

BOOK REVIEW SERIES

YBEMA, S., YANOW, D., WELS, H., & F. KAMSTEEG (Eds.). 2009. *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*. Sage Publications Ltd. vii + 287 pages.

Organizations appear bounded in so far as they are considered in terms of rigid structures, fixed hierarchies, and specifically designated spaces. Should they, however, be thought of anthropologically, the substance of everyday life—the contingency of human relations, creativity and failure, humor and irony, fear and desire, etc.—begin to manifest themselves inside organizations, forcing rigid divisions and bounded structures beyond convention, and away from such simple dichotomies as inside/outside, high/low, manager/worker, etc.

A venture by a group of scholars from Vrije University, Amsterdam, this edited volume on “organizational ethnography” lives up to what it says it is: an introduction to an alternative method of conducting organizational studies through the anthropological methodology, ethnography. The volume brings together a wide-ranging combination of contributors: hands-on professionals and managers, consultants, and academic scholars of anthropology, sociology, public policy, and business. Despite the differences in the authors' backgrounds and styles of presentation, each of the twelve essays here appear to echo and resonate with one another in their central quest as to what an ethnography of organizations look like. Grouped into three thematic parts, the essays also touch upon adjacent issues relating to the writing and doing of ethnography. These thematic areas are the challenges and limitations of ethnographic method, power and representation, and ethics and responsibility.

In their introduction to the book, the editors

give a brief overview of the field of organizational studies, and explain the role this volume might play as a “method text” that sets apart ethnography as “constructivist-interpretative perspective” (9) from other positivist approaches common to the organizational studies field. The introductory character of the book suggests a widely targeted audience and interdisciplinary scope. Indeed, the editors promise the book to those both new and experienced in the field, “ranging from advanced undergraduate and graduate students to organizational scholars, researchers, consultants, and analysts”(15). Whether due to its mostly dry prose, numerous typologies, or its “how to” style of representation, this volume, with the exception of a few of the essays, resembles a neatly assembled textbook where all divisions are settled and all gaps reconciled. With that in mind, for what textbooks are worth as introductory tools, I would definitely recommend it as a good classroom guide to ethnographic method. You will find a few challenging intellectual discussions, but you will come upon a variety of interesting ethnographic experiences from the field. And the latter is one of the worthwhile features of the volume. In addition, the volume might serve as an invaluable source of literature in the sphere of organizational ethnography, as it provides extensive references throughout, and concludes with a detailed annotated bibliography.

Whatever innovation this volume might offer to the field of organizational studies, this review specifically focuses on how the authors have adopted ethnography as a research method; what intellectual issues, gaps and anxieties they raise in its regard, including those around trust, truth, authenticity, representation, norms and standards, etc; and finally, how they attempt to reconcile them.

In what follows, I will briefly comment on each of the contributions (not in strict order of appearance in the volume).

Anthropologist Kees van der Waal starts off the first part of the book by depicting ethnography as but a “generic research approach” (24). The story of his own professional conversion from an ‘innocent’ South African ethnologist to a critical organizational ethnographer serves to situate his writing, which defends the importance of theory for the ethnographic method. In doing so, he proceeds to lay out a foundational scheme of steps and list of tentative questions – including issues of

access and ethics - to arm oneself upon embarking on the ethnographic project. It is true that if one has never done or read ethnography of any kind (which is arguably difficult to avoid for an anthropologist), this inventory should prove to be useful.

Along the way, my experience of this text was that of reading a practical manual about how to write a grant, or better yet an IRB proposal, or do research: "make realistic goals," "think of a back-up plan," "what is your methodology?" "how are you going to store data?" and "how to attend to asymmetrical relations of power in the field?" Separate advice given, which might serve some well, include caution against tying oneself to "obligations to obtain approval of one's work in order to publish it," while still offering the "draft publication for comment" (28). One the whole, the 'manual' attempted to explain how to ward oneself off a strong feeling of anxiety, when in the field and prior. But in doing so, it failed to point out that however uncomfortable, this anxiety is not a curse against which one needs spells and safety cushions; anxiety is what constitutes the ethnographic moment (See Devereux 1967).

The essay jointly authored by Michael Humphreys, a Professor of Organizational Studies, and Tony Watson, Professor of Organizational Behavior, both from Nottingham University Business School, targets mostly issues related to post-field research, and focuses on the writing-up stage of the ethnographic enterprise. They make, what I find to be, a curious distinction between "writing-up ethnographic research" and "writing ethnography." This seemed rather limiting and exclusive, but simultaneously a useful heuristic tool on ethnographic styles and various audiences. Unfortunately, rigid exclusions follow throughout, and the authors, among others in the volume, argue for a narrow definition of ethnography that includes "a huge range from doctoral theses converted into extended monographs to short stories, plays and poems" (41).

Putting these differentiations aside, Humphreys and Watson further focus on the topic of ethnographic genres, and create a four-fold typology of ethnographic writing distributed across a "spectrum of truth" (53). Here, truth or validity becomes the measuring rod for the division, which is staged in correlative terms to "what really happened." As such, they start with what they assume to be straightforward, "plain ethnography," proceeding to a "semi-fictionalized"

description, and conclude with a "fully fictionalized account" (43). The article is more than worthwhile, due to the extensive ethnographic examples given to illustrate the "truth spectrum." At the same time, fixation on truth as a measure of validity and success, painfully reflects utopian dimensions of holism, and complements Euro-American academic standards of a 'good' scientific research and expectations thereof.

The following article by two Political Science scholars, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, resonates with Humphrey and Watson's piece in its search for what it calls "trustworthy texts." But if the latter concerns itself with the divisions between the writing and experience, the former focuses on the gap between writing a text and reader/reviewer expectations. In doing so, it sets up a six-tier evaluative criteria of trustworthiness comprised of "specific textual elements" based on the "standards and expectations" of the interpretative "Chicago School-style field research" (57). These, argue Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, aid ethnographers in their attempt to stage readers' perception of the "overall trustworthiness of the research narrative" (58). As such, the authors claim that trustworthiness suggests a more "appropriate criterion than 'validity' [...] and the like, as these are rooted firmly in a positivist scientific methodology that rests on the presumption of a real social work[...]" (62). Notably, the focus on trustworthiness in devising methodologies of research can be rendered as an indirect critique of Humphrey and Watson's essay. This attempt to escape a correlation between the "truth" and representation is laudatory, but it too assumes the singularity of human experience and perception, and hence proceeds to devise strategies and create typologies for "proper" research design. The authors, however, do warn against taking their suggestions in a "checklist fashion," but rather as a "starting point" of reflection about the "quality of a particular study" (63).

Likewise, Simon Down and Michael Hughes echo the concerns of the previous authors in relation to the authenticity of an account, and focus on the strategies of doing and writing organizational ethnography. Simon Down, a lecturer/researcher, and Michael Hughes, a worker/manager at a coke-making steel plant, jointly co-author an ethnographic account of an "experience of going through a corporate cultural

change programme" (84). They do so by positing a concern about representation within the framework of power and ethics of speaking and writing, and attend to the issues of positionality, power, identity and reflexivity inherent to the question of representation à la Foucault and Spivak (1988). In doing so, they largely avoid the question of whether ethnographic subjects can speak for themselves. Accordingly, they frame ethnography in terms of autobiography, where both the researcher and the researched become the objects of study and reflection. In this piece, complexity of emotional engagement with human subjects - whether in the organizational, or research settings, or both - surfaces in the narrative. The authors contend that their co-produced story portrays "organizational life as it is lived." As such, it does not make claims regarding authenticity of representation, but allows to "avoid the moral and emotional neutrality that social science so confidently claims, so often" (96).

The second and third sections of the book interrogate the classic schizophrenic division in anthropology between self and other, inside and outside, and familiarity and strangeness. They also gear towards questions that relate to ethics and perceived limitations, pertinent to doing ethnography at home.

In their essay, Sierk Ybema and Frans Kamsteeg make a case for a "disengaged engaged" approach to organizational ethnography. They argue that 'going native' is counterbalanced by the theoretical or intersubjective "distancing," where the latter is seen as a necessary prerequisite for doing ethnography. If a researcher is already "native" and "at home," they ask (103), "How do we step back?" Here, the authors argue for cultivating ethnomethodological strategies of surprise and play, and holding onto the mystery and irrationality - such as "breaching intimate relations" with the researched, or movement between scales of focus and research sites - all in order to break with "taken-for-granted understandings" (110). Or perhaps, suggest the authors, ethnographers should stop trying to take themselves so seriously and speak like experts (113). Instead, they argue they should adopt the role of an idiot, or "organizational fool" (Kets de Vries 1990).

Similarly, Davide Nicolini suggests that it is the strategy of improvisation and taking chances that allows for an ethnographic "processual ontology" approach. This type of ethnographic

research stands out in the edited volume, as it focuses not on individuals, but rather takes as its main object of study their mundane practice and activity. Such a strategy of following social practice also "partially coincides with multi-sited ethnography," as it implies shifts in time and space (120). Nicolini illustrates this research method with a four year-long ethnographic research project that he conducted on telemonitoring serious chronic heart failure patients at home. In the process, he studies things and people indirectly, from the side - focusing not on the objects and subjects as such, but rather on the "interactional order" between humans and non-humans (125), on bodies and artifacts and their trajectories, on learning curves of novices and accomplishments of apprentices, "texture of dependencies and references" (128), "following the intermediaries" resources and conditions necessary for practice (130), and "comparing sites of the same practice" (131). As such, the author claims to proceed "rhizomatically," following connections between things extending in time and space. Notably, such a rhizomatic shifting argues ethnographically against an idea that there is some deeper knowledge underneath, and deep immersion into the field will eventually lead to it. In fact, "zooming in" does not warrant either a deeper understanding or better grasp of organizational practices. Instead, concludes Nicolini, it is attention to the "fragmented, distributed, and fast moving reality" of virtual and multi-layered organizations that yields increased understanding thereof (136).

Contrary to Nicolini, Brian Moeran, an anthropologist with a focus on Business Studies, argues for a complete immersion in the field. Furthermore, he advocates for the "observant participation" where the ethnographer puts participation ahead of observation. Drawing on his own experience in a Japanese advertising agency, he suggests a business model of ethnography that insists on taking advantage of strategic connections to gain access into an organization (141). In doing so, he advises how to properly "make a pitch," and cautions against taking all what people say as truths. In his account, Moeran also distinguishes observant participation from "traditional" participant observation, critiquing the latter for its limiting focus on holism, inactive approach, and restrictions that it imposes on a researcher in terms of their ability to be fully "incorporated" as a community member (139).

This, I argue, results from an overly narrow definition of participant observation and understanding of what it has to offer to the ethnography of organizations.

Chris Sykes and Lesley Treleaven largely echo already raised concerns in relation to organizational ethnography as a method. They suggest a hybrid method theoretically akin to Brian Moeran's "participant observer" in focusing on "useful" action, also paralleling the co-authored account by Simon Down and Michael Hughes in co-construction of knowledge.

Likewise, Mats Alvesson in his own piece takes issue with both interview-based qualitative research and ethnography, arguing that both are "time consuming," politically-sensitive, "uneconomical," and focus too much attention on the "empirical material" at the cost of researcher's reflexivity and theoretical analysis (159). Instead, he suggests a "new" method of "at-home ethnography," which, according to Alvesson, is "a study and text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a 'natural access' and in which s/he is an active participant" (159). In addition, he argues such an at-home ethnography will not be constrained by staged methodologies and procedures or a-priori chosen research questions, and would be quite convenient in terms of exercise and economical in expense (163). Alvesson's concerns largely resonate with the earlier discussed account by Sierk Ybema and Frans Kamsteeg, who attempt to break away from the constraint of familiarity, by creating critical distance through irony and the cultivation of surprise as it lends itself to reflexivity and recursiveness.

The final piece of the volume, co-authored by Halleh Ghorashi and Harry Wels, resonates well with the concerns of reflexivity. As such it focuses on what seems to be an oxymoron, the "complicity of engaged research." The authors contend that we, researchers and our informants, are always already embedded in disciplinary power and structures of violence, and hence without reflexivity and critical awareness easily slip into the normalized modes of moral and political legitimacy. The authors give a liberally utopian and vague answer: to take responsibility by engaging with "all players in the configuration of power" (231), regardless of prior divisions and allocated roles, thus "contributing to a more just world" (247).

Similarly, Gary Alan Fine and David

Shulman concern themselves with ethical issues that inevitably accompany any human interaction, including that in organizations. More specifically, they claim that any organizational fieldworker is guilty of "lies" s/he inevitably tells before, in and after the field. These lies ordinarily are hidden behind numerous representational techniques and strategies. "Such antiseptic accounts," argue the authors with an air of moral righteousness, "cost readers and practitioners, offering an incomplete account of the practical ethical dilemmas" (177). Their piece, however, suggests two virtuous contributions. On the one hand, the authors lay bare the constraints and limitations that most of the ethnographers face due to their conditions of research, the demands of academic standards, IRB requirements, and discursive norms (178), thus dispelling the myth of a liberally "virtuous" ethnographer. On the other hand, it also combats an illusion of giving neat and holistic ethnographic accounts. Instead, the authors argue, "each ethnography tells a tale of multiple sites - the field site and the sites of the interventions of colleagues, mentors, reviewers and publishers." And of course ethnographers tell lies, conclude the authors, "but through lying we also present truths about organizations that escape those who are not so bold" (192).

Finally, Nic Beech, Paul Hibbert, Robert MacIntosh and Peter McInnes support the conclusions of Fine and Shulman, and address the question of friendship relations in field research and beyond. Illustrated with extensive ethnographic cases, the authors uphold the fact that ethical concerns always arise as researchers are embedded in a multiples locations and relations at once. However, these concerns are rather mundane in the course of social life, so why one needs to reify these in the context of a fieldwork. Friendships do get breached and compromised, but they are also sustained and cherished.

As a matter of conclusion, I wonder what the central preoccupations of the authors of the book - representation, truth, trustworthiness, authenticity, lying, reception, academic standards, and criteria of measurement - are symptomatic of? These issues are a concern for anthropologists as well, especially since the 1980s turn of "writing culture." But in this case, I suspect, the anxiety has to do with the fact that organizational studies, a discipline with its own established methodologies and canons of legitimacy, has

adopted a methodology foreign to it, especially the one that empirically interrogates the truth of received wisdom. Instead of attempting to suture them, they would do well to explore and exploit the gaps that the ethnographic method creates and makes visible in order to question received knowledge and truths, for this is very value and virtue of ethnography. Empiricism gives the researcher something to reflect upon. To be open to truth means questioning received ones. That is good scientific method.

In summary, the volume offers a fine introduction to interdisciplinary research, and makes a considerable effort to bridge anthropology and organizational studies, or rather enriching and extending the latter by borrowing the ethnographic method from the former. As such, it largely succeeds, and additionally gathers many useful references pertinent to both. At the same time, a general genre of the organizational ethnography situated largely in interpretative-constructivist approach that this book participates in, however innovative to the field of organizational studies is not to most anthropologists. Despite this, the book is of tremendous value precisely because of its reformulation of classic and perennial issues and problems of ethnography in a new setting, suggesting fertile ground for discussions in and outside the ivory tower. This is more than enough reason to assign the book for both undergraduate and graduate courses.

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