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# *Microstoria*: Reducing the Pro-elite Bias in Management Research

**Abstract**

Much management research, more than perhaps any other neighbouring social science, and especially in recent times, has been organised around elites – founders, CEOs, top management teams, and board members – as the privileged locus and production site of meaningful knowledge. We propose *microstoria* as a methodological frame which could contribute to reducing that pro-elite bias by shedding light on how organisational and working life is experienced by significantly under-represented groups – non-elite workers, contingent labour, and others on the periphery of the firm – who are often overlooked (or even rejected) by traditional management research programmes. We give some examples of *microstoria* methodology in use, including an illustration of strategy-as-practice (SaP). The approach debunks wrongly positioned views that a focus on the smaller stories is insignificant and lacks impact. Instead, considering them includes the much-neglected stories: placing small units of research within the bigger context, *microstoria* prioritises the creation and sharing of contemporaneous storylines of people or groups whose polyphonic voices are often subjugated in objective discourse. We present a frame for conducting *microstoria* research and argue that its conduct helps researchers look in newer and more impactful places than in traditional top-down methods only.

***Keywords:***

*Microstoria*, marginalised groups, polyphonic voices, little people, strategy-as-practice

## Introduction

Management research has conventionally focused on examining the key actors directly as the unit of study. It is often overly-focused on 'the top' or specifically targeting the centre/core of the firm as an object of study and as a source of information. This may result in a one-sided understanding of organisational life: a pro-elite bias. A variety of actors 'distant from the top' (peripheral) are 'marginalised' in research, even though they can be crucial in practice. Such a research tradition has been embedded in upper-echelons logic which assumes those who sit at the top/centre of the organisation have the greatest knowledge and significance, and therefore hold the highest value, or because it is more convenient/easier to do so than to find alternative actors to investigate. Such topics include leadership theory, CEO succession, board diversity, top-management teams, etc., especially in areas where decision-making is the subject of study, such as strategy. Yet, inside firms, actors that sit at the margins – or those who are important but marginalised for one reason or another – are seldom the focus of traditional management research programmes. Common sense dictates that ignoring the marginalised is destructive at worse, and incorrect and lacking in impact at best. It is like focusing on the melody of a piece of music and denying the harmonies, or focusing on tennis players in a tournament while ignoring the efforts of the ball-boys/girls and umpire who in fact ensure the smooth running of the game. Regardless of the accuracy of the impact, the marginalised have long been neglected in management research (see Bell et al., 2017; Spiller et al., 2020), and considering them can assist researchers to look for meaning in new places and in different ways. The purpose of this viewpoint is to reduce the pro-elite bias in management research by bringing to the attention of our fellow researchers and academic colleagues the methodological approach of *microstoria*.

We regard *microstoria* as a narrative analysis approach that defies grand narratives of macro-history and operates at the marginalised level of small groups where most of real life or important organisational activity takes place that would otherwise be omitted by other methods. Following Lewis et al (2023, pp.147), we refer to those less visible actors from the societal

perspective as ‘little people’, as the marginalised “who depart from the dominant majority and have been traditionally excluded and invisible for not fitting societal norms of gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, health or other arbitrarily constructed distinction”. They are not technically ‘little’ in the smallness of the roles they play, nor are they necessarily positioned physically far away from the central actors in terms of where they reside or work in the physical sense of being at the margins. Instead, they are considered not playing the ‘main-role’ of any storyline, as a result of being marginalised, and are often unheard or even voiceless. These may typically include subgroups not fitting within mainstream society (Wolff, 2015), such as ethnic minorities, day labourers, migrants and peasants; or intersectional subcategories (Collins and Bilge, 2020) of LGBTQIA, sex workers, ‘nobodies’ and other identities of concern.

Beyond societal concerns, such as for management research, the marginalised may include actors whose position is considered low-skilled – such as cleaners, receptionists, personal assistants – or low-paid, such as machine operators and teaching assistants – or whoever (wrongly) are regarded as insignificant, and yet undertake important communicative and coordinative activity but are rarely consulted in key organisational decision-making and are therefore under-researched. This is absolutely not to say that there is no research on cleaners and receptionists, or gay people and ethnic minorities. In such research, they are the direct focus of the study about their specific role (they are not marginal to the issue at hand). However, they become ignored in research involving higher level concerns where their ‘smallness’ within that system works against their involvement (they are peripheral to the issue of principal investigation). Thus, the target of *microstoria* may include and encompass 'the marginal', i.e. groups of people who are 'little' (low/poor/powerless) in the circumstance; the 'peripheral' (those who are distant from the centre but perhaps powerful in practice); and the 'marginalised' (neither powerless nor peripheral, but unheard, hence voiceless, like the middle managers).

Traditionally excluded and invisible in management circles, we know little about their world and how their views and perspectives could potentially redirect our attention to novel insights in our theorising efforts (Muzanenhamo and Chowdhury, 2023; Spiller et al., 2020; Eberhard et al., 2019). In this regard, we frequently rely on public comments and press narratives on their existence and life-worlds, which are often based on 'racialised tropes', conjectures, or obliviousness to develop our theories about them with limited recourse to their sensitivities, culture, beliefs and wellbeing. And in organisational research, we rely on assumptions about the importance they place on the overall process.

The new turn to bringing the marginalised to the centre of engaged research, or to at least being heard, does not only ensure their meaningful inclusion in objective discourse. It provides opportunities, potentialities, and possibilities to understanding and valuing the lived experiences of these historically marginalised groups (Atewologun and Sealy, 2011; Cetina, 1999). Zooming in on, and tracing the progress of, specific actors have long been used as a prominent approach for processual and organisational research (see Chau and Witcher, 2005). Many global challenges currently await us for which management research is important (see Chau, 2019). George et al. (2016) further add, enabling uninhibited participation of the marginalised in tackling global challenges could make us all, including management scholars, become more sensitive to the nuances of the marginalised others, and how our decisions could impact their overall wellbeing. These calls to ensure marginalised voices are represented in engaged management research have led to interest among management scholars to explore the persistence of marginality of individuals and groups located within and beyond the theoretical boundaries of the firm (Maclean et al., 2023; Haar and Martin, 2022; Imas et al., 2012). This attention shift is understandable, given the surge in demand for fair representation, and a growing recognition in the world view of the marginalised in theorising social orders and relationships on multiple levels (Fenton and Langley, 2011). However, reaching and conducting research on marginalised groups can pose real methodological challenges, given

that some are invisible, and others (e.g., illegal migrants) often do not wish to be found, live under the radar, wish not to be promoted to core roles in organisations, and actively evade research surveys (Cheong, 2023).

Much of the difficulty in researching marginalised groups, more generally, has been underpinned by ethical concerns (Bhopal and Deuchar, 2015) and the relevance of inclusivity in strengthening our theories (Woelders, 2015). What is missing from the extant business and management literature is a methodological framing – distinct from rhetorical, theoretical, or social framings – for credibly extracting and representing first-person accounts from the marginalised themselves, rather than about them. Hargadon and Wadhwani (2023) offer a theoretical case for microhistory in management research; sociological, anthropological and historical work provides rhetorical and social grounding. Management is still deprived of a procedural account of how to source the voices of non-elite organisational actors, conduct the fieldwork, and represent the resulting micro-stories without ventriloquism. Filling this void is crucial because it leads to opportunities to emphasise who is important to involve, and the commitment to microanalysis, agency, and the power of the marginalised to have a view. Not all the general understanding of how such accounts could be leveraged to shine light on incoherent discontinuities, contradictions and the ruptures of everyday life of the marginalised (Lane, 2019).

So, we ask, how can management scholars interested in studying marginalised groups overcome the challenges associated with giving them an authentic voice that could breed radically new interpretations of their situatedness? In response, we propose that the methodology/approach of '*microstoria'* (originating back to the basis of Ginzburg, 1976) is scientifically sound and a legitimate approach among the plurality of 'canons of rigour' we should admit (Grandori and Morley, 2022). This ensures that marginalised voices get the opportunity to narrativise their life-histories and talk openly about perceptions of their lived (or worked) experiences in ways that emphasise the absences, silences, and repressed

meanings, that are otherwise ignored or assumed (Alvesson, 2003). The objective of this paper is to explicate how readily available stories related to marginalised individuals could be captured and represented in engaged research and present *microstoria* as a methodological frame to inform the way management scholars studying marginalised groups could capture the 'existential condition of [their] research subjects in a [consummately] meaningful way' (Venkatesh, 1995, p. 36).

**What is *microstoria*?**

Presented as the stories of 'little people', *microstoria* privileges the creation and sharing of contemporaneous storylines by people or groups whose polyphonic voices are often subjugated in objective discourse. A narrative turn in contemporary social theory, *microstoria* places primacy on the use of micro- (and otherwise unheard) stories recounted by marginalised individuals to theorise them (Imas et al., 2012). The new turn to *microstoria* is in part a response to the postmodernist clarion call to challenge grand narratives of macro-history that only favour the 'great man', totalises 'little people' histories into one sub-societal narrative of power without margins, and renders local ways of knowing that are unscientific or simply illegitimate (Bastien et al., 2023; Gray, 2023). This is a quest to trace bottom-up stories of the ignored part of historical and everyday accounts (Linstead et al., 2014).

Placing these often-small groups or units of research within larger contexts provides opportunities for intensive investigation of a well-defined smaller unit of research, allowing for the variation of scales of analysis that could reproduce radically new interpretations of commonly accepted grand narratives (Bastien et al., 2023; Bell, 2017). What makes *microstoria* different, interesting and appealing is that it involves taking risks in challenging non-trivial assumptions in ways that have the potential to capture the attention of policymakers within the contingencies of making reforms, influence the 'powerful' to act, and motivate us to search for answers to counterintuitive and meaningful questions that keep cropping up

(Linstead et al., 2014; Boje, 2001). Innovative and less formulaic, we argue that *microstoria* research in its purity could produce learning that can make a real change to phenomena at the lower end of organisational and/or social hierarchies, which in turn, increases our understanding of complex problems, and how they could be challenged in meaningful ways.

Doing *microstoria* is about fulfilling a promise of a 'conversation' between us, as researchers, and the marginalised and underrepresented who may have been historically overlooked in generating knowledge. This conversation need not be literal – it is an interaction that is not necessarily interpretivist in the discursive form of data collection. It can take place neo-positivistly in the form of survey research and other approaches, albeit less effectively (see later). However, this perspective, we argue, provides management scholars with the opportunities and potentialities to situate themselves and their own theorising within the contingencies in which marginality plays out in context, regardless of how the data were collected. Aimed at challenging hegemonic grand narratives which do not hold up when tested against the concrete reality of small-scale life (Adas, 2012), *microstoria* as a conversation is in search of hidden voices and unrecognised perspectives and seeks to turn them into narratives (Bruner, 1987; Hollinshead and Maclean, 2007; Czarniawska, 1998). In particular, "questions are considered, rephrased and analysed with the [marginalised] so that they can discuss how they experience their world and what kind of things are meaningful to them" (Dougherty, 2004: p. 40). The collection of such stories creates more nuanced accounts.

To explicate how to do, and who does, *microstoria*, we extend the seminal work of Hargadon and Wadhwani (2023) on microhistory in two directions. First, we shift the emphasis from theorising with microhistory to a methodological frame to credibly source, extract, and represent first-person accounts of the marginalised in business settings. Second, we reframe the target from theory-building per se to a specific class of management problems that *microstoria* can resolve, or resolve differently: elite-respondent bias in studies of strategy and leadership; survivor bias in entrepreneurship research, where failed and precarious founders

are unheard; absent voices in studies of platform and gig labour; under-representation of non-elite perspectives in corporate social responsibility and sustainability research; and silenced accounts in studies of organisational misconduct, harassment, and whistle-blowing. In this respect, microhistory provides us with the strategic option of reducing the temporal scale of engaged management research in ways that open new vistas for research into "several phenomena that remain elusive to contemporaneous and longitudinal studies" (Phillips and Ranganathan, 2025).

**Levels of *microstoria***

*Microstoria* research can be carried out at different levels. *Microstoria* focuses on 'exceptional normal' actions (the ordinary, everyday behaviours that are extraordinary when noted), unintended consequences, non-linear and emergent processes, contingent processes, and unobserved or inconceivable processes. To make this concrete: the canonical micro-historical exemplar – Ginzburg's (1976) reconstruction of the cosmology of a single sixteenth-century miller from a handful of inquisitorial records – translates directly into a management register. The equivalent move would be a deep account of a single warehouse picker's improvised workaround during a peak-season system failure, or a contingent worker's daily negotiation of an unstable shift schedule: actions that are unremarkable to executives but revelatory of how the operation actually holds together at the level where work is done.

As an extension to Hargadon and Wadhwani (2023), we contend that doing *microstoria* provides additional opportunities for harnessing multiple perspectives in bringing to the fore problems that beset organisational and social systems. This may surface through relational dialogue that allows for generative theorising that better addresses the key challenges facing people whose voices are often subjugated in objective discourse. In this regard, we suggest that *microstoria* could be usefully applied to a plethora of micro-phenomena linked to the grand

crises of our times, offering an analytical lens to engage with or investigate how the marginalised make meaning of the world (see Chau, 2019). This we do by disambiguating three ways of doing *microstoria*, each emphasising how scholars could deal with the inherent tensions, overlaps, and varying boundaries between the elements of the micro, meso, and macro; marginalised vs central; and 'little' versus 'grand'; in theorising social life by engaged management research.

*'Micro' (individual histories) vs meso and macro*

Dealing with the tensions between the individuals as carriers of rules and the systems they organise, and the population structure of systems of meso, the approach here not only prioritises the dynamic relations between the micro and the macro but also presupposes a relational ontology of individuation (Chia and Rasche, 2020). Here, language, discourse and other culturally specific actions of the individual become the fundamental medium through which we capture the processuality and relationality of *microstoria*, and its emancipatory potential. Amid the temporality and sequencing of narrated experiences, the overlaps between the micro and the macro provide opportunities to capture the realities of the marginalised, both in flight and *insitu*, and give form to the "sense of meaning that others give to their own situation through interpretative understanding of their language, art, gestures and politics" (Smith, 1983: p.12). This way, it focuses on bringing out meaningful connections between the storied experiences of the marginalised and rendering them intelligible in ways that challenge unitary and often universalising macro-histories which may be untenable.

*Marginalised vs central groups*

Emphasising the epistemic voids between the 'micro and meso', *microstoria* helps bridge the lived experiences of marginalised groups. Throwing light on the varied boundaries between these group categories, *microstoria* here addresses the hitherto missing questions relating to

how the relationship between marginalised and central groups are enacted in practice, the tensions from which these relations emerge and that they trigger. It also provides opportunities to identify recurrent discourse features necessary to extend our understanding of the relation between the linguistic forms of texts generated by the marginalised, and the broader socio-cultural world in which they are produced. This way, it provides opportunities to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning of the world as seen by the marginalised, and their own interpretations (Maclean et al., 2023; Spiller et al., 2020).

*'Little people' vs grand/powerful (anti-heroic)*

*Microstoria* emphasises the central ground between the elements of the meso and macro structure. This *in-betwixt* space gives form and shape to the inherent tensions between those 'little people' who are often excluded from mainstream opportunities and the grand/powerful who frequently totalise meanings of experiences and interactions in relationships. These tensions, which play out in recurrent stories of the marginalised, provide salient insight into their lived experiences, thereby rendering their world views intelligible. Emphasising the micro-activities of individual agents (Chia and MacKay, 2007) and their everyday practices as the site for the reproduction of the social (Schatzki, 2002), it brings out meaningful connections between the recounted experiences of subjects, their ideas or value commitments, particularly toward the unconscious or automatic activities embedded in taken-for-granted routines (Swindler, 2002). Making inherent tensions between the marginalised and the powerful visible not only helps assert transparency and support "claims about the 'native's point of view', but it also additionally sheds light on how experienced moments are constructed, and how the ongoing operation of order is organised (Moerman, 1988: Samra-Fredricks, 2003).

## *Microstoria* in/as action

Although under a different guise from the specific terminology of *microstoria*, it has been the foundation of many key works. For example, Michel Crozier's (1964) analysis of power strategies in *Le Phénomène Bureaucratique* rejects broad, top-down sociological models and grounds macro-level structural analysis in the everyday power dynamics of individual workers and specific groups within the workplace. Instead of viewing a bureaucracy as a monolithic machine dictated by abstract rules, Crozier focuses on specific, local interactions, such as how shop-floor workers outmanoeuvre maintenance technicians. Here, ordinary people are not passive victims of broader historical or social forces. Rather, the 'little people' bargain, wield leverage, and exert power over superiors and peers. Their voice and thinking have power and therefore do matter.

In management research, there is a common bias in methodologies that favour approaches that capture views of leaders to describe the organisational whole – such as upper echelons theory – when we know the marginalised voices matter. This is even more problematic in strategy research when strategic planning is carried out at the top of the organisation, but an organisation's effectiveness lies in how well that strategy is implemented and carried out by frontline employees and efforts of the organisational whole (see Witcher, Chau & Harding, 2008). Thus, a more detailed example of how *microstoria* can be used in management research can be (but not exclusively) through the perspective of strategy-as-practice (SaP), which focuses on what strategists do as everyday activity (Whittington, 1996). Jarzabkowski (2005) further saw this as an activity-based view, treating strategy as the recurrent, situated activity of actors (whoever they may be). This is important, as *activities* are the 'smaller' work of organisations, commonly (and wrongly) ignored in strategy formation (Whittington, 2006).

Thus, SaP shares three commitments: an analytic interest in what people do rather than in formal strategic content alone; a methodological preference for close, situated study of

strategising activity; and an explicit broadening of the cast of relevant actors beyond the CEO and the top team (i.e. marginalised actors). Empirically, SaP has clustered around a recognisable set of sites: planning workshops and away-days, board and executive team meetings, episodes of organisational restructuring and change, and the discursive work of revising strategy in talk and text. The dominant respondents in these sites are, unsurprisingly, the strategists conventionally so labelled – CEOs, senior managers, and middle managers tasked with translation and implementation – with comparatively little attention paid to the operational margins of the firm. SaP thus opens conceptual space for where strategising is seen as being strategic, which is precisely the contribution of *microstoria*. In SaP research, Balogun and Johnson's (2004) seminal study of middle-manager sensemaking during organisational restructuring established the analytic move of taking non-CEO accounts seriously as constitutive of strategic outcomes. Similarly, Vaara et al. (2016) argued that narratives are instrumental change actors in organisations, including the marginalised frontline operatives, who otherwise are embedded in but largely silent on the strategy count.

More specifically, each of the ways of 'doing' *microstoria* developed above maps onto a distinct line of SaP inquiry. The micro-versus-macro move, grounded in a relational ontology of individuation (Chia and Rasche, 2020), directs attention to how the situated language, discourse, and culturally specific actions of frontline workers compose, sustain, or quietly subvert the strategy of the firm in the course of everyday operational activity; this is where operational workarounds at the periphery become visible as constitutive of strategic outcomes rather than as deviations from them. The marginalised-versus-central move foregrounds the epistemic voids between groups of strategists conventionally so labelled and the operational actors whose strategising is rendered invisible by elite-respondent designs and asks how the relationship between the two is enacted in practice during episodes of strategic change. The 'little people'-versus-grand move occupies the *in-betwixt* space in which non-elite actors construct and contest the strategy of the firm, surfacing the unconscious or automatic activities

embedded in taken-for-granted operational routines (Swindler, 2002) that elite-centred SaP accounts treat as background rather than as strategy work.

Procedurally, *microstoria* in SaP research requires sourcing the polyphonic voices of non-elite organisational actors (i.e. the multiple, simultaneous, and often conflicting first-person accounts of how strategy is lived at the operational margins) through ideographic methods: life-histories and open-ended interviews conducted on the participants' own terms and territory, ethnographic observations, and visual records of the artefacts and contexts in which strategizing is enacted. Epistemically rooted in *Verstehen*, the interpretive understanding of action from the actor's own point of view, the analytic move is to render these accounts intelligible as strategy work without dulling their meaning into statistical insignificance! Theorising from such material proceeds as a group study from the lower hierarchy, whose aggregated micro-stories permit cautious generalisation about how strategy actually lands at the periphery, by including the nuances of individual cases.

In Hargadon and Wadhwani's (2023) framing, the exceptional-normal events *microstoria* surfaces are exactly the contingent, non-linear, and emergent operational episodes that fall outside the variance-explaining logic of conventional strategy research but reveal how senior strategic intent is stabilised or destabilised in practice. Borrowing from Kinneavy's (1971) etics-and-emics thinking, the resulting micro-stories can then be theorised as both trustworthy and stylised arguments addressed to strategy audiences – logically coherent, evocative in imagery, and persuasive enough to displace the elite-respondent default in SaP empirical work.

### ***Microstoria*** **as method**

Translating literally as 'small history' from Italian, '*microstoria'* was pioneered by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg (1976), to describe a method of studying history by shifting the

attention from grand events and grand people such as leaders, kings and wars; and the official documents in which they are reported ; for focusing on 'small people' and 'small data' , such as the 'cues' and 'traces' they leave. The '*storia'* (story or history) was not always about finding causality, but this type of historical research proposes to shift the scale of observation away from grand narratives to tightly defined spaces and marginal events to create an understanding or interpretation. Microhistory was premised on three core principles: (1) a focus on a small fragment of reality to uncover details that would otherwise be lost in macro-level studies; (2) a study of marginal cases (an exception from the 'normal' case) to understand how rules of an entire era functioned; and (3) an application of a clue-based approach, rather detective-like in examining the minor details, to uncover gaps and contradictions in official documents.

The call for *microstoria* as an analytical lens in contemporary management research has gone further – say, in the way Hargadon and Wadhwani (2023) conveys – and may be "to elucidate historical *causation* [emphasis added] on the level of small groups where most of real life takes place and to open history to peoples who would be left out by other methods" (Muir and Ruggiero, 1991, p. xxi). The marginalised, by virtue of being frequently embedded in contexts beyond the traditional boundaries of the firm, are frequently left out because most management research methods tend to focus on protagonists, such as managers and TMTs. Grounded in an existential ontology of being in relation with others (Chia and Holt, 2006), priority is placed on the marginalised situatedness and organising efforts to 'making do' within the contingencies of their embeddedness, rather than treating the temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of 'doings' and 'sayings' of the marginalised as something that is stable and institutionalised, they are approached as flexible and in constant flux and transformation.

Emphasising relationality, attention is taken away from the individual or set of individuals to their social relationships, interactions and situated activities, and how they may

give form to the complex power relations between the subordinated and dominant classes (Burns et al., 2014). The meanings and interpretations of these relations, we argue, could lead to the production of new forms of knowledge that are locally relevant, and the effort here is on building an understanding of how the marginalised experience the researched phenomenon and to identify logical patterns to produce unique and novel insights to aid in the generation of theories (e.g. Sasaki and Baba, 2024). Achieving this potential would involve making some strategic theoretical choices. This will include taking a middle ground ontological perspective which recognises the interdependence of agency and structure, but at the same time the individuals' responses to those structures mediated by their subjective interpretation of them. Such a relativistic ontology emphasises the notion that an objective reality out there is practically impossible with truth being an ideological product. Emphasising plurality and heterogeneity of values is also the commitment to amplify the often silenced and repressed narratives of the marginalised so they could provide detailed rich accounts of their own experiences and at least project the values by which their social world is regimented.

An important objective in *microstoria* is searching for hidden voices. In this regard, chosen methodologies must depend solely on what the researcher is striving to achieve rather than adherence to a particular research paradigmatic stance which can easily distort systematic and pragmatic reasoning (Cavaye, 1996). We argue that ideographic methodologies that employ qualitative data collection techniques (e.g. life-history interviews, open-ended interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic interviews), supplemented with observational data, are the conventional way to collect data. This approach may also include visuals of research participants in their own spaces or engaged in their situated activities at the 'natural site' of their practice, to help with the contextual capture of action. Such visuals could help both the researcher and audience reflect on the essential artefacts and the context in which the activities under consideration were enacted by the research participants. But beyond the exploration and search for new marginalised actors, explanatory data in any form may also augment the

*microstoria* conversation. Table 1 summarises the common set of methodological and theoretical choices that could be employed to evaluate *microstoria* research.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Theorising with *microstoria* therefore involves the strategic use of micro-stories as persuasive and effective arguments to appeal to key stakeholders and shape responses to the situatedness of 'little people'. *Microstoria* is in this respect compatible with a range of methodological paradigms – from case-based empiricism through interpretivism to ethnomethodological description – and the point of view of the researcher inevitably becomes part of the account whenever the analytic move is to render subjugated voice intelligible. Because of this reflexive turn to the researcher, purely positivist and classical research techniques like structured interviewing or structured observation that lacks the 'conversational' touch would be less suitable as they do not allow flexibility for the researcher to probe further for either who the next participant should be or follow-up on responses to gauge emerging issues of interest. In this regard, the point of view of the researcher, in practice, becomes part of the account in *microstoria* as it draws attention to the lived/living conditions of those being studied and the context within which their voices have been subjugated in objective discourse. So we borrow elements of Kinneavy's (1971) model, with our amendments, of classical rhetoric to unpack the *etics and emics* of theorising micro-stories (see Table 2). The key to observing, attending, and theorising is the strategic appeal to our audience, in ways that could help them catch in flight, the world according to the marginalised particular points of view.

Our preoccupation with *microstoria* is the concern to reprioritise attention to the habituated and ways the marginalised engage with the phenomenon. A potential conduit for the coping, de-shackling and transformation of the lived experiences of the marginalised, micro-stories will have to be trustworthy and impose reasonable obligations to the virtues of

equality, inclusiveness, and respect. Second, the stories must have logicality of substance, coherent, and reasonable to discerning minds. Thirdly, they must emphasise imagery that has the potential to evoke an emotional response from an audience, and fourthly, they have to be stylised, arranged, and presented in ways that have the potential to persuade the audience of their veracity.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

**Conclusion**

Much management research, more than perhaps any other neighbouring social science, has been organised around elites – founders, CEOs, top management teams, and board members – as the privileged locus and production site of meaningful knowledge. In this paper we have presented the case for *microstoria* – the what, who, how and why – as the methodological frame for reducing this pro-elite bias. *What* is it? It is the creation and sharing of contemporaneous storylines recounted by non-elites who are often identified as marginalised, underprivileged, and/or underrepresented. *Who* does it involve? It includes the 'little people' and those who sit at the periphery of society or within organisations and are often overlooked, as well as the unheard, and any other group that become marginalised for various reasons. *How* to do *microstoria* research? It has traditionally involved conducting microhistories, and in contemporary management research it concerns 'conversations' with marginalised actors at any of the three levels, involving mostly reflexive interpretivist data collection methodologies. We illustrated this for SaP research, and made the case for how the stories of these 'little people' could redefine, or spin anew potentially radical interpretations of commonly accepted grand narratives. *Why* do *microstoria* research? Reprioritising attention to a population often hidden in plain sight, *microstoria* ensures marginalised voices are represented in engaged management research and teaches researchers new places to seek answers to impactful questions.

Our appeal to a new turn to *microstoria* in engaged management research (beyond the social society setting where it has claimed greater prominence) is a clarion call to scholars to raise new questions and seize new opportunities from the perspective of the marginalised. However, *microstoria* should not be viewed as an attempt to replace or invalidate traditional approaches emphasising organisational elites and managers as the locus of knowledge. Instead, the conduct of *microstoria* research helps to correct misconceptions by paying attention to 'little voices' and discover things that would otherwise be missed and reduce unintended consequences of organisational decision making by avoiding attributional errors of merit and fault outcomes from only the view of senior staff, which is where the majority of strategy research traditionally takes place. This in turn potentially improves overall corporate strategy, and/or any other cognate fields of management studies. *Microstoria* teaches us to include minorities, look in places we do not often look, and shine our torch onto the outer margins of all levels where economist refuse to shine.

*Microstoria* offers an analytical lens to investigate the world of the subordinated or non-elites in ways that enrich our understanding of the world views of 'little people' who do have a key role in society or are a key actor in organisational/managerial processes, that may otherwise be misunderstood as unrepresentative, insignificant in sample-size, marginalised in practice, and therefore ignored. The well-known Latin phrase *nani gigantum humeris insidentes* [dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants], on which many great achievers as Sir Isaac Newton and others had conceded to, provides the foundational scholarly convention for knowledge to flourish. This remains an imperative, but metaphorical, premise – not a literal one. The 'little' shoulders (and voices) of little people are as gigantic and important as, and complementary to, those of the elite in helping us see further!

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# TABLES

**Table 1: Methodological and theoretical choices in *microstoria***

| Ontology | Epistemology | Axiology | Typical methods |
|---|---|---|---|
| Situatedness and organising efforts to 'making do' | Exposes power relations and questions dominant views | Value-constituted research | Qualitative methods (e.g. life-history interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic interviews) |
| Flux of processes, experiences, practices; Complex, rich | Shows 'truth' to be a product of ideology | Researcher and research embedded in power relations. | Deconstruction of texts and realities |
| Socially constructed through power relations | Focuses on absences, silences, and repressed meanings and voices. | Some narratives are repressed & silenced at the expense of others. | In-depth investigations of silences and absences |
| Some meanings, interpretations, realities are dominated and silenced by others. | | Researcher radically reflexive. | Search for hidden voices and perspectives |

**Table 2: The etic and emic dimensions of *microstoria***

| The etic/emic of *microstoria* | Appeal to audience |
|---|---|
| **Ethos** | ***Ethical appeal:*** micro stories sounding fair or unbiased as recounted by open-minded, honest individuals. |
| **Logos** | ***Logical appeal:*** micro stories that are strong, coherent, and convey a sense of reason. |
| **Pathos** | ***Emotional appeal*:** micro stories with tropes that evoke strong feelings in the audience. |
| **Eumonia** | ***Organisation and flow:*** good structure and flow |

Based on Kinneavy (1971)