Ethnography in Organizational Settings*

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Despite the oft-remarked dominance of quantitative methodology during much of the Twentieth Century, qualitative analysis was the primary means by which research was conducted in the early decades of the last century. This is particularly true within organizational sociology, which until the 1960s was largely wedded to a case-study approach. Statistical analysis was, in fact, a scholarly latecomer. From the writings of Frederick Taylor onward, much early analysis consisted of detailed descriptions of a company or introspective renditions of personal experience. The resurgence of ethnography in organizational sociology while innovative is also a return to tradition. Organizational life has long been amenable to qualitative analysis.

In fact, the qualitative analysis of organizations has typically received acclaim for its ability to provide creative insights into the field. In 2004, the Academy of Management surveyed its editorial board on which management and organization science articles they considered important, competently executed, and particularly interesting (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006). The results revealed that six of the top seven papers employed qualitative field methods of some kind (e.g., Barley 1986; Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Eisenhardt 1989; Uzzi 1997). For a field that is relatively oriented towards quantitative empirical research, ethnographic methods occupy a surprisingly important and relevant position.

In this essay, we rely on a variety of exemplars to illustrate the contributions ethnography has made to organizational sociology, focusing on six substantive areas of inquiry: (1) the elaboration of informal relations, (2) organizations as systems of meaning, (3) organizations and their environments, (4) organizational change, (5) ethics and normative behavior, and (6) power, politics, and control.

We characterize ethnography as "sustained, explicit, methodical observation and paraphrasing of social situations in relation to their naturally occurring contexts" (Weick, 1985, p. 568). This characterization casts a wide net over a host of fieldwork studies. However, it excludes qualitative fieldwork in which the fieldworker does not remain in the field (for months over even years) to become "saturated" with first-hand knowledge of the setting (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It also excludes field studies where the primary goal is not to describe and interpret the experiences of organizational members,
but to produce critical interventions into organizational functioning. By specifying ethnography in this way, we highlight the methodological distinctiveness of a particular style of research (typically practiced by sociologists and anthropologists) to demonstrate how it has contributed to substantive knowledge in organizational sociology.

We begin by locating the contributions of organizational ethnography in the six substantive areas listed above. We then examine three claims that ethnographers typically make: that it provides for depth, multiple perspectives, and process. These claims permit its unique contributions, but also create trade-offs in terms of control, bias, and generalizability. We conclude by suggesting implications of the resurgent interest in organizational ethnography for its systematic practice and the development of standards to evaluate its cross-disciplinary usage.

The Contributions of Organizational Ethnography

The Discovery and Elaboration of Informal Relations

In the 1920s and 1930s, the empirical studies of shop floor behavior at Western Electric’s Hawthorne Plant first revealed the presence of an "underside" of work - those hidden, informal arrangements by which organizational life operates in practice (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1947). From the researchers’ perspectives, informal relations operate in stark contrast to organizational rules and became the source of “irrational” uncooperation with "rational" managerial directives. Although the Hawthorne studies had quantitative components, it linked the power of narrative to rich, descriptive accounts of informal employee interaction. Much of employee interaction observed at Hawthorne occurred in the context of management concerns about worker productivity and experimentally modified work spaces to investigate forces that affect productivity. As such, the Hawthorne narratives derive from a managerial rather than a worker perspective.

In the 1940s and 1950s, many observational studies of organizational behavior adopted an ethnographic slant as sociologists took jobs as workers and managers. Such research posed practical
issues of access and ethical issues to the extent that co-workers were unaware that they were being studied, but the richness of the observations were thought to trump such problems. Ethnographers first turned to the shop floor and then to the managerial suites to analyze informal relations in organizations. These studies recast informal relations from an image of irrational uncooperation to one of rational adaptation. William Foote Whyte (1948), for example, worked in a hotel restaurant kitchen and found that informal status systems differed markedly from the formal lines of authority. Such alternative status systems adjusted the skeletal, formal chain of command by distributing various levels of trust, fealty, and interpersonal control among workers and supervisors. To an even greater degree, Donald Roy's ethnographic studies of life in an industrial machine shop underscored the adaptive functions of informal relations in the workplace. Roy (1952; , 1954; , 1959-1960) demonstrated that factory workers could create autonomy in the face of an oppressive management regime. His analysis -- counter to both Taylorian scientific management principles evident in the Hawthorne studies and the beliefs of critics of corporate capitalism -- depended upon an ethnographic investigation: in this case, a study in which Roy labored in the factory. Roy's analysis proved highly influential, notably in Michael Burawoy's (1979) ethnography of the same factory a quarter of a century later.

At this time, Melville Dalton published *Men Who Manage*. Dalton sought "to get as close as possible to the world of managers and to interpret this world and its problems from the inside, as they are seen and felt at various points and levels" (1959, p. 1). He witnessed the political and social world of white-collar work while he worked as a manager in two of the three Midwestern organizations he studied. Just as there was an underside for blue-collar work, so there was one for white-collar work. Dalton discovered that gaps between official and unofficial managerial practice and the conflict between groups vying for power were not momentary departures from Weberian "rational bureaucracy" or Chester Barnard's (1938) "cooperative system" in his *The Functions of the Executive*. Nor did informal relations only act against the official structure. They served many ends, even buttressing official procedures by distributing rewards supporting organizational goals and punishing violators of official normative
standards (Dalton, 1959, p. 222).

Dalton found that what managers claimed about their behavior and decision-making was inconsistent with their behavior. His findings could only have arisen from a method capable of discovering subtleties in both meaning and behavior as they unfold in situ. Such issues were difficult to study by other means, such as questionnaires or experiments, because such methods remove actors from their natural contexts, and introduce a layer of interpretation due to self-reports and retrospective statements. Dalton’s attention to tacit understandings, multiple expectations, and taboos in managerial practice informed students of organizational culture in subsequent decades (Fine, 1996; Kunda, 1992; Morrill, 1995). As influential as his insights were, however, Dalton did not develop a distinctive theoretical perspective that could be applied systematically. The study of organizations as systems of meaning and, later, as social and communication networks, emerged from two traditions: symbolic interactionists who studied organizations ethnographically in the 1950s and 1960s and ethnographers who began to study organizational environments in the 1970s.

Organizations as Systems of Meaning

Seeing organizations as meaning systems emerged from the tradition of symbolic interactionism in the 1950s, primarily at the University of Chicago. Interactionists, with their emphasis on embedded meanings, encouraged studying organizations "close up," to observe how actors interpret their interactions in and across organizations.

A series of team ethnographies inspired by Everett Hughes and led by Anselm Strauss provided empirical grounding for what came to be known as the "negotiated order" approach to organizations (Strauss et al 1963, 1964). Based on research in a psychiatric hospital, Strauss and his colleagues captured how diverse occupational groups (doctors, nurses, patients, lay workers) "negotiate" the meanings, routines, and tacit agreements of work against the backdrop of beliefs about the "proper" goals and methods of psychiatry. Although Strauss’s findings detail how actors negotiate, he was not merely interested in relationships among individuals. He came to view group interaction and negotiation,
especially across status levels, as a core aspect of organizational life. Yet, such determinations depended on the inside observation that ethnography provides.

Working under Lloyd Warner, Erving Goffman completed his dissertation research as a participant observer in the Shetland Islands off the Scottish coast. Although never published as a stand-alone work, the Shetland observations (together with other materials from a variety of organizational settings) formed the empirical core of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first published in 1956. Now regarded as a classic in the social psychology of interpersonal relations, Goffman intended *Presentation* as a "handbook" for understanding organizational behavior, particularly that "within the physical confines of a building or plant" (1956, p. xi). Goffman's observations and discussions of "impression management," "back stage regions," and "front stage regions" created an image of organizations woven together through "performances." He argued that while impression management is often viewed at the interpersonal level, it is also a "team" phenomena and has profound implications for understanding organizations. Goffman also did fieldwork in mental hospitals, first making brief observations at several mental wards during the mid-1950’s, and then working for a year as an assistant to the athletic director in a federal mental hospital. This fieldwork yielded *Asylums*, which evokes the grit of organizational "underlife" and its informal relations. On one level, *Asylums* is a ringing indictment of the treatment of the mentally ill. On another, it presents a set of sensitizing concepts and a theoretical rationale for analyzing the formation and maintenance of the self in organizations from both an "institutional" and an "individual" perspective.

By focusing on the sometimes smooth, often complex negotiations over meaning and purpose in organizations, Strauss and Goffman reinforced the ethnographic tradition of revealing unintended consequences of intended managerial decisions, as well as the divergences between back stage and front stage organizational behaviors. This tradition cuts across many organizational ethnographies that count symbolic interactionism as a theoretical point of departure (e.g. Barley, 1983; Becker, Geer, Riesman, & Weiss, 1968; Salaman, 1974).
Deborah Kolb's (1983) study of two industrial dispute mediation agencies is another example of the negotiated order turn in organizational ethnography. Mediation involves the intervention of a "neutral" third party into disputes in order to facilitate discussion, negotiation, and resolution between the disputants. The front stage of mediation underscores the creativity and flexibility of practitioners - mediation as art. The ideology of the agencies she studied reinforces this public posture by emphasizing the idiosyncratic nature of mediators and the work they do. Each dispute presents different challenges and a competent practitioner is one who can diagnose the issues of a conflict and fit his or her style to the case. The back stage behavior and interpretation of mediation practice is quite different. As Kolb (1983, p. 149) argues, "...the process appears to be more one of pattern and routine than it is of creativity and innovation."

Perhaps the best recent exemplar of this work — and evocative of Goffman's analysis of the unintended effects of producing institutional "selves" — is Kunda's (1992) study of "culture control" in a high-tech firm. Kunda addresses many of the same issues posed by Strauss and Goffman, but targets "corporate culture." The concept of culture dominated a good part of managerial consciousness during the 1980’s as organizations turned toward new ways to merge individual and organizational interests without explicit social control.

Kunda's ethnography of the daily interactions, rituals, and the material ideological productions (e.g., posters, handbills, e-mail messages) experienced by "Techies" (his label for the people who work at "High Tech Firm"), suggest the potential tensions of "strong" organizational cultures for individuals and organizations. The ideal Techie is driven by strong emotional attachments and a sense of moral obligation to serve the corporate interest. Consistent with Strauss and Goffman, Kunda found Techies active users, rather than passive recipients, of culture. It is through such active participation that each Techie's self becomes submerged and defined by organizational ideology. Paradoxically, the longer one stays at Tech and the higher one climbs the corporate ladder, the less likely Techies view the emotional attachments and moral obligations to Tech life as being authentic. The end result are "unstable selves"
(1992, pp. 213-216) in which the processes of commitment unintentionally breed cynicism about firm structures and strategies. The very processes put into play to create a strong work cultures eventually undermine their existence.

Organizational ethnographies using feminist perspectives have also been concerned with the friction between institutional and negotiated constructions of self (e.g. Martin, 1992). A classic study along these lines is *Men and Women of the Corporation* in which author Rosabeth Moss Kanter examined via ethnography and other methods how organizations construct gender roles, images, and ethics associated with particular bureaucratic statuses. Picking up Kanter’s thread, Karen Ashcraft (1999) traced how one organization’s response to and experience with a female CEO who took maternity leave traces changes in employee perspectives of CEO’s initial “feminine” leadership style, affording a critical perspective on “gendered interaction styles” and “women’s ways of managing” (1999, p. 275). Given the changing nature of work, the increased numbers of women at top levels of management, and the pressures of work on work-family balance, Ashcraft’s study provides a rich set of insights that depend on her close observations.

Organizations and Environments

In addition to their investigations of the interactional and cultural dimensions of organizational life, ethnographers have studied both the constraining and enabling relationships between organizations and their larger environments, crossing the boundaries of the organizations on which they focus. Concern for the world "outside" organizations, whether called an environment, a field, or a network, is a critical task of organizational ethnography. Strauss claimed that the proper level of analysis for negotiated order analysis of organizations is the "meso" level: the domain in which interaction among groups is shaped by structural constraints such as resources, authority structures, and broader institutional arrangements (Maines, 1982; Strauss, 1982).

Rob Kling and Elihu Gerson (1977) provide a compelling example of this approach to external, environmental constraints from the world of computing. They examined the relationship between
organizational innovation and environmental conditions and discovered that each institutional segment is biased in favor of innovations that move from suppliers to customers (ultimately requiring new purchases). As innovations are processed, changes originally designed to produce more flexibility become increasingly constrained.

Observational research by Harvey Farberman (1975) on the "criminogenic market structure" of used car dealerships illustrates how decisions outside of the interactional system affect internal choices, even seemingly unethical decisions. Farberman's ethnographic research suggests that actors in "deviant" markets behave as they do, not from moral lapses, but because the structure of the market encourages them to act to survive. That automobile manufacturers push dealers to achieve high volume and low profit per unit sets in motion a downward spiral of illegal and quasi-illegal actions: a) leading to fraudulent service operations, b) generating a kickback system allowing used-car managers of new-car dealerships to demand graft from independent used-car wholesalers, and c) forcing the latter to generate cash from illegal "short sales," unrecorded in company books. Ethnographic research permits the examination of how decisions and policies made at one level of the market affects other levels, particularly those with less power and those who are more resource-dependent.

Fine's (1996) work on the restaurant industry represents an explicit attempt to demonstrate how life in restaurant kitchens results from decisions and choices made outside that setting, including how the market niche of the restaurant and the costs of labor and foodstuffs, filtered through the decisions of managers and the responses of workers, affect what is served. Patterns of kitchen interaction derive from management choices, which are, in turn, a function of market typification.

Organizational ethnographers have paid increasing attention to how organizations or sub-units within organizations work with each other, shedding light on how organizational boundaries are established and maintained. Carlile's (2002) ethnography of a design and manufacturing firm for auto fuel systems develops a sophisticated understanding of how knowledge is used at the boundaries of cross-functional teams, suggesting that different mechanisms must be employed to achieve knowledge
integration across units. The study provides important insights on how knowledge at organizational boundaries is transformed to suit new ends, and develops a nuanced understanding of the characteristics of boundary objects.

These projects illustrate through careful observation how external relations constrain internal decisions. In the late 1970s and 1980s, ethnographers also examined the multifunctional roles of external relations. Burawoy (1979) demonstrated that through a set of wider institutional arrangements, negotiated implicitly and explicitly by labor and management, workers were able to – and were implicitly expected to – carve out autonomy for themselves in the labor process. These arrangements enable management to gain what it most desires: a docile and stable labor force that ostensibly accepts managerial control. External relations both constrain and enable workers and management as they pursue their collective interests.

In his essay on the legal and welfare policies encountered by divorcing couples, Simpson (2001) valuably suggests that ethnographies of "organizations" need not be restricted to the spatial and bureaucratic existence that formally constitute organizations, but can also account for organizational "effects", including the rules, values, ideologies, and objectives that are enacted in practice on a daily basis (113). Leslie Perlow’s (1997) ethnography of product development engineers at Ditto, a Fortune 500 company specializing in developing printers, illustrates this approach. She explores how organizations construct and utilize time at work, finding that decisions about time use at work significantly influence how time is conceptualized in non-work contexts. Moreover, organizations often expect employees to privilege work over family time. At Ditto, excessive work demands resulted in a crisis-mode culture that intensified employee stress and morale, carrying implications for lives outside the workplace. By problematizing how time is constructed and used at work, Perlow’s work suggests that in addition to analyses of the environment as enabling or constraining, studies of the impact of organizations on their members outside organizations can provide critical perspectives on issues such as work-family balance and leisure activities.
Walter Powell's (1985) comparative fieldwork in an academic and a trade publishing house illustrates yet another variant of ethnography that explicitly focuses on organizations and their environments. Powell echoes Whyte's (1948) and Dalton's (1959) earlier insights concerning the role of social networks "filling in the gaps of formal structure" (1985, p. xix) to address analytic concerns about managerial decision making. Powell finds that publishing houses are a central node in a network of relations that link a variety of constituents: authors, libraries, bookstores, the reading public, unions, banks, and parent corporations. Each of these sets of network ties constrains and enables editorial decisions. In all of these contexts, editors use their network positions strategically to pursue career advancement, organizational goals, and aesthetic visions of "good," marketable books.

Change

In perhaps no other substantive area is ethnography more suitable as a method than in studying the dynamics of organizational change. A short-term or one-shot view of social life, for example, can reveal many discontinuous shifts that appear as recurrent events when viewed from a "longer" perspective. In other words, at what point are multiple changes a pattern of continuity? Yet another problem of interpretation arises when considering the origins of change: Does change emanate from within organizations or from the external environment? It is not surprising that research on organizational change is fraught with contradiction (Barley, 1986). While ethnographers can not magically produce order in this area, they offer sustained, empirical studies and theoretical insights that address key interpretive problems.

If the negotiated order perspective has taught us nothing else, it is that incremental shifts and repositioning are the rule, not the exception in organizational life. Individuals and groups constantly adapt, which in turn produces slight shifts in the footing of actors and variation in the performance of routines. Change can occur through the "selective retention" of such performances in everyday social interaction (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 113). But organizational change can strike well beyond incremental shifts or the selective retention of routine performances to reach quickly and deeply into
organizational structures and strategies. Radical, rapid alterations in organizational components are relatively rare, but dramatic and analytically challenging when they occur.

Andrew Pettigrew's (1985) extensive study reveals the power of ethnography to capture the "change patterns" in one of the world's largest multinationals, International Chemical Industries (ICI). Pettigrew enjoyed access to the firm as both a consultant and a trainer, completed over one-hundred depth interviews of personnel from the middle to the top levels of the firm, and collected nearly twenty-five years of documentation by the firm and sixty years of secondary documentation produced about the firm. The changes Pettigrew documents are multidimensional and multilevel, involving production, diversification, marketing, and administration. By embedding his observations in a longer historical context, Pettigrew establishes that change occurs in rhythmic patterns: long incremental waves, punctuated by rapid, dramatic upheavals. He links these patterns to interest politics both within and external to organizations, reflecting the constant give and take of organizational struggles. Interest groups emerge around issues of whether to grow or not to grow, diversify or centralize, to bring in new technology or not.

Stephen Barley (1986) offers an equally useful ethnographic vision of organizational change in his study of two radiology laboratories by addressing paradoxical findings about the relationship between technological innovation and organizational change. Social scientific and popular views have long held that technological innovation determines organizational change. However, empirical research is inconclusive, revealing "contradictory" findings in which the introduction of the same technologies can produce either different organizational structures or maintain the same organizational structures (Barley, 1986, p. 105). Couching his observations in negotiated order (Strauss, 1982) and structuration (Giddens, 1979) frameworks, Barley demonstrates the impact of new x-ray scanners in the radiology labs is an "occasion" for redefining ("structuring") roles and role-relations by and among lab technicians and other personnel. Few of the outcomes of this restructuring were fully intended by management or the actors involved.
Ethnographies of organizational change often underscore its unintended effects, yet less often incorporate cross-case comparisons to aid in its analysis. A notable exception is Steven Vallas’s (2003) multisite ethnography of four manufacturing plants that attempted to implement team-based participatory practices among shop floor workers during the 1990s. He found management's focus on scientific and technical rationality during the change led to the development of an expert-centered initiative that eventually stood at odds with the notion of worker participation. Where plant executives were more flexible (and less expert-centered) with respect to their approach to change, worker participation schemes were more likely to succeed.

Normative Behavior and Ethics

Ethnographic studies of normative behavior and ethics can be divided into two categories according to their organizational contexts. The first category comprises studies that focus on the dynamics of "deviance," systems of morality, and grievances, conflicts, and disputes in "legitimate" organizations such as corporations, retail establishments, and government bureaucracies (Heimer & Staffen, 1995; Tucker, 1993; Vaughan, 1996). A second category comprises studies of organizations considered "deviant" from conventional normative or legal standards, such as organized crime families, drug dealers, and gangs (Adler, 1993; Bourgois, 1995; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Ethnographers studying normative behavior in legitimate organizations discovered that boundaries between "deviance" and "normality," as well as "harmony" and "conflict" are habitually blurred, questioning the absolutist and rationalist underpinnings of conventional understandings of normative behavior. Dalton (1959) demonstrated that conflict was endemic in organizations despite the pretence that it does not exist. Many of the social control mechanisms in organizations flow through informal rather than formal channels. Conflict is embedded in daily routines and is often handled behind the scenes, and not always by those with formal authority to settle disputes. These studies also reveal that seemingly irrational and individualistic conflict management actions have logics grounded in the social and cultural contexts in which they occur (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Morrill, 1995). Jackall's (1988) five-
year ethnography of managerial decision-making in three corporations underscores the relativist nature of "business ethics" in the corporate world. Jackall found that corporate managers follow a "bureaucratic ethic" that situates moral choices in the "rules-in-use" of particular organizational contexts.

If ethnographers of "normal" or "legal" organizations have often demonstrated their "deviant” or "conflictive” sides, ethnographers of "deviant” organizations typically illuminate their "normal” or "harmonious” sides. Howard Becker's (1963) ethnographic observations of "deviant occupations” demonstrated the utility of applying the career concept to how people operate in deviant organizations. Patricia Adler's (1993) account of an upper-level drug dealing community demonstrates that drug dealers have business-like orientations to their occupations, are motivated by profit, and rationally organize their businesses, much as entrepreneurs in "legitimate” organizations. Their commitment to drug dealing, however, originates in their choice of a deviant lifestyle. Finally, both Sudhir Venkatesh (2006) and Martin Sanchez Jankowski's (1991) ethnographies of gangs portray the gang as a quasi-rationalized business organization in which the entrepreneurial spirit is the driving motivation, not motivations such as excitement, risk, or violence.

Power, Politics, and Control

Since the classic shop floor ethnographies of Donald Roy (1959-1960) and Michael Burawoy (1979), ethnographers have explored power and politics within organizations, producing insights unavailable to scholars using other research methods. Such studies often focused on the significance of informal relations among subordinates for contesting formal authority, coercion, and abuse exercised by supervisors and other overseers (Morrill, Zald, & Rao, 2003). Contemporary ethnographic works on resistance investigate how its meanings and functions emerge from subordinates’ knowledge of and encounters with organizational power and control (Ewick & Silbey, 2003).

Prasad & Prasad (2000) ethnographically examined the discursive practices through which resistance emerged during the implementation of a new computer system among HMO employees. They suggest that formal status influences how actors label and understand resistance, including managers who
facilitate the emergence and persistence of resistance among non-managerial employees. John Weeks’ (2004) ethnography of a British bank goes one step further by illuminating how ritualized forms of resistance and complaint became woven into the very premises of the organizational culture. Roscigno and Hodson (2004), in their meta-analysis of 82 workplace ethnographies, confirm the linkage between different kinds of contestation, informal relations, and formal authority structures. Workplaces characterized by persistent managerial-worker conflict, strong union presence, and bureaucracy are more likely to experience collective contestation (such as strikes) than workplaces characterized by weak union presence and authority structures, which are likely to spawn individualized forms of resistance (such as sabotage and theft).

Ethnographers have not only examined resistance, but have also investigated the inverse – how authority and control are constituted through interactions among superiors and subordinates in contemporary organizations. Much of this work resonates with earlier work in the negotiated order and culture control traditions by carving out key roles for sense making and identity in the exercise of authority and control. Through an in-depth ethnography of partners and staff in Big Six (now Big Five) accounting firms, Covaleski et al. (1998) argue that formal bureaucratic structures and professional socialization function as interrelated control systems that also create opportunities for resistance. They draw on Michel Foucault’s (1977) work on discipline to analyze how bureaucratic incentive and mentoring programs in Big Six firms attempt to remake accountants as “objects” of production that “map” on to organizational goals. Such programs ultimately create crises in accountants’ personal and professional identities and can lead to resistance or exit from firms. Michael Pratt’s (2000) multi-site ethnography of Amway distributors suggests how organizational socialization can remake members’ identities via sense-making activities. However, not all such activities lead to strong attachments to the organization. Pratt identifies the conditions under which such activities lead to identities congruent and incongruent with organizational goals. Hallet (2007) goes perhaps the furthest in pushing the negotiated order approach by investigating how symbolic power is generated via interaction rituals of deference and
demeanor during administrators’ attempts to change the institutional order of an elementary school. Deference, he finds, is a kind of “credit” that administrators use to frame actions and events, thus inducing compliance and re-shaping the underlying social order of an organization. Finally, ethnographers have noted explicitly and implicitly the importance of meaning and identity for control systems in alternative organizations that privilege democratic decision making (e.g. Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; e.g. Warhurst, 1998). Even more so than in traditional bureaucracies, control and authority reside in members’ identifications with their organizational goals, especially their interactionally sustained definitions of themselves as participants in alternative organizations.

Methodological Claims and Trade-Offs

The previous sections illustrate the theoretical and empirical payoffs of organizational ethnographies. We now describe the methodological claims and trade-offs of ethnographic research. On the positive side, ethnographic research provides for depth, multiple perspectives, and process.

Depth

Ethnographers routinely justify their methodology by claiming that this approach permits a deeper and more nuanced understanding of an organization. If occasionally an illusion, the belief is deeply held. As we have argued, ethnographic data are often richer than those collected by quantitative measures. Situational particulars add verisimilitude to narrative accounts. Whereas experimental data and survey research mesh cases, qualitative methodology depends on the power of the extracted example. This emphasis on in-depth analysis permits researchers to examine the details of expressive culture.

Multiple Perspectives

A second claim of ethnographic research is that ethnography addresses how participants view their social world. The perspective is subjective and based on multiple points of view. To explore multiple perspectives ethnographers use purposive sampling to select informants and contexts to gather information. Such strategies include maximum variation sampling (in which all of the relevant actors or contexts are sampled in an organization), extreme or deviant case sampling (in which information is
gathered on exceptional or idiosyncratic actors or contexts), snowball sampling (which uses social network logic whereby one informant is asked to help the researcher find other informants), and theoretical sampling (in which the ethnographer seeks data relevant to emerging hypotheses).

The ethnographer typically is interested in what Gould et al. (1974) call "perspectives in action" and "perspectives of action." Perspectives in action consist of talk that occurs during naturally occurring interaction in an on-going social context. Perspectives of action, by contrast, consist of communication intended to make a context or situation meaningful to an outsider, such as when an informant responds to a question by a researcher. The longer the ethnographer stays in a social setting, the more important perspectives in action become as he or she learns about the lived experience of informants.

Process

The third distinguishing claim of ethnographic research is its attempt to examine how organizations operate as on-going concerns. The depiction of outcomes is lessened in favor of the examination of process. Depicting the doing of organizational work becomes the central analytic goal. Ethnographers examine not only the effects of corporate culture, but how corporate culture and its effects evolve through interaction.

Trade-Offs

Ethnographic methods also entail trade-offs: issues of "control," "researcher bias," and "generalizability." While none of these trade-offs are fatal obstacles to the development of a meaningful organizational ethnography, they warrant discussion.

Control. Because the ethnographer focuses on obtaining the perspectives of participants as they enact their "natural" routines, ethnographers have methodological strictures against playing too great a role in defining and organizing the setting. As such, ethnographers renounce a set of seemingly "objective" rules, instead emphasizing situational choices. The behavior studied should be that of the participants, not that of the researcher. The traditional model for ethnographic research is for the participant observer to remain passive, observing the scene as might "a fly on the wall" (Fine, 1993).
This lack of control is a virtue as it demonstrates that the behaviors that are observed are "real." Yet, in being real they may not address the analytic concerns of the researcher: the content of the observations are haphazard and not entirely focused on the researcher's concerns, compromising the internal validity of the observations. As a consequence, many argue that ethnography must be inductive, rather than deductive: making a virtue of necessity.

This does not mean that ethnographic research proceeds haphazardly. The classic research design in organizational ethnography situates a lone participant observer at a single site selected to represent a particular organizational process. Robin Leidner's (1993) ethnography of bureaucratic routinization at a McDonald's franchise involved a careful consideration of appropriate research roles, field sites, and observational strategies. Ethnographers may also conduct multiple types of observation (e.g., moving from participant to nonparticipant) as another form of control. In Sherryl Kleinman's (1996) study of a holistic healing center, she volunteered for fundraising events, but also observed organizational members as a nonparticipant at meetings and retreats. Ethnographers sometimes adopt multiple researcher roles the longer they stay in the field to maximize their perspectives as observers. John Van Maanen initiated his (1973) classic study of a police department in the training academy as a police recruit. After graduating, he became a quasi-participant observer as a police officer "reserve" riding with police patrols. Calvin Morrill's (1995) comparative study of conflict management among corporate executives in thirteen organizations provides a systematic approach to sampling and site selection using both interviews and direct observation. He first interviewed informants (in which question topics were laid out in advance but pursued flexibly). Data from the interviews guided his observations at field sites chosen to represent types of organizational structures.

**Researcher Bias.** Just as ethnographic research emphasizes the choices of the participants, it also privileges the judgments of the researcher more than other methodologies. Countless essays (Fine, 1993; Van Maanen, 1979) demonstrate that the choices of ethnographers matter: one's research decisions interact with those of participants to create the ethnographic reality of organizational life.
Two common strategies by which ethnographers manage bias are "member checks" and "triangulation" (Lincoln & Guba 1985, pp. 289-332). In member checks, the ethnographer asks participants to assess the plausibility of the ethnographer's interpretations. The recognition by members that an ethnographer's conclusions are plausible reconstructions of the members' own experiences enhances the authenticity of an ethnography and helps minimize research bias. Member checks typically occur at the end of data collection. Morrill (1995) used both informal member checks in his study of corporate executive conflict management and formal "exit" member checks when leaving the field. As useful as the member check is, their results must be situated in the rapport that exists between informants and researchers. There is always the possibility that informants share common myths or a "front" which could affect what a researcher "should" or "should not" uncover (Douglas, 1976). Triangulation involves checking data gathered from one source against other sources. Typically, ethnographers triangulate data gathered from multiple informants with organizational documentation, secondary published material, and outsider perspectives. Less often ethnographers address research bias by triangulating researchers' perspectives and data gathering efforts via "team ethnography" (Douglas, 1976; Snow & Anderson, 1993, pp. 23-24; Snow, Benford, & Anderson, 1986). Robert Prus and Stylianos Irini (1980), for instance, worked part-time as bartenders, desk clerks, doormen, and waiters over a five-year period to study an urban "hotel community" of fifty hotels and bars that cater to prostitutes and their clients. They triangulated their data gathering techniques, lessening the bias of their perspectives or role-relations in the hotel community.

Generalizability. The aim of science, it is frequently argued, is generalizability. Yet, the idiographic nature of ethnography seems to preclude the generalizability of ethnographic findings. These two statements, as contradictory as they may seem, raise the question of what generalizability means. By generalizability, most social scientists mean "enumerative" generalizability; that is, the ability of a finding to represent some social process or state in a larger population from which a random sample was drawn. By these criteria, ethnography involves a trade-off: Depth and perspective for generalizability. However,
the relationship between ethnography and generalizability can be expanded in at least three ways. First, ethnographic studies on similar phenomena or in similar contexts can be used in qualitative "meta-analyses" (with attention given to the quality of the data in each study) to form broader empirical understandings of phenomena (Yin, 1984). Such analyses also can translate findings across contexts because of the added depth that each ethnography provides. Second, ethnography typically has more relevance than statistical studies of random samples to "theoretical" generalization. Theoretical generalization involves "suggesting new interpretations and concepts or re-examining earlier concepts or interpretations in new and innovative ways" (Orum, Feagin, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 13). Third, ethnography contributes to the "naturalistic" generalizability of findings (Stake, 1978). Ethnographic findings can be generalized when they resonate with a reader's empirical, often tacit, experiences. An ethnographic text need not agree with common belief; the issue is whether the account is plausible, even when it challenges existing frameworks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 119).

The Resurgence and Practice of Ethnography across Disciplines:

Sociology and Management Studies

The previous section illustrated some methodological issues ethnographers have explicitly addressed. As ethnography has moved outside the social sciences into other domains, such as management, with a more applied focus, coupled with a strong tradition of quantitative research, the development of methodological standards for the cross-disciplinary practice of ethnography has increased in importance. This issue becomes particularly central when training novices. How can business students (or sociology graduate students, for that matter) be trained to observe organizations? Are guidelines possible?

Sufficiency and Immersion

Robert Sutton (1987) provides an intriguing answer. In his analysis of the process of organizational death, he presents tables that express the extent to which his theoretical conclusions are supported by ethnographic data. This form of data presentation has been alien to sociological
ethnographers, who establish the credibility of their work through narrative. Even though letters replace numbers -- with precision and exactitude lost -- the model remains intact (i.e., letters take on levels of support for the hypotheses in the model; e.g., C = strong evidence from initial contact, c = modest evidence from initial contact, I = strong evidence from interviews, i = modest evidence from interviews). This approach implies that a certain amount of data will suffice for presentation. It also argues that ethnography can be made "rigorous" in the image of quantitative techniques, preventing methodological challenges to its legitimacy.

This model of data collection is one of sufficiency: how much data is sufficient to make a claim plausible, in contrast to the standard ethnographic criterion of immersion: at what point will the researcher feel that he or she has enough insight into the scene that the data collected is redundant. The latter view asks whether the researcher knows enough that he or she could pass as a full member. Fine (1983) knew that it was time to discontinue his examination of fantasy role-playing games when participants began asking him for advice on the rules of the game. From being the pilgrim, he became the arbiter.

The issue of systematic analysis and standards is particularly relevant in a discipline like business administration that demands timely findings coupled with claims that give others the confidence to act. Research should be more than an expression of personal beliefs, swathed with memorable "anecdotes." If qualitative research does not, in this model, become a science, it can be a tool capable of being objectified and judged by others. It needs sufficient credibility that change agents should be able to utilize the results to demonstrate what changes might improve organizational functioning (Eccles, 1985).

How Much is Enough?

Ethnography in sociology and in management is grounded upon different traditions. While the overlap is real, both in methodological dicta and in cited literatures, the research traditions are not identical. The goal in much sociological ethnography is to gain as full an interpretation of a social scene as is possible. One collects data until one can act "as a native" (Adler & Adler, 1987). A strong correlation is assumed between length of time in the field and quality of research. Further, this research
model suggests that not only will the ethnographer wish to examine the scene for an extended period, but that during the research, the observations will be more intense; more hours per week will be spent in the setting. As many of our exemplars illustrate, the research often includes extensive in-depth interviews, archival data collection, and the compilation of detailed field notes. The more data collected and the more time in the field, the more successful the research. Given that many sociological research studies are explicitly inductive, the researcher is constrained to have few preconceptions before entering the field. This means that the first task of the researcher is to gain a sense of this unfamiliar, unexplored land. Once achieved, one can then, through grounded theory or analytic induction, explore the core conceptual and theoretical insights gained from patterns of interaction within the setting. The setting represents an empirical world from which one can generalize naturalistically, theoretically, and sometimes with enough cases, enumeratively. Glaser and Strauss (1967) make this explicit in their depiction of the "constant comparative method." One's research site is to be compared to other sites to discover the domain to which one can generalize one's findings: findings linked to generic social processes (Couch, 1982; Prus, 1987).

At the risk of overgeneralization, demands are different in management-based organization research. Much management ethnography has an explicit applied link, sometimes even funded or supported by the organization(s) being studied (Eccles & Crane, 1988; Kanter, 1983, 1992). Indeed, more than is true for sociologists, management ethnographers have "their" organizations or industries, in which repeated observations are possible. Whereas the sociological investigator can spend years in the research setting, and often additional years writing up the analysis, this is unacceptable in situations in which the target organization expects or demands results. To the extent to which a research bargain exists that requires the investigator to provide information to the organization, the leisurely investigations of the sociologist are impossible. Even when no quid pro quo is involved, the model for research in organizational studies is linked to evaluation research. Consequently research of this style tends to be more tightly focused than the more general analysis preferred by many sociologists. Extensive data may
be less necessary for addressing more focused questions.

At the same time, recent shifts in technology and labor markets may prompt fundamental shifts in how organizational ethnographers ply their trade. Barbara Czarniawska (2004) maintains that organizational scholars must refocus on “organizing,” following Karl Weick’s (1979) decades-old dictum (echoing the negotiated order approach) that organizations are not reified structures, but dynamic, on-going accomplishments. In today’s world, so Czarniawska argues, organizations are “action nets” that involve complex interactions and rapid movements of people across time and region. As such, ethnographers must develop triangulated techniques of “mobile ethnology” – including “shadowing” people through multiple workdays across time zones and geographic regions; “observant participation” through which informants are trained in the arts of collecting systematic descriptions of their days; and “narrative interviews” that yield chronological depictions of events from informants perspectives. She posits that traditional ethnography may be more appropriate for studying groups and communities situated in particular places, yet becomes difficult when organizations take the form of far-flung networks, virtual communities, or constantly changing alliances. Barley and Kunda (2004) use similar techniques cast in a team ethnographic approach in their study of high-skilled contractors who circulate through every region of the world.

Obviously no simple or objective answers exist to the question of how much and what kind of data are necessary or how much time should be spent in the field. The answers to these questions depend upon what one hopes to gain. Efficiency is a value that should not be lightly dismissed. For every research project a point of diminishing returns exists: a truth that every ethnographer learns when he or she attempts to tape record interaction in a field setting. Tapes keep running, participants keep talking, and eventually the unsuspecting researcher discovers mounds of data to be processed and digested – or ignored! A point exists at which there is too much data: either because little use can be made of the material or because it redundantly exemplifies a point. In any ethnographic report only a few field note extracts are necessary to “substantiate” a claim. To be sure, one may not know until the final draft which
examples are the most compelling, but a time occurs when routine transactions do not add to ethnographic insight.

Students are often instructed that in the early stages of research fieldnotes should incorporate a wide array of topics, since it is often uncertain what topics will eventually prove central to analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 2006). Field notes become progressively more targeted, and in time only the richest, most compelling, and most relevant examples are inscribed. This progression is akin to the more focused world of management or corporate ethnography. While the moment of analytic saturation may arrive earlier and the scope of observations may be more limited, the process by which one learns that enough material has been collected is similar. In all perspectives the reality is that the materials that are collected and the amount of time that one stays in the field are limited by occupational and organizational constraints.

The driving need for generating compelling conclusions also affects the amount of data to be collected. Different research goals, coupled with distinct standards of evaluation, determine what constitutes a competent research report. Given this, it may be that those with a more sociological approach may scorn the less intensive analysis of those in management programs, while those in management programs may define sociological work as too heavily theoretical, published in an untimely fashion, and of less direct relevance.

Ultimately those who conduct organizational ethnographies belong to the same intellectual community, even if we recognize that projects place different demands on researchers. Those who hope to conduct a detailed examination of an organization (however defined or embodied) have an extensive task: a large organization is not a small group. To study an organization is to accept the challenge of simultaneously examining many groups: most organizations are segmented and reticulated. The task is not simply one of examining a regularly interacting group, but of examining a network. We need to see the problem of "how much data" not simply in terms of ethnography in general, but in light of the specific problems that come from examining organizational life.
Several features define how much data suffice. First, there is the problem of *disciplinary practice*. Inevitably the standards of one's colleagues and disciplinary gatekeepers affect the choices of individual researchers. Second, the *structure of the organizational locale(s)* affects the style of research. Types of organization influence how complete a research project can hope to be. When management researchers examine large-scale organizations or organizations whose boundaries are difficult to define, the goal of completeness is less possible. Third, different projects have distinct *intended outcomes*. A research program that is narrowly focused will be less extensive than one broadly focused on the totality of organizational life. Related is the model of theoretical development that stands behind the research. Research that investigates a narrow range of hypotheses or set of assumptions may require less immersion than one that proceeds inductively or that seeks to modify existing theory.

No reason exists why any methodology demands one standard operating procedure. Nowhere is this more evident than in ethnographic research, whose flexibility is its *sine qua non*. While complete immersion can be justified, this benefit must be weighed against the efficiency and timeliness of briefer and more focused projects. Some research projects benefit from a more in-depth investigation. Yet, simultaneously the extensive research projects characteristic of working ethnographers in sociology may be needless luxuries, as the time involved in writing up the results may prevent the research from having impact.

**Conclusion**

Ethnographers have produced penetrating analyses of informal relations in organizations, organizational meaning systems and culture, organizations and environments, organizational change, organizational ethics and normative behaviors, and power relations. In this, organizational ethnographers have confronted questions that link organizational sociology to the larger discipline and other social sciences: agency and structure, rationality, and subjective experience. Negotiated orders in which individual actors and groups act purposively, socially, and with some measure of agency exist within and between organizations and their environments. As we understand members' subjective meanings of
organizational processes, restrictive notions of rationality become less tenable. What emerges is a more humane, less atomistic rationality that takes into account the social and cultural contexts that frame decision making.

Organizational ethnographers, despite different styles, share the desire to understand the dynamics of human groupings, which may ultimately lead to improving human lifeworlds. Whatever discipline an ethnographer calls home, ethnography contributes to our knowledge of organizational life. Perhaps the diversity of legitimate modes of data collection and analysis demonstrates the ultimate promise that the world can be comprehended through many lenses if we only look.
References


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