizational culture, the use of technology and the design of work. This had destructive consequences for working lives and so the article calls for further accounts that elucidate the consequences of 'distance', so that we can illuminate and reflect upon its condition and consequences, with a view to ameliorating the damage that it causes.

The article is organized as followed. The next section considers the relevance of fiction for studying organizations. The work of Kafka is then introduced that illuminates the problem of 'distance' in works such as *The Trial, The Castle* and *In the Penal Colony*. The case study is then explored before summarizing the main points of the article in a discussion and conclusion.

Fiction, literature and organization

The use of fiction is now well established among organizational scholars (see, for example, Czarniawska-Joerges and Monthoux, 1994; De Cock, 2000; De Cock and Land, 2005; Domagalski

and Jermier, 1997; Grey, 1996; Knights and Willmott,1999; Phillips, 1995; Srinivas,1999; Waldo,1968; Willmott, 1993) who have used fiction to illuminate different facets of organizational life and to 'corrode disciplinary boundaries' (Parker et al.,1999: 588). It might be argued, however, that novels have no place in a social scientific journal and this raises important epistemological questions because such a view is grounded in the problematic belief that novels are fiction whilst science is fact at least 'within the epistemologies of modernism' (Grey, 1996: 65). To draw such a conclusion is questionable in numerous ways, for example, Watson (1994) has argued of his ethno-graphic work that 'When I write about events and people … I am not describing or reporting what has happened. I cannot be objective in that way. But I am not making up what I am writing' (Watson, 1994: 106). He asserts that 'Management researchers select, interpret, colour, emphasize, shape their research findings' (Watson, 1994: 106). Through such arguments, Watson and others (Keenoy and Seijo, 2010:178–179) have highlighted that fiction is an integral feature of ethno-graphic accounts (see also Van Maanen, 1979). Indeed, according to Astley and Zammuto (1992), 'Empirical research is essentially a form of "story-telling"' (Astley and Zammuto, 1992: 449). The above authors highlight that 'there is no specific place where social science ends and narrative fic-tion begins. The two pursuits are bound together by their interest in the social world and how it functions. They are separated not by practical considerations, but by social norms which have maintained that there is some fundamental difference between the 'fictions' of writers and the 'facts' of social scientists' (Phillips, 1995: 627; see also De Cock, 2000: 591; Knights and Willmott, 1999: 8; Parker et al., 1999: 581).

If it is the case that social science accounts are constructions that are grounded in reality then it can also be argued that fictional accounts have some basis in reality otherwise we would not be able to relate to or make sense of them. According to Munro and Huber (2012) 'literary fiction can reveal important truths about organizational life without recourse to the representation of factual events' (Munro and Huber, 2012: 525) and yet many fictional accounts are loosely connected to real events. Hence George Orwell's *1984*, Zamyatin's *We* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* are all works of fiction and yet all are infused with an understanding of the oppression created by totalitarian regimes. Likewise, there is little doubt that Kafka's literature is influenced by his 15 years of employment in the workmen's compensation division of a government bureau-cracy. In view of this, as Heinemann (1996) suggests, 'the boundary between Kafka's professional and private lives, between his bureaucratic work and his writing, may be more permeable than critics have assumed' (Heinemann, 1996: 257; see also Munro and Huber, 2012: 530). De Cock and Land (2005) also argue that fiction is grounded in the everyday for literature 'inevitably refers back to and embodies the social and economic realities within which it was produced; this is to say that literature is historically contingent' (De Cock and Land, 2005: 529). Nevertheless, neither social scientific empirical research nor literature, even in the case of the 'realist novel', can be regarded 'as a mirror of reality' (Grey, 1996: 63).

If, as academics, we are concerned to encourage people to think, reflect and act so as to change society for the better then it is important to engage them. Academic accounts are often staid affairs with a propensity to switch students and 'practitioners' (De Cock, 2000: 603) off. By contrast, fictionalized accounts can stimulate attention because they portray everyday life in such vivid colours whilst 'illuminating the broader aspects of social life' such as 'inequality' (Knights and Willmott, 1999 :1). As Phillips (1995) puts it 'fiction can provide a setting and an atmosphere that adds life and interest to academic articles' (Phillips, 1995: 637). This article is grounded in the belief, therefore, that as academics we have much to learn from the writers of 'fiction' for they 'open the door to a capacity for accepting disruption and enabling new ways of thinking about the world' (Domagalski and Jermier, 1997: 291).

De Cock and Land (2005) have suggested that the 'seam' between organization studies and literature is permeable for they 'are mutually co-articulating and interdependent concepts and fields of enquiry' (De Cock and Land, 2005: 517; see also Parker et al., 1999). They warn of accounts that seek to mine literature as 'a simple prop to embellish organizational research papers' (De Cock and Land, 2005: 529) or that use literature as a tool to improve managerial or organizational effectiveness. The power of literature they suggest is when it unsettles us and it is argued that this follows because literature reveals itself as a fiction. This serves to suspend our judgement opening us up to other possibilities. Yet, in drawing this fiction/fact distinction, the authors risk undermining the dualism that their article attempts to disrupt. Hence through entering into a more 'dialogical relationship with the literary' (De Cock and Land, 2005: 523), as they suggest, we can perhaps continue to unsettle others even if our accounts are not simply fictions. De Cock and Land (2005) suggest that 'it is precisely' the 'lack of "authenticity", its ambiguity and "strangeness" that provides the strength of the literature text' (De Cock and Land, 2005: 526). But one could argue that strangeness combined with authenticity is also disturbing, perhaps even more so, because the knowledge that these are real people behaving in a monstrous way is itself gripping. This can be achieved through juxtaposing and intermeshing fiction with organization theory (e.g. Knights and Willmott, 1999; Parker et al., 1999; Willmott, 1993) or with empirical research but the latter is much less common.

Kafka and the problem of distance

It is clearly impossible to do justice to the complex and multi-faceted work of Franz Kafka in a single article and this article does not claim to be able to do so but it does seek to harvest insights from his work that are relevant to the analysis of the case study to follow. The work of Kafka is often associated with a bleak, if not totalitarian view of organizations and society. The image that is conjured up when we refer to something as Kafkaesque is one of dark, impenetrable forces of labyrinthine complexity; forces that might rip us from our beds at night without charge or explanation. This derives from Kafka's most famous novel *The Trial* (1925) and yet this sinister impression does little justice to the subtlety of Kafka's work, to the way in which he avoided dualistic thinking or to his social conscience and left-wing leanings. This article, therefore, revisits two of his major novels and one short story so as to draw out the important insights that they provide into the way that bureaucratic organizations reinforce 'distance' between human beings. Lowy (1997) asserts that Kafka 'had a profound insight into the way the bureaucratic machine operates like a blind network of gears in which the relations between individuals become a thing or an independent object' (Lowy, 1997: 128). And, as a novelist, Kafka was able to provide insights into the subjectivity, emotions and complexity of distance that serves to bring the 'subject matter to life' (Knights and Willmott, 1999: 5). Hence he 'captured the anxiety of the modern age' (Litowitz, 2002: 104), which alerts us to and helps us to emotionally connect with trends that continue to this day (see, for example, McCabe, 2007b; Ritzer, 2008).

A recent article in *Organization* has drawn upon the work of Kafka and differentiated his insights into bureaucracy from those of Max Weber. In doing so, Hodson et al. (2012) link Weber to conformity or 'the formal-rational' aspects of organizational life (Hodson et al., 2012: 265). By contrast, 'the Kafkaesque elements of bureaucracy' are argued to emphasize 'divergent goals, unwritten rules, patrimonialism and chaos' (Hodson et al., 2012: 269). The authors suggest that 'chaos, with its unpredictability and chronic ambiguity, is perhaps the most defining feature of Kafka's vision of bureaucracy' (Hodson et al., 2012: 258). This dualism between conformity and nonconformity or order and chaos, seems to me to obscure the complexity of Kafka's work.

Kafka was undoubtedly sensitive to the unpredictable, underbelly of organizational life but, like Weber, he was acutely concerned with conformity whereby through the bureaucratic dynamic, organizations can operate 'without regard for persons' (Weber, 1946: 214). Indeed, for me, Kafka attended to nonconformity precisely to challenge and suggest alternatives to the dangers of conformity.

Through linking Kafka to nonconformity, Hodson et al. (2012) present an understanding of bureaucratic organizations that seeks to disavow the Weberian formal-rational model. In doing so, they attempt to elucidate how organizations work in a way 'that fully incorporates Kafka's darker vision of uncertainty, deceit, informal agreements and personal power' (Hodson et al., 2012: 272) and yet, for me, this fundamentally misses the point. The darkness of Kafka's vision lies in conformity *not* nonconformity. Hence he considers what could happen when the formal-rational model is taken to its extreme – when human beings become so distanced from each other that they begin to regard each other as mere cogs in the machine. Both Kafka and Weber shared this fear and yet through his fiction Kafka was able to bring it to life. In the following account I provide three examples of this.

In *The Trial* (1925), Kafka explores the experiences of 'K', whose life is threatened, when warders come to his home to arrest him. The warders refuse to say what 'K' is charged with and, throughout the book, this charge haunts 'K' both in the bank where he works and in his daily life. In a Chapter of the book entitled 'The Whipper', Kafka introduces a character who has been instructed to whip the warders who first arrested 'K'. They are to be whipped because 'K' has 'complained about' and has 'reported' them to the authorities (Kafka, 1925: 66–67). To his astonishment, 'K' finds the whipper, who is about to perform his duties, in an out of the way room in the bank where he works. 'K's' alarm is compounded because he has not informed the bank, as his employer, of his arrest. 'K' communicates to the whipper that it is not the warders who are guilty but rather 'it's the organization which is guilty' (Kafka, 1925: 68) or those 'senior officials, not one of whom had yet ventured to face him' (Kafka, 1925: 70). Here Kafka appears to suggest that it is those who are most removed, most distant, that are the guilty ones for it is they who create and give the instructions without apparent concern for others – the strategists, executives, directors and senior managers. The whipper explains that he will not be put off carrying out his duties because 'I am appointed to whip, so I whip' (Kafka, 1925: 68). The Whipper then, is removed from those he is about to whip just as the authorities are divorced from 'K': both have imbibed a distanced, bureaucratic way of being.

The warders who are about to be whipped, complain to 'K', because they had 'had every prospect of advancement and would surely have become whippers' (Kafka, 1925: 67) themselves, had he not reported them. They are not concerned with the suffering of those they might have whipped but only with the threat to their 'careers' (Kafka, 1925:). It has been posited that 'responsibility emanates from proximity, as social distance increases, moral responsibility decreases' (Srinivas, 1999: 611) but Kafka suggests that even those who are as close to another as to be able to tear the flesh from their back can be distant from them. I take this to mean supervisors, line managers and middle managers. In this way, the problem of distance goes beyond a consideration of 'leaders' (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002; Collinson, 2005) or those strategic thinkers at the top of the organization.

Kafka does not exempt 'K' or us from responsibility for the problem of distance and so his work urges reflexivity, which is still unusual in organization studies. Hence 'K' gives up trying to bribe the whipper to stop the flogging *only* when *his* personal position or career is threatened. That is to say, it is only when his clerks might discover the flogging taking place that 'K' allows it to continue for such a discovery threatens 'K's' career. Only then, 'was everything at an end' for 'Nobody

could expect K to make this sacrifice' (Kafka, 1925: 70). The point is clear, 'K's' life has been threatened by distant, unknown others and yet he is (we are) unwilling to sacrifice his (our) job or career, to protect those who are about to be whipped because he is (we are) distant from their concerns. Though far less graphic, these insights are relevant to the case study to follow because as we shall see whole layers of management from senior strategists to middle managers to supervisors, were distant from the concerns of those on the frontline.

The second source for inspiration for this article comes from Kafka's (1926) other classic novel *The Castle*, which can also be read as a critique of bureaucratic organizations and the distance that is generated through them. The novel features a Land Surveyor, also called 'K', who arrives at a village that is dominated by a Castle. Although recruited and instructed by the Castle authorities, 'K' struggles unsuccessfully to gain admittance to the Castle. The book shares many similarities with *The Trial* in that it is suffused with opposites including top down power and resistance; hope and fear; defiance and subservience; conformity and nonconformity. Kafka (1926) never falls into the dualistic trap of attending only to the 'dark side' of power/authority for always resistance and alternative conditions of possibility can be glimpsed. Both conditions run together even if we are left with a perplexing reality rather than a way that is clearly signposted for us. Throughout *The Castle*, we observe 'K' striving to make sense of how power is exercised. A messenger, who relays notes from the Castle to 'K', also searches for meaning in the meaningless work that he does. In this way, we can see that Hodson et al. (2012) are quite right to have highlighted the 'confusion' (Hodson et al., 2012: 257) that is a feature of Kafka's work. Kafka's allegorical tale is nonetheless grounded in materiality for economic discipline gives teeth to the authority of the Castle. Hence it is the messenger's fear of losing 'his job' (Kafka, 1926: 163) that prevents him from asking what is really going on and, it is his family's experience and fear of 'poverty' (Kafka, 1926: 166), that prevents them from urging the messenger to resign from his meaningless post. These insights highlight that the bureaucratic order cannot simply be wished away because it is intertwined with the economic vulnerabilities that infuse our lives such that we tolerate and reproduce extant conditions because to do otherwise threatens our livelihood.

The Castle explores how 'respect' for authority is 'instilled into you in all sorts of ways' (Kafka, 1926: 164), which produces a terrifying acquiescence on the part of the villagers and those who serve the Castle. The villagers accept the hierarchical structure of society and this serves to divide and individualize them. They define themselves as 'lesser folk', who 'stick to the rules' (Kafka, 1926: 13). The Castle and its authorities, appear to be omniscient and omnipotent, for one is merely a 'tool' (Kafka,1926:104) of an 'impregnable' and 'indestructible' (Kafka, 1926: 104) distant authority that one learns to 'love'. In this way, Kafka could equally be talking about the case study to follow, where both managers and staff have learned to be 'employees' (Jacques, 1996) and, especially those in senior management positions, think and act 'as a representative of the power and prestige of the entire structure' (Merton, 1940: 566).

Kafka does not, however, present power as totalizing hence the hierarchical distance of the Castle authorities from those they control and the complexity through which the bureaucratic organization functions is, as Kafka (1926) indicates, a fundamental flaw in its operation. Indeed, it creates the type of mistakes that lead 'K' to be appointed and summoned to the Castle in the first place. Hence 'one department arranges this, another that, neither is aware of the other [and so] a degree of confusion may arise' (Kafka, 1926: 54). In this way, Kafka points to the weaknesses and vulnerability of bureaucratic forms of regulation for they lead to errors and create spaces for escape or resistance. The Castle operates through 'distant' authorities that are never seen and sometimes decisions are made *as if* by 'the official machinery' itself 'without the aid of the officials' (Kafka, 1926: 62). The type of problems that this gives rise to are evident in the case study to follow, where

senior managers act in ways, which suggest that they cannot 'see' those on the end of strategic designs or consider alternative ways of organizing.

Towards the end of the book, 'K' discovers a variety of flaws that permeate the Castle's bureaucracy. Thus there is carelessness and files can 'go missing' (Kafka, 1926: 259). The flaws stem, in part, from the inability of humans to design perfect systems of control and so people find ways to resist as has been found in relation to both 'bureaucratic' and more contemporary work regimes such as Total Quality Management (Knights and McCabe, 2000). Although the Castle officials are not supposed to display 'sympathy or anything of that sort' (Kafka, 1926:193) and managers are required to act ruthlessly with themselves and others in 'strict compliance with and execution of [one's] duties' (Kafka, 1926: 233), Kafka suggests that this is not always the case. Nevertheless, like corporate culturism (see Willmott, 1993), Kafka argues that there is supposed to be no separation between the self and the corporation, for 'ambition seeks fulfilment in work and since the job itself receives priority it is absorbed completely' (Kafka, 1926: 204).

Kafka's literature and life (see Wasserman,2002) illustrate that he was deeply attuned to the devastating human consequences of distance and this is also evident in his short story *In the Penal Colony*. Here, Kafka explores the relationship between an execution machine and the officer responsible for it (Kafka, 1961/2007). The 'torture device' works by 'slowly' carving 'the words' (Lowy, 1997:127) that represent the person's crime deeper and deeper into their flesh until the person dies. The officer, whilst carrying out an execution, explains to a passing traveller 'the procedure' (Kafka, 1961/2007: 169) or 'the process' (Kafka, 1961/2007: 169) involved. It becomes evident that he is imbued with what Weber (1968) termed 'formal rationality', for the 'means' of the execution are more important to him than the 'substantive rationality' or 'end', of executing someone. He is more interested in the workings of the machine, its operation and preservation, than the person who is being executed.

A similar dynamic is evident when strategists forget those on the receiving end of their decision making. The officer becomes annoyed when the traveller is 'distracted by the condemned man' (Kafka, 1961/2007: 158), and, when the latter vomits, he lambasts that 'the machine is being treated like a cowshed' (Kafka, 1961/2007: 163). Finally, when the officer is informed that the machine is to be decommissioned, he allows himself to be killed by it. He identifies with the machine to such an extent that he has become the machine and so, if the machine must perish, so must he. Here Kafka illustrates that distance is not only calamitous for those on the front line but also for those who instigate discipline for it works through their subjectivity thereby corroding their concern for others. Through this short story, Kafka displays his concern with bureaucratic conformity and it seems to me that this is by far the most significant meaning of the story rather than its illustration of nonconformity or 'conflict' in organizations. Hence Hodson et al. (2012) allude to the officer's concern that 'others appear to have the ear of the new Commandant and are intriguing against his prize device' (Hodson et al., 2012: 263). Certainly, Kafka's work illuminates the potential for conflict in organizations but the key to this story is the officer's conformity. It is apparent in his disregard for those he tortures and in his identification with the means and not the ends of his actions.

In stark contrast to this distant officer, Kafka spent his life seeking to help those whom he came into contact with. His work in insurance exposed him to the injuries that workers suffered due to machines that were unsafe. He therefore attended evening classes where he studied Engineering and with this knowledge he helped to modify machines to prevent 'workers from having their fingers amputated' (Wasserman, 2002: 478). Once this is taken into account, then we can look at Kafka's short story as something more than a work of fiction. His life, along with his writing, can be understood as a reflection of his own experiences and, as I see it, a call for us to think about and

diminish the debilitating consequences of the distance that we help to reproduce. This could be read as imposing a managerial interpretation on Kafka or a pedagogic one whereby the value of his work is that it offers 'a more comprehensive route to managerial understanding' (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994: 7). To draw such a conclusion is party true because it is also important to recognize the deeply subversive nature of Kafka's writing which often turns hierarchy on its head whilst avoiding simple interpretations, representations and conclusions (see Kornberger et al., 2006; Munro and Huber, 2012).[1]

The case study

Britlay Bank (pseudonym) is a retail bank with over 1,700 branches in the UK. Successive waves of centralization and the re-engineering of branch processes have culminated in the creation of seven back-office Processing Centres (PCs). This last phase led to 4,000 redundancies which amounted to one-fifth of the branch workforce. As part of the research, a PC was visited that processes accounts for branches in the Northwest of England. The majority of its 240 employees were formerly employed in the branch network and this article focuses primarily on the experiences of those in managerial positions from the PC manager through to the supervisors. The research sought to understand what it is like to work in the bank and to uncover and say something about 'the ways of being and seeing for members of the culture examined' (Van Maanen, 1988: 13). In view of this broad-based focus, a qualitative research approach was deemed necessary as it allows one greater access to a world that is complex, shifting and multifaceted. In order to protect the identity of those who participated in the research, all of the names that are used are pseudonyms.

The empirical research was conducted over a six-month period and involved ten visits to a PC, ten visits to three branches and five visits to the Head Office. Data were collected in three ways, first through 54, 45-minute, tape-recorded interviews. In total, 81 individuals were interviewed both individually and in groups including ten senior and middle managers; six back office managers; six supervisors; five team leaders; six branch managers; 17 branch staff and 31 back-office staff. Second, strategy statements and change documents were analysed to explore how change was communicated to the staff along with the minutes of Customer Service (CS) workshops. Third, during the 25 visits to the bank, 'fieldnotes' (Van Maanen, 1988) were written before, in-between and after interviews that recorded first impressions, passing conversations, details regarding office layout, decor and architecture.

The design of work in the PCs displayed a lack of concern for employees and, when combined with the intense bureaucratic surveillance, it struck me as Kafkaesque. I then revisited Kafka's work 'for inspiration and insight' (De Cock and Land, 2005: 518). The 'distance' between 'K' and the Castle authorities; between 'K' and those about to be whipped; between the officer and those about to be executed, resonated with and brought into sharp relief, the distance that I had observed in the bank between whole layers of management and frontline staff. This fictional and 'fantastic' (De Cock, 2000: 590) literature turned out to be not so fantastic after all and it created a spark and a focus enabling me to translate 'experience … into the intellectual sphere … [whereby one] … gives it form' (Wright Mills, 1959: 199). This was an iterative process that involved moving 'back and forth between existing materials and my own research' (Wright Mills, 1959: 202). The engagement with Kafka was not unidirectional but was 'more akin to a mutual dialogue' (De Cock and Land, 2005: 518). The way in which different hierarchical stratifications within the bank were distant from each other and the dire consequences that followed from this for frontline staff provides the primary focus of the following case study.

The strategy

A process of centralization began in Britlay Bank through the creation of call centres (CCs). Subsequently, cheque processing was centralized through the introduction of Cheque Processing Centres (CPCs). In order to reduce the bank's cost-income ratio, a strategy was then devised to further centralize branch processes and this involved creating seven back-office processing centres. Branch processes were broken down into specialized tasks and transferred onto an automated document image processing (DIP) system. This allows electronic images of documents to be stored, retrieved and processed. In a video that was used to communicate the changes to the branch staff, a TV personality suggested in an empathetic way, that this latest phase of the restructuring was initiated with the staff in mind. Hence she turns to the camera and says:

> You know what it's like, your customers in front of you. The phone's ringing here, another customer's over there. Paperwork everywhere. What do you do first? Well, one answer is to take the paperwork off your shoulders, send it to one central point.

These comments suggest that the PCs were introduced for compassionate reasons 'to take the paperwork' off the 'shoulders' of the staff in the branch network, thereby lightening their burden. Yet the discourse of the senior managers who created the PCs, demonstrated little concern for the staff in the Centres, who are required to process highly specialized and repetitive tasks. This is evident in the comments of the Senior IT Analyst who was responsible for transferring branch processes onto the DIP system:

Author: Have you realized all the benefits that you hoped to achieve?
Kay: You mean cutting all the heads?
Author: Well
Kay: Laughter
Author: Was that the only objective?
Kay: No. Erm yes, I think so yes.

The subjectivity of these managers appeared to reflect that as 'bureaucratic types' they were 'incapable of relating to other individuals as persons' (McDaniel, 1979: 369). Hence the staff were referred to as a 'headcount' – frequently shortened to 'heads' and this is indicative of 'a new type of moral agent, one inculcated in thoughtlessness' (Srinivas, 1999: 612). The initial focus was on cost cutting and, according to Margaret, a member of the Change and Transformation Team, the branches 'took the opportunity to rationalize headcount more than maybe the savings from centralization actually supported'. Margaret asserted that the branches blame Head Office for the job cuts and yet the regional branch divisions 'claimed the heads if you like or removed those they didn't want'.

Sue, the Planning, Control and Design (PCD) Manager, who wrote the business case for the centralization strategy, explained that 'we needed' to simplify the work. Yet this 'need' reflects the desires and concerns – and mechanistic thinking – of those who were responsible for designing the back offices. The type of work that was created, which sought to 'automate the sources wherever possible' (Sue, PCD Manager), was far removed from the concerns of the employees, who might want to work in an exciting and stimulating environment. Robert, the Head of the PCs, explained that the culture of the Bank has traditionally been autocratic and he conceded that 'it's been very hard to acknowledge that maybe the people at the bottom know what they're talking about'. Oscar, the Head of the Change and Transformation team, confirmed this when he commented on his

approach toward change, which is to 'sort of talk to people and get their own issues and concerns, but then very much to do it top down' and so distance appears endemic to the organizational culture. This has resulted in a system of work that did not countenance the needs of the staff but rather viewed them as costs to be controlled or removed. Displaying a subjectivity that is 'methodological, prudent, disciplined' (Merton, 1940: 562) but also distant, Sue explained that the intention was:

> To give us better control and standardization over the service we were providing to customers and there was a drive that it would reduce costs by removing staff from the network.

According to McDaniel (1979), Kafka's novel *The Castle*, illuminates 'a world where means-ends rationality has been extended to its ultimate degree: where all relationships are functional and mechanistic and impersonal – and thus absurd' (McDaniel, 1979: 368). This is redolent of the strategic thinking in Britlay Bank and it is, in part, a condition and consequence of the distance of senior managers from the experience of work for frontline staff. The distance between the strategists and the world inhabited by employees is abundantly apparent in the comments of Henry, the Head of IT, who despite the highly repetitive and monotonous work that he has helped to create, asserted that:

> People love working in the PCs … The main reaction from people was how good the bank are to invest all this technology in us. Yer, that was the overwhelming – 'Oh this big screen, image, when I see what my colleagues have got back in the branches, this is great'.

Henry suggested that everyone 'loves working in the PC' despite the fragmented and standardized nature of the work. One can interpret this as the creation of a 'perfect skin' that allows Henry to forget 'what is happening below' (Pelzer, 2002: 856). Yet Kafka's work prompts us to consider the underbelly of organizational life (see Hodson et al., 2012) so as to reveal what Henry seems to want to distance himself from. If we take Henry's representation as a misinterpretation of how others view the world rather than a misrepresentation, then it resonates with Kafka's position that 'The social world as such is constituted by a web of misunderstandings' (Munro and Huber, 2007: 536). This confusion appears to be exacerbated by the hierarchical distance of Henry from those on the frontline, as his further comments exhibit:

> One of my jobs was to make sure that the centres themselves were environmentally friendly – are conducive to processing. So we [management] actually gave them [staff] the facilities that they er would never have had in the branches. Specific designed desks to actually meet their requirements … introduced exercises for them so they didn't end up with stress syndromes and damaged wrists and backs and limbs and all that sort of stuff. Gave them a restroom that many branches probably never had … sparkling new furniture. You know, we didn't go overboard but actually made it into a reasonable place … and people actually respect them and talk to them more as humans.

Henry was involved in designing the work in the PCs and this design reflected a lack of concern for employee welfare to such an extent that it is apt to lead to 'stress syndromes'. Yet, in a self-congratulatory way, Henry explained that management has introduced exercises and appropriate furniture, so that the work will not physically damage the staff, which is, of course, necessary to avoid legal culpability for such damage.

Even the decisions about where to locate each PC, appear to have been taken with little regard for the staff. The former branch staff tend to live in close proximity to the local branches in which they once worked, but the PCs are located in remote, out-of-town areas. The PC that was visited as

part of this research is located on the edge of a housing estate that has a notorious reputation for crime. No doubt this meant that it was inexpensive for the bank to procure but it effectively ties the staff to the building because there are no shops, cafe's or restaurants nearby which are 'safe' to go to. In view of this, the provision of a 'rest room' is a necessity rather than an act of thoughtfulness as Henry suggested:

> Author: The first time I visited someone was shot
> Steve: That's right. The security bloke across the road, got shot in the leg didn't he?
> Julie: Lovely area in't it? But when it first opened there wasn't a wall around the car park here. They built a wall, put the gates on
> Steve: Cameras, lights, 24-hour surveillance
> Julie: We have shutters that come down over the windows every night. Just getting worse and worse
> Steve: So that doesn't promote going out really. There's hardly any shops to look at.
> (Section Managers)

The staff are geographically shackled to their place of work and little thought seems to have been given to the location except in financial terms. Hence, when the PC first opened it was broken into and computers were stolen. Subsequently, a wall was built around the perimeter of the building and a security gate installed. Security guards and 24-hour surveillance have also been introduced to protect the bank's property from those distant others who live on the adjacent council estate.

The processing centre (PC)

There are seven sections in the PC and each performs discrete, repetitive tasks, such as processing direct debits and standing orders. A section has between 15 and 35 staff. Although Henry stated that 'people love working in the PCs' the minutes from Customer Service workshops record a different experience. Hence, the staff in a Welsh workshop stated that 'people are treated as numbers' and during a Manchester workshop the staff stated that they wanted to be recognized 'as individuals and not a number'. These comments point towards a dehumanizing work experience and indeed the staff at a Stratford workshop commented that they wanted to 'be treated as human beings' for then they 'would feel more at ease'. These insights illustrate how profoundly illogical and absurd work can be when one considers the experiences of those on the frontline.

The work is closely monitored using an IT system called 'Arresting Time' and the staff have monthly reviews along with 6-and 12-monthly appraisals. One might expect such interactions to reduce the 'distance' between managers and the staff but the staff expressed that they are primarily assessed according to impersonal, individual output and error rates. The comments of Joyce, a member of staff on the Account Maintenance section, suggest that the PC managers are distant from the office-floor experience:

> I mean they [management] actually say that it [performance] doesn't only go by the efficiency figures but there's probably a lot of us that would say it does [laughter].

In the PC, supervisors feel divorced even from the layers of management who are immediately above them:

because I haven't got that 'M' in front of my name, I don't see myself as being a manager and the way they treat you here, being a supervisor, you can sometimes be in 'no man's land', because the managers will go off and have a big meeting that we get to hear about or sometimes we don't get to hear about. (Gina, Supervisor, Enquiries)

Gina expressed that she is distant from both the managerial and staff worlds and this seems ripe for exacerbating the type of 'misunderstanding' that Munro and Huber (2012: 536) argue is central to the work of Kafka. In *The Trial*, Kafka (1925) states that the 'hierarchical structure' facing 'K' 'was endless and beyond the comprehension of even the initiated' (Kafka,1925: 93–94). The result was that 'business simply appeared' to 'minor officials' who 'did not know where it had come from, then passed it on, and they were not told where it was going' (Kafka,1925: 94). This resonates with the experience of work in the PC, for the staff process images of documents that flash onto their VDU screens that then disappear once they have finished their part of the process. The hierarchical and functional disjointedness seems likely to generate misunderstanding for as Gina, a supervisor, explained 'We do not know what's going on'.

The staff complete individual time sheets each day and are required to record the time that they spend processing different types of work. The staff are allocated to work queues which have targets for processing items per hour. On the Mandate section, for example, the staff must complete 90 signature checks or process 125 cancelled cheques each hour. Data is fed into a work tracking system, which produces weekly performance reports for each individual and section. This machine based work militates against social interaction creating distance between the staff as the comments of Julie, a Section Manager, reveal:

In a branch, if someone's on standing orders and they've got an in-tray piled up everyone can see that. So, when they've finished their own work, everyone will come and help with that. Whereas here, if you finish your queue, they, operators, then go to the team leaders or supervisors and say 'I've got no work'. And then the supervisors say 'Right I'll put you on such and such a queue now'. So they just go back to the machine they don't liaise with the other people who are already working on that type of work. (Section Manager)

The work is organized so that employees 'just go back to the machine', which suggests that distance is reinforced through how the technology has been deployed (see Srinivas, 1999: 616). The majority of the staff perform the same task day after day, week after week, stretching into months before being moved onto an equally repetitive task. Surveillance saturates life. Work is checked, in some instances, by one's peers. The staff do not know whose work they are checking or who is checking their work. Like 'K', the staff 'only observe the organizational ladder, never the final authority at the top' (McDaniel, 1979:367). Errors identified by the branch staff or by customers are logged and 'each case is investigated individually' (Kafka, 1925: 137).

The PC manager is a friendly, personable individual, who did not want the PC to be managed like a 'factory' and yet this is precisely how a number of the staff described it. Donald, a team member, commented that 'You feel a bit depressed, suppressed at times by 'em, with these error logs' but this was not entirely due to the PC manager. Indeed, he described the difficulty of trying to change the way in which the managers beneath him manage:

Head of PC: We've never said no talking out there but the nature of the work makes you look at the screen
Author: Although, you know, people do feel that they're not supposed to talk
Head of PC: Well I know, I know and told the managers, told the supervisors, told the staff. I've never said no talking. I expect the staff to act with maturity. They know

> when we're busy. We show figures. When we're busy I expect heads down, when we're not so busy, you know, just act as an adult.

It appears that 'One merely moves from one misunderstanding to another' (Munro and Huber, 2012: 536) for despite his instructions, the PC is being managed in an autocratic, figure-driven way, reflecting the wider bank culture. This reflects and reproduces the distance between the PC manager and the managers who report to him. Nevertheless, despite refuting a policy of 'no talking', the PC manager is clearly concerned with performance and expects 'heads down' when the PC is busy. In this sense, he displays what Kafka refers to as the 'bureaucratic mind' (Heinemann, 1996: 256) in terms of an obsession with order and conformity but he simultaneously lambasted his management team for taking this too far, which is precisely the concern of both Weber and Kafka.

Hierarchical distance on the office floor

The PC is only a small part of the bank and senior managers are far removed from the staff and yet the hierarchical structure seems capable of distancing even local managers from the staff as this section explores. Kafka's dramatic representation of distance and the neglect of others that flows from it are redolent of life in the PC. Yet, despite this, some supervisors argued that there is more teamwork in the PC than there was in the former branches. This belief may reflect how they experience work, their aspirations or perhaps the official corporate discourse but it is disconnected from the lives of the staff:

> Author: Is the work more rewarding here, now, than it was in the branches?
> Jan: You never really thought about it in the branch. It's nice to say 'We've cleared the queue' here. You can see that you've achieved something at the end of the day
> Kim: At the end of the day when you've got a nil, nil, nil right across all your queues and you think 'Oh you've done it'
> Jan: And it's like a team achievement isn't it? Whereas at branch, come Friday night, you might think 'Thank god for that, my tray's empty'. But it was only you getting the buzz out of it. It wasn't the branch was it?
> Kim: Yes it's definitely more teamwork.
> (Supervisors)

These supervisors suggested that the work in the PC is more rewarding than in the branches and is characterized by teamwork yet this flies in the face of the individualized nature of the work and the emphasis on individual output and error rates.

The distance between the staff and management was highlighted during a Customer Service programme for all 1,400 staff in the seven PCs. This was introduced two years after the PCs were set up. It was a day long course and, during the first hour, the staff were tasked to consider the 'reality' of their working lives and a 'fantasy' situation, which would be necessary to deliver improved service. This task unleashed so much anger that the course facilitators were unable to progress beyond it and this took management completely by surprise such was their distance from the work experience of the staff. Indeed, the above account of teamwork contrasts sharply with the views expressed by the staff during the workshop. Hence Yvonne, who was a workshop facilitator during the Customer Service programme, articulated how the staff felt:

The majority of people said that they didn't fully feel part of a team because they were all so worried about their own figures, their performance on a daily basis, they didn't really get involved with others.

Jeninne, who was also a workshop facilitator, endorsed Yvonne's views, for the staff expressed that:

you are treated as an individual because of your targets. So you've got certain targets and you had to process your work in a certain time and they felt that that dropped the teamwork side because you could be sat there thinking 'I've got to hit my targets'. So if someone asks me a question I'm just gonna say 'I haven't got time' or if the phones ringing 'I ain't answering it someone else can answer it' and that was affecting the teamwork issue as well.

The above account points towards the limitations of bureaucracy and to the potential ways of escape that Kafka alluded to in *The Castle*. Hence the staff resisted through refusing to help each other or by failing to answer the phone. The staff resented the individualizing way that they are treated; the boring and monotonous work; along with the emphasis on error rates and output as the remarks of one supervisor, concerning the workshops, testify:

Gary: I think they [management] got a shock
Author: Well what were they expecting to get out of it then?
Gary: I think they expected to get out of it a lot of gripes that the staff had, but I don't think they realized how bad it were. Somebody said that it's like a concentration camp I think [laughter], which is a fair assessment in't it?

The Head of the PC reflected upon why the staff response to the Customer Service programme, was such a 'shock' for management:

Just the strength. Erm, probably because during the first 12 months it was, for me personally, it was so exciting. Adrenalin, and that was shared by a lot of the managers and probably a lot of the supervisors … although I was open, friendly, with a lot of the people out there, nobody would say to the manager 'Can I have a quiet word? It's shit out there really'.

This manager suggested that during the first 12 months of the PCs operation, he inhabited a different world from his staff. At that time, the management team was riding an adrenalin-charged, roller coaster of change. It was exhilarating for them because they had to master the operation of a new PC and yet this excitement divorced them from the frontline work experience. This distance seems likely to continue because the back office managers often denied 'polyphony' (Kornberger et al., 2006: 23) or the negative experience of work as voiced by the staff, even as the Customer Service programme that they had introduced, revealed it:

Author: Are there any words that sort of describe the culture of the PC?
               (pause)
Di: We're focused on quality. And I would say it's basically 90% a happy centre. I said to you we care about the people and that's genuine. The managerial team, the great part of it, really genuinely care about the people and, when I heard some of the comments coming out of the Customer Service programme, we're actually shocked and hurt and they felt that we'd let our team down.
               (Processing Manager)

Irrespective of Di's sense of shock/hurt, she did not appear to grasp the oppressive humdrumness of the lives of the staff, such that she described it as '90% a happy centre'. It seems that even managers who claim to 'genuinely care' about the staff can be removed from and therefore 'misunderstand' (Munro and Huber, 2012: 536) their work experiences. Yvonne, one of the workshop facilitators, explained the sentiments expressed by the staff during the workshops and they underline that the PC is far from a 'happy' centre:

> They didn't feel there was any gratitude. No one ever said 'Thank you'. No one said 'Well done'. It was only ever 'Hold on, you've done something wrong'. They were saying 'We don't want bottles of wine or chocolates just a simple "Thanks" and to be made to feel more valuable'.

Yvonne's remarks, when juxtaposed with those of Di, clearly express different worlds, which points towards a disconnection between local managers and the staff. In terms of the future, Yvonne expressed that managers need to 'have that empathy there, for when you're dealing with things like, they need a night off for a nativity play type of thing'. Clearly, empathy is one important means through which to reduce the distance between managers and staff. Yet some section managers, who heard and acknowledged the staff comments during the workshops, remained distant from the staff experience and, in some instances, appeared to lack empathy:

Steve: the actual workshops, the one I attended anyway was just a moaning shop. I felt meself, biting me tongue half the time
Julie: Yer I did
Steve: But having said that, it was a workshop for people to air their views, so you had to do that …
Julie: But was worthwhile though, 'cause before that I don't think we realized like the teams were as disgruntled
Steve: Yer that's true.
       (Section Managers)

On the one hand, these managers dismissed the views of the staff as 'moaning' and yet, on the other, they conceded that before the workshops they were unaware of the staff experience. They did not appear to want to legitimize the disgruntlement. It seems, therefore, that the problem of distance endures and to begin to change this situation, managers such as Julie and Steve, will need to look at, and understand the world, as their staff experience it.

Discussion and conclusion

Fiction has the emotional and sensitizing power to illuminate and heighten our awareness of issues that have become buried or petrified in our taken-for-granted ways of viewing the world. Kafka's work provides vivid insights that can help us to look anew at the complexity and dire consequences of distance for human beings. His work helps us to push bureaucratic thinking and scientific rationalism 'to the limits of their assumptions' (De Cock, 2000: 603) thereby urging new ways of being and organizing. His fiction can be understood 'as a weapon against the mythologies of the new bureaucratic order' (Munro and Huber, 2012: 533). Hence his 'counter-mythologies' and especially his emphasis on 'misunderstanding' call into question the rational order (Munro and Huber, 2012: 536) whilst simultaneously questioning its inner workings. This is a valuable contribution because although 'good novels can educate better managers'

(Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994: 1) they can also be subversive and therefore lead us to question the status quo.

Heinmann (1996) asserts that the 'bureaucratic mind' of which Kafka wrote extensively 'reflects both the acceptance of authority as a basis for attachment to a community and the paralysis of a restlessly critical consciousness that makes impossible any reconciliation between self and other' (Heinemann, 1996: 257). The 'critical consciousness', that is alive in his work, offers one means through which to ameliorate the debilitating consequences of distance. Ameliorate in the sense of encouraging us to think about others rather than simply pursuing our individual agendas or blindly following what we believe the bureaucratic order asks of us. This is no small feat, for as Kafka's work so ably illustrates 'one of the important features of the bureaucratic labyrinth is that it takes a while before you are going to notice that you are increasingly absorbed by its complexities' (Ten Bos, 2004: 16). Hence the managers at numerous levels in Britlay Bank had become so absorbed by the strategizing, the processes, the surveillance, the technology, the output and error rates that they simply did not see the other who suffered beneath them. Many were shocked, therefore, when they finally heard their voices but not so shocked as to seriously do anything about their complaints. This also applies to the staff and to us for we become so absorbed in the details of our toils that we may fail to see or challenge the labyrinth.

Although consciousness of the problem of distance is a first step towards ameliorating its effects, it is important to recognize that to challenge established mechanistic and distanced ways of thinking and acting, is likely to meet with resistance. Moreover, if distance is reduced through alternative forms of work organization (e.g. teamwork) that prove to be equally intense (see Barker, 1993) and serve merely to reproduce embedded inequalities – then it is simply a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire. Nor is there any guarantee that endeavours to reduce distance will produce more humane organizations partly because of unintended consequences (see Kornberger et al., 2006). This is no excuse for inaction, however, for there is a need to translate employee 'concerns into the managers reality' (Kornberger et al., 2006: 25) and to create 'space for voices not normally heard' (Kornberger et al., 2006: 15). This article has drawn on Kafka to illuminate the destructive consequences of distance in terms of the neglect of others. It has sought to challenge 'the passivity of the manager' by suggesting that they/we need not conform whereby they/we 'become a cog in the machine' (Srinivas, 1999: 621–622) and thereby fail to see the other. It needs to be recognized, however, that the economic, political, educational, institutional and cultural obstacles to alternative ways of organizing are immense. Change is unlikely to arise through benevolence but through education, political will and struggle on the part of those who suffer due to such distance.

Kafka does not provide simple solutions either of the revolutionary or managerial kind and so his work speaks to us of the everyday ambiguities, struggles and dilemmas that we all confront. The characters and creatures that he presents struggle to cope with and understand the complex and contradictory demands and situations that they face. In his account of the 'Whipper', 'K' is appalled at the prospect of people being whipped. He knows both emotionally and ethically that he must act to prevent this and yet he remains selfishly preoccupied with securing his job and career. This is redolent of our contemporary lives in that we are preoccupied with our own labyrinths in terms of balancing family versus career; publishing versus teaching; individual advancement versus a concern for others. These existential dilemmas are vividly portrayed in Kafka's (1961/2007) short story *The Burrow*, which describes an isolated, mole-like creature and his constant and competing anxieties around the need to fortify his burrow to ensure his personal safety and his longing to connect with others (see Heinmann,1996).

To conclude, each of us reads a text in a unique way as we bring to it our own life experiences and observations. Though less dramatic and savage than Kafka's fictional accounts, for me, his work exposes the problems and dynamics that can arise in contemporary organizations. This is evident when leaders, strategists and senior managers focus on cutting jobs or consider employees as merely automatons to be slotted into holes that they have helped to create. Yet the problem of distance does not end there, for it is apparent when middle managers become preoccupied with numerical systems of accountability, and fail to see the human on the receiving end of them. It is evident when supervisors deny the suffering of those they work with on a daily basis. Kafka's insights are unsettling because they force us to look again at the violence that we do to others through bureaucratic mechanisms. True to Kafka, this can be read as an inevitable outcome of the misunderstanding that characterizes everyday life and yet it can also be seen as a product of the distance that we reproduce through bureaucratic ways of organizing. Kafka's work demands that we look again at our own lives and actions so as to consider the ways in which we may have begun to conform. He urges us to see the human and not simply the machine or the system.

Note

1   See also Christian De Cock's (2000) work on Jorge Luis Borges.

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