

Narratives of Irony and Failure in Ethnographic Work

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Abstract

Organizational ethnography is one of the most valued approaches to qualitative studies of organizations. Much attention has been given to the development of the research process, of which the researcher's identity is an integral part. However, we believe that the analysis of research failures has been much less developed in the discourse of ethnographic methods for the study of organizations. Therefore, we have explored some of the "slips" in ethnographic work, as described in accounts of fellow organizational anthropologists. As the study is qualitative, we have adopted a narrative research method. We have divided the "slips" (i.e., errors) into four categories important for the ethnographer's identity: (a) one's role; (b) one's project, (c) one's relation to "the Other"; and (d) the social context of the slip. Copyright © 2010 ASAC. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

JEL Classification: M14

Keywords: organizational ethnography, qualitative methods, methodological mistakes, anthropological methods, academic archetypes

Résumé

Dans les études qualitatives des organisations, l'ethnographie organisationnelle est l'une des approches les plus préconisées. Jusqu'ici, une grande attention a été accordée à l'élaboration du processus de recherche qui comprend l'identité du chercheur. L'analyse des échecs de la recherche a été, pour ainsi dire, négligée dans les discours portant sur les méthodes ethnographiques d'étude organisationnelle. Dans cet article, nous examinons quelques-uns des «ratés» dans la recherche ethnographique tels que présentés dans les comptes-rendus des anthropologues organisationnels. La recherche étant qualitative, la méthode adoptée est narrative. Les «ratés» (c'est-à-dire les erreurs) sont divisés en quatre catégories importantes pour l'identité de l'ethnographe. Il s'agit de: (a) son rôle; (b) son projet; (c) ses relations avec «l'Autre»; et (d) le contexte social. Copyright © 2010 ASAC. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Mots-clés : ethnographie organisationnelle, méthodes qualitatives, fautes méthodologiques, méthodes anthropologiques, archétypes académiques

Organizational ethnography has for a long time been an important method for the exploration of organizations (for an overview see for example, Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Van Maanen, 1998). Its influence has been immense, not

just as a perspective for empirical studies of organizations, but as a mindset and a way of approaching the field. One important issue, however, has not as of yet been sufficiently addressed—namely, that of failures and misses. It has been argued that stories of failures and near-failures are more important for learning than success stories (Snowden, 2003; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). We agree with this argument and thus aim to explore the less successful side of organizational ethnography. Particularly worthy of examination is the identity of the researcher, which is an important part of the research process, not just in classical ethnography—a field much better acknowledged by such well-known authors as Agar (1980)—but also in organizational ethnography. In this paper, we explore the consequences of failures for the

The authors are very grateful to the anonymous reviewers, who provided most useful feedback and advice, as well as to the CMS Division Editor Albert J. Mills, whose guidance in working on this paper was extremely helpful, and to the Managing Editor Melissa Corey, who professionally led us through all stages of the publication process. We are also indebted to Carole Caulier Gustavsson for her indispensable help with the lovely French language.

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construction of the organizational ethnographer's identity and regard this process in narrative terms, that is, we reflect on how the individual narrates the identity. We have employed narrative methods suited to researching the subject from such a perspective and have collected stories from active organizational ethnographers. The results of our study point to the role of irony in the researcher's identity construction in response to these slips or failures.

Writing ethnography is a serious endeavour, and it often means disregarding situations not part of its success. Failures and dead-ends fall outside the process and do not have a place in the arguments leading to theory-building conclusions. However, it is our conviction that their role is quite important, if not for the theories and models that the ethnographers produce, then for the way they construct their professional identity.

In this paper we are concerned with misses and failures but not as funny asides or anecdotes that spice up or "personalize" tales from the field. Their place in ethnographic accounts is usually marginal. Although "confessional writers are forthcoming with accounts of errors, misgivings, limiting roles, and even misperceptions, they are unlikely to come to the conclusion that they have been misled dramatically" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 79). The presented slips typically serve a purpose of legitimization (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988), creating a feeling of "being there," and of authenticity. The tales we normally hear have, for obvious reasons, happy endings. Here, we intend to concentrate on stories that are typically marginalized, and thus our intent is to redefine methodological constraints from the very practice of ethnographic work. This is a study dedicated explicitly to failures, blunders, and gaffes in ethnographic work and is a narrative on the ethnographical profession based on professional ethnographers' narratives (Corvellec, 1997, 2006; Czarniawska, 2000; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998).

The Method and the Purpose

We sent emails to our colleagues asking for stories of their failures, blunders, and gaffes in their fieldwork. We received nine stories from eight organizational ethnographers, all of whom are active field researchers and also our friends. These narratives constitute the main material (or "data") in this paper.

In presenting their tales, scholars have to carefully decide what is important and what is not for the final text. In most cases, ethnographies are written on the basis of thousands of pages of field notes: It is never possible to present even a fair part of the success stories relevant to the chosen topic, and, as a result, the failures quite naturally have to be underrepresented in published accounts. Like writers, scholars, and especially ethnographers, must be persuasive and recount interesting and consistent stories that

their audiences will appreciate (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). They have to prove their credibility in the eyes of their peers. As a result, their work is (again, like that of any other scholar) ultimately rhetorical (Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987), and could potentially affect their standing in the academic community and, as a result, may include elements of "keeping face" or facework (Goffman, 1961). Consequently, although admissions of blunders may occasionally add some colour to the narrative, they are usually dosed with caution, so as not to undermine the researcher's credibility. The stories we collected narrate something that often goes untold. Articles addressing research situations and studies that turned out to be failures are rarely accepted by academic journals. Often, admissions of blunders are removed from final reports and are considered redundant and irrelevant to the main argument. Although in some cases (e.g., in ethnographic memoirs, as described by Prasad, 2005) the admission of failure plays an important role in the narrative, it still is not the main topic.

However, understanding the rules of exclusion (and seeing the stories that are typically excluded in scholarly publications) may be useful and interesting in defining the boundaries of our discipline. After all, it is not only how tales of the field are told (Van Maanen, 1988), but also what is discarded and omitted from the tale that defines and constructs the outcome. Moreover, Prasad (1997) has spoken of ethnography as a methodological tradition—a concept embracing not just the methods but also the ethos and professional implications of ethnographic practice. This way of understanding ethnographic research has implications not just for the question of "how" but also for the question of "whom." To understand the professional identity of an ethnographer, it is crucial to interpret the common mistakes.

Such an understanding is valuable not only for beginning ethnographers and students of methodology, but also for the whole community of researchers: understanding our peers' slips is a tremendous help in reconceptualizing our own. Unfortunately for us, the most interesting stories of research blunders are probably the ones that will never be told; we hope those we present here are a close second.

It should be noted that exposing one's own failures, or simply funny situations that happened "out there" is not only time-consuming, but also delicate, and it should not be surprising that only a few of our colleagues chose to reply. We are grateful for and indebted to their contributions, and we believe their input helps us better understand how the role of the ethnographer is constructed. We have included our own stories as well, as it would be hypocritical of us to ask for confessions of research slips while conveniently refusing to reveal our own.

The stories are all self-ironic in the sense that they show a professional ethnographer having trouble maintaining his/her professional role. This self-irony should not be mistaken for silliness or foolishness. One of the characteristics of stupidity is the inability to see oneself and to refer allegoric-

ally to the outer world (Ronell, 2002). In contrast, the stories we present show irony in its highest and most self-reflective form. Although, they are not always humorous and are indeed occasionally tragic. In this sense we believe that the irony is, in fact, one of the keys to understanding these accounts and to interpreting the role of ethnographer more generally.

Our approach can be described as both interpretive, as we searched for meaning in the narratives of failure and irony, and postmodern, as we found playfulness, not only in our own quest for meaning, but also in the multiple facets of interpretations available to the reader (Prasad, 2005). We intend to open the grounds for multiple readings of the narratives that have been gathered.

Although this article is meant for readers generally familiar with qualitative studies, we do hope that a more general audience may find it useful as well by showing the problems and pains typical for organizational ethnographers, and by making their work behind the scenes more understandable.

Irony and Organizational Realities

Irony is a characteristic of a style in the text that implies a deliberate contradiction between the literary meaning of the statement and its actual meaning not directly expressed. It can be subtle or crude, but is always based on a kind of imbalance. In traditional slapstick comedy, it is the body that becomes unbalanced: The well-dressed man slips on the banana peel and the displacement of the body provokes laughter. In witty intellectual comedy, the lack of balance is of a higher order and is cultural or spiritual. The essential element of sarcasm comes from the unexpected confusion of stereotypes and archetypes. Such a semiotic reading may definitely revive the works long forgotten (Eco, 1979): The recent comeback of Chuck Norris as a satirical figure is but one example (i.e., a character originally meant to look tough and strong is considered funny because of his image of being all too serious and grandiose).

In organizations, irony has many cultural uses: It facilitates socialization and bonding, it offers agency or empowerment to people who feel oppressed or limited in their freedom to act (Kostera, 1995), it helps people to distance themselves from their social roles (Kunda, 1992), and it helps make sense of paradox and ambiguity (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). Irony may help to construct professional identity in social settings, and is especially useful if there is a perceived discrepancy between key symbols (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2005).

Irony is present in all levels of organizations. Ethnographers have mapped uses of humour by manual workers (Konecki, 1990), middle-level managers and engineers (Kunda, 1992), and top-level executives (Hatch, 1997).

In many cases, irony is an important social instrument used to deal with organizational change and organizational

ambivalence (Dent, 2003; Höpfl, 1995). It reinforces and creates social divisions in the workplace, as it is one of the crucial ways of “us” and “them,” deepening the split between workers and management or between staff and clients (Jemielniak, 2007; Mik-Meyer, 2007). Similarly, irony can be seen as a way to achieve a sense of belonging among ethnographers, and perhaps also a sense of legitimization that comes from a shared sense of common mistakes and blunders.

Ironic ambiguity is an inseparable part of anthropological work. The tension and distance between the identity of the ethnographer and the studied people, as well as the contrast between his/her passive role and the eagerness to change the observed social reality, all result in what Clifford Geertz (1968) called “anthropological irony.” This irony is sustained by the fiction of mutual interest of the researcher and the subject studied. The illusion that the reality, in which the researcher is performing the study, may change as a result of his/her presence is usually recognized as beguiling by both sides. Both sides, however, decide to save face and play their roles accordingly in a cheerful rapport, which makes the process of anthropological inquiry deeply ironic. This paradoxical interplay is sometimes considered methodologically useful and advisable (Clifford, 1983), but does not change the fact that all ethnographers have to deal with a double-edged identity (or rather, a series of identities) in their work (Down, Garrety, & Badham, 2006). Feeling ironic about oneself, as it seems, is one of the major emotions of anthropological inquiry. Therefore, for the advancement of organizational ethnography, it is crucial to understand what the professional anthropologists of organizations construct as ironic or erroneous.

However, our study understands irony more as the ability to self-reflect and separate from one’s own seriousness, rather than as humorous. In this sense, we looked for the potential of ethnographers to deal with dual identities and ponder their own mistakes, rather than for situational comical aspects of their stories. Our use of irony as an explanatory category is subservient to the general purpose of broadening our understanding of professional identity in ethnographic work. The humorous aspects of failure result from hindsight, rather than from situational comedy.

Narratives

The stories we received are constructed as short prose, in first-person narrative. For professional anthropologists, it is the primary genre of delivering research results. In field research, organizational ethnographers collect stories, and when they subsequently write up the accounts of their studies, they do so in the form of stories (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1999). Stories, however, are not the unique domain of ethnography—in fact, their role in life and research is tremendous and is increasingly appreciated by many authors

(for an overview, see Czarniawska, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000).

Indeed, storytelling is arguably the most natural form of communication (Czarniawska, 2000) and enacted accounts are one of the most common forms of social interaction. Roland Barthes put it bluntly, stating that a narrative is “simply there like life itself” (1977, p. 79). Jerome Bruner (1991) held that narrative is a way of organizing normal experiences for humans and also the way in which people frame their perceptions of the world. This role describes not only everyday perception but also the more “advanced” perception of scientific research.

Narratives have gained much interest as method and substance of research in social sciences (Czarniawska, 2004), and in our own field of organization studies (Boje, 2001). David Boje’s seminal works have convincingly shown that the very process of organizing and sensemaking relies on the production of narratives in interplay with stories and ante-narratives (Boje, 2001). Organization theory is also a genre in its own right, with ample room for varieties of storytelling (Czarniawska, 1999). Ethnographers are professional storytellers: they are formally legitimized to “scientifically” describe their “subjects,” but still are expected to create narratives. Ownership of the right to write is of crucial importance, as the weaving of the narrative relies both on the author and on the entrusting audience (Boje, Luhman, & Baack, 1999). Ethnographers are socially recognized as knowledge creators, and their stories receive a very particular status. Although all scholarly writings belong to a specific genre of narratives (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998), ethnography is one of the few to openly admit its narrative character, while also operating on a meta level by creating stories about stories.

We understand, following Yannis Gabriel, that stories are “narratives with simple but resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skills, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade and win over [the listeners]” (2000, p. 22). In our study, we made twofold use of stories: Firstly, we collected them from our respondents and analyzed them in a narrative fashion, and secondly, we composed a narrative account of the central feature of the collected narratives, as we saw it.

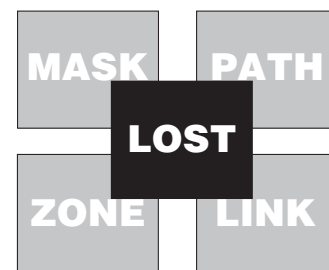
The Stories

Although we did not explicitly ask for humorous or ironic accounts, all of the collected stories were ironic (we only expressed our interest in the accounts of slips, blunders, or funny stories from the field). We found the irony of the texts particularly interesting and that became our first facet of their interpretation. We first looked for the main feature of the irony, which we understood as the ability of the researcher to look back on his/her work and smile. We tried to understand what exactly made the texts ironic (or,

even better, self-reflective). We came up with four major types of disruption, which we discuss in the following order:

1. *Losing the Mask*: Disruptions in the presentation of self, especially the ethnographer’s professional role, and all questions about what this role may embrace.
2. *Losing the Path*: Trouble with relating to the Other in space, time, and in a symbolic way.
3. *Losing the Link*: Cultural discrepancies, such as cultural blunders and shocks, causing personal and professional turmoil and misunderstandings.
4. *Losing the Zone*: Complete incompatibility and incommensurability of the ethnographer and the Other: a rift in expectations and realities so profound that it makes any beneficial contact between them impossible.

Figure 1.
Types of disruptions in ethnographic accounts: Ways to get lost in the field



Losing the Mask

The first category of stories about disruptions of self contains narratives of the loss of the professional mask. Heather Höpfl (1995) described an experience that actors call “corpsing.” When a stage actor misses his cue, the validity of the performance comes into question and the act “dies” on stage. The loss of the mask, literal in classical theatre and metaphorical in modern-day performances, exposes the make-believe, uncovering what is usually accepted as a symbol of the performance. It happens that the pause is followed by the laughter of the failed actor, and sometimes of the audience. We have collected several stories about this kind of unbalancing. In the first, the author presents a situation quite similar to corpsing. She loses her place in the script, and exposes the precariousness of the role:

Still a student at Warsaw University, I was working as part of a consulting team of the Action Research type. We were about to start our project for a big Polish consumer goods company and we intended to carry out extensive open-ended interviews and direct observations at the site. I had done some interviews before, but only with people I knew personally or who were introduced to me by my Swedish supervisor (and I interviewed them in her presence). [...] As is my style, I did not admit to my lack of experience but decided to just go ahead. So one day I stood there in my interviewee's office, holding my notebook and pen in my hand, ready to plunge in. Carefully avoiding eye contact, I sat down in front of her and opened my mouth to ask the first question. And shut it quickly again. [...] I sat there in silence for what seemed like hours and felt how my face grew more and more red. Finally, in an upsurge of desperate daring I looked up at her. She was just as red in her face as I must have been. (Monika Kostera)

By corpsing, the ethnographer reveals the uncertain fabric, not just of her own role in the encounter, but also that of the Other's. The role of the ethnographer is not only ambivalent in itself, but, in the experience of many organizational ethnographers, is premised only on very vague terms by the social actors in the fields we visit, and then only at best. Many have never heard of organizational ethnographers before we pay them a visit, and do not know what to expect. If they are unsure what role the ethnographer should have, they may be just as uncertain about what role they should take *vis-à-vis* the ethnographer. Apparently, the ambiguity works both ways and the researcher may be as frightened as the subject of the study. Being open to new experience and keeping the "anthropological frame of mind," which allows childlike fascination of and surprise by even the mundane reality, is an important professional skill for an ethnographer (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992), but, alas, only once s/he knows it.

The second narrative is an account of how the protagonist perceives her role as shaky and unstable. What setting is she part of, and how should she respond to it? She believes that there are certain cues to follow from the script, which she regards as part of her role as ethnographer. But there are also other alternative cues, derived from the script of participating in an organizational reality. When the cues become contradictory or discrepant, embarrassment (and/or comical consequences) may ensue.

One of the most difficult experiences during field studies that I have been conducting up till [sic] now, regards my presentation in the organization. I am unable to come up with one concrete example, but there is an intensely embarrassing feeling accompanying the first encounters with the field, very much alive in my memory. First of all, when I begin a field study, I usually don't know what I am really interested in. Method books console the uncertain fieldworker—this is not a sin in the initial phase of the study. However, having to explain something I don't know myself to people I meet in the field

leads to misunderstandings and is a source of strong feelings of embarrassment. Recently I faced this situation when interviewing a group of programmers. After my brief presentations [...] a series of questions followed: "but what are you trying to prove?" "what you say sounds interesting but what is your practical aim?" "what will the end-result of this study be?" When faced with such questions, I always considered whether I should be "authentic" and say something like "we'll see" and as a result be treated patronizingly (for not being a real "scientist") or if I should rapidly come up with some catchy topic and impress the interlocutor with what he or she would be able to perceive as more "professional"? (Dominika Latusek)

The role of the ethnographer is not well defined in the field and there are no consistent internal and external standards about what is and what is not "scientific" and "professional." The gap in between invites embarrassment—and makes room for irony. The protagonist whips up a charming self-irony as a resolution: She admits to fantasizing about inventing a façade for herself that the Other would perceive as "cool" enough. In an adolescent fashion, she dreams of impressing them or, at least, of making them accept her story. Ethnographers, apparently, are particularly prone to being treated as weird (why don't they get a normal job, anyway?) and have to pretend to be someone else to be able to keep the professional image.

The third story shows how much heroic effort can be put into ethnographic "facework" (as in "keeping face"), and how far the ethnographer is willing to go in order to keep the mask in its dignified place.

When I was collecting field materials for my doctoral thesis I was invited home to one of my interviewees, in order to interview him there. I dressed rather smartly—in a shirt and jacket and left my hotel. I found the address I have been given by my interlocutor on the phone. The flat was located in an old, patrician building [...] It was evening and early spring, the central heating season had been ended and it was as cold inside as in a crypt. My interviewee was used to this, dressed in a warm sweater he sat there and told (very interesting!) stories of his childhood and his youth. I sat opposite him in a chair, more and more cowed, asking questions, nodding and doing my best not to chatter my teeth (you can't hear it on tape but it cost me a lot of effort) [...] The nice interlocutor realized, after a few hours, that I was cold and offered me a blanket. It did help a bit when I wrapped it over me, but by then I was so frozen that when we said goodbye late in the night, I had considerable trouble in hauling myself to a taxi. It ended with a severe cold and on antibiotics. For my next interview in that cold flat I turned up dressed as if for the Antarctic: several layers of clothes and warm socks. (Katarzyna Wolanik Boström)

The protagonist reveals the great lengths she was willing to go in order to keep her professional mask in place. Like the archetypal samurai, she chooses to suffer and even to get sick rather than to lose her (professional) face,

apparently in the belief that admitting to being cold was out of line or unbecoming for the truly dedicated researcher. However, the author chooses to be self-ironic and self-deprecating rather than proud of her achievement, turning the story and its point into an ethnographic facework account with a touch of light self-distancing.

Losing the Path

Our second category consists of stories where the ironic twist is constructed around the disruptions in the relationship with the Other. These narratives deal with the experience of losing a sense of direction in the fieldwork.

The first story in this category portrays an ethnographer who fails to make it to the field at all:

I hate ethnography. I really loathe it. It's not the "Being There" that bugs me though, although that can be an arduous experience. It's the traveling that I hate. I mean, where are we going when hey-ho, hey-ho, ethnographing now we go? The practice of field-work is most of the time described as: deciding to go somewhere, being there and writing out the first two parts. Being There seems very central, almost a braggable feat. It is as if [...] in the Being There [stage, we first] would become ethnographers, truly attaining oneness with our study-objects, or at least oneness with what we want to become when Being There [sic]. I would like to bring another part of ethnography to your attention, one that has been unfairly forgotten—Getting There.

The air-conditioning on the Aeroflot flight from Helsinki to Moscow is a bit peculiar [...] Functioning basically like a big humidifier, it spews out cold steam into the cabin, making the air more breathable and the atmosphere less pleasant [...] I get picked up at the airport, and my surly driver takes me to my hotel. It is huge. The reception is manned by stalwarts from the Soviet service industry, unsmiling, uninterested, unforgiving. I, however, manage to get my room. It is OK, situated at the start of an insanely long corridor. There is no-one [sic] else around. It is quiet. Grave-like, even. I can't even find a bar, and by now, I need one.

My driver comes in the morning, as surly as the night before. He speaks no English. I give him the paper which is supposed to indicate where I'm going. It is a copy of a fax (of a copy?), and very difficult to read [...] He starts driving. And we drive. And drive. And drive. It is glaringly obvious that he has no idea where we're going. He stops, asks for directions, scratches his head, drives some more. An hour passes. I have no idea where we are, as I've never been in Moscow before. Then, he seems to get an idea. He guns the engine, and drives me to a construction site. I get off, and we agree that he'll pick me up in three hours. He drives away, and I start looking for the site office. I find it, but it's locked. I realize there is no-one [sic] on the site. I'm alone. Without a driver, in a city I do not know, not knowing the language. And the site is empty. I almost start crying. And I realize that there is something much, much worse than a failed ethnography—not even getting there. (Alf Rehn)

This is a straightforward account of a dead-end, in the geographical sense. The researcher goes beyond failures in research: He, because of the misunderstanding (or, perhaps, because of the vile intentions of the driver), does not even make it to the field and his prospects of getting back to the city seem to be fully dependent on the driver.

Losing the sense of intellectual direction is another type of losing the way, and is depicted in the following story, which, as painful experience as it describes, culminates in a happy, albeit ironic, ending.

My task was simple, or so I thought. I was to go to the company, make interviews, spend some time on observations [...] Short of a car but very motivated, I took two buses and a bit less than after two hours [sic], in the early morning, I was at the site. After going through the preliminaries, and after talking to the manager (not too happy to have me there, but quite helpless, as the word from above came that I would be doing the study), I was allowed to go to the software engineers' working rooms, where I was shortly introduced and left by myself.

Feeling that, as I was probably already being perceived as an intruder, I probably should be a bit more polite than usual, and also seeing how hectic the work seemed, I decided to schedule a couple of appointments and call it a day. It went surprisingly easy: I made four appointments, both scheduled two weeks ahead (but fortunately for me for the same day). Quite satisfied, I returned home.

Two weeks went by and I made the trip to the company. When I came to the room, it turned out that what I thought [...] had been hectic earlier was nothing compared to what took place now. Indeed, there was a serious breakdown or bug in the system [that the team maintained], to make matters worse [it was] in the system used by an important client. It made no sense to disturb anyone, as they would not have time for me anyway, so I just made sure to reschedule the interviews. Fortunately enough, all four interviewees agreed that in two more weeks latest everything will come back to normal and we would be able to have our interviews done. We all put the date into our calendars and I took the buses home. Finally, when another two weeks passed, I begun [sic] to understand an important thing: if there is anything close to "normal" in software development, it was hectic and short of time. Although I did not make my interviews then, I finally realized that it does not make any sense to schedule them. Instead I stayed and talked to people over lunch breaks—but this turned out to be quite effective and does not belong to this story anymore. (Dariusz Jemielniak)

This story is striking because it owes its happy ending to the recognition of—and giving in to—the perceived ambiguity in the field. The protagonist enters the scene like John Wayne, ready to take on the perceived enemy, which for ethnographers is chaos or uncertainty. The researcher has a plan about how to carry out his study. In his ignorance, he does not recognize the *mañana* character of the schedules, which itself is a topic much more fascinating than he had

imagined. When they start to fail, he becomes alarmed. Then, when he embraces the uncertainty of the field and goes with the flow, his mission at last begins to succeed.

The last story is much less optimistic and its strong ironic accent provides perhaps the only salvation. Not only does the plan fail, the whole endeavour becomes endangered and the ethnographer is left with her sense of humour and nothing else.

When I was doing my dissertation field work I wanted to keep the specifics of the focus of my study of the way physical spaces affect how people work a secret so as not to influence the way that my informants reported their behavior. As I was getting ready to meet the first group of employees at one of my field sites I heard over the intercom "all those signed up for the physical space study should go immediately to the conference room!" So much for planning! (Mary Jo Hatch)

The reckless revealing of the topic of the study to the company results in a true disaster. The research ends before it even starts, as the population being studied irrevocably loses its innocence by being spoiled with knowledge. We do not know what happens next. This story is notable in that it leaves no hope for success.

Losing the Link

The next type of discrepancy is the inconsistency of cultures, a common enough trait of the context in which the ethnographer finds her- or himself. One could say that cultural disagreement is the inbuilt professional condition of threat for the ethnographer, just like violence is for the police officer. Ethnographers have famously been called professional strangers (Agar, 1980). This is a mission "to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, and to boldly go where no one has gone before," as the popular *Star Trek* TV series put it. Wherever they roam (be it to an exotic tribe or just to the adjacent room), they are not to familiarize themselves with the field too much: their professional identity must prevail. This, perhaps, is the reason (if not an excuse) for the fact that ethnographers are vulnerable to culture clashes. After all, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 102):

Confrontation of the ethnographer with an "alien" culture is the methodological and epistemological foundation of the anthropological enterprise, whether it be from the point of view of a romantically inspired search for exotic cultures, or the less glamorous sort of encounter

The first of the stories of this kind shows how easy it is to put one's foot in one's mouth during ethnographic work. The narrated event could, of course, have taken place in any other social setting. However, for an ethnographer it can be a more frequent occurrence than for most people (cultural blunders abound among those who are busy study-

ing alien cultures), and it can have devastating consequences for his or her entire project. The ethnographer is considered, if anything, an expert on cultures and a cultural blunder may affect his or her credibility.

Recently I was conducting an interview in English, with a manager in an IT company. My interlocutor was describing an implementation of a new solution for a client. At some moment, when I wanted to make sure if I understood him right, I asked an additional question: "so, you mean implementing the final solution?" From the conversation it should be clear that I meant the final version of the IT solution implementation. My interviewee, however, stopped talking abruptly and started scrutinizing me in an uncomfortable silence. After a while he remarked that he did not appreciate my use of the phrase "the final solution," also because of his Jewish roots ... (Dominika Latusek)

Perhaps this time the ethnographer, thanks to her foreign background, overcoming the awkwardness of the situation, manages to convince the interlocutor that her unfortunate choice of words is neither deliberate nor a consequence of incompetence. After all, the role of a stranger allows not only for strange questions, but also for inappropriate behaviour. But these two aims are at cross-purposes. If she does not mean what she says or if she is not familiar with the English translation of *Endlösung*, she shows her ignorance of the contemporary world and of history. If she is familiar with the term, she is deliberately offensive, or at least insensitive. Invoking foreignness can in such situation be a blissful resolution of a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma. The second story describes a serious cultural misunderstanding without a comforting resolution.

I had only come across the idea of ethnography in passing whilst completing the first year of my undergraduate course in sociology. But in looking forward to starting an option in industrial sociology in the second year, I decided that I would spend all my summer vacation working in a factory. I would be like an anthropologist going deeply "into the field." [...]

Not far from my home was a business that engaged in what it called "scientific packaging" and they were advertising jobs in the department which made crates and packing cases. I got one of these jobs and found myself, day in, day out, working alongside a dozen or so other youths, constructing ammunition boxes for the Ministry of Defence. I learned about and took part in all sorts of practices—and malpractices—that I was later to read about in the Hawthorne Studies and Gouldner's gypsum factory study. All this learning was valuable, but the most significant learning came when I was asked if I would provide two weeks' holiday cover for the man who worked "the big chopper" in the part of the factory where various delicate mechanical items were packed into boxes for dispatch around the world.

I experienced something of what I later came to know as "culture shock" when I entered C Shop for the first

time at 7:55 am the next Monday morning. It was a large hangar-like building in which rows of women sat or stood at benches to do the packing. I was led into a small room through a door in one wall of the main working area. In this room was an enormous guillotine. This was the big chopper. And my job was to slice up paper and cardboard into precise dimensions which the women, in ones or twos, would bring to me in the “chopper room” throughout the working day. The C Shop foreman and I were the only two men in this part of the site.

I was not naïve enough to be surprised by leg-pulling and sexual banter from the women who would visit me for what they called “chopper services” through the day [“chopper” is a British slang word for penis]. What I was surprised about, however, was the seriousness which often accompanies pranks and joking in all sorts of settings (a theme which I subsequently took up in my “grown-up” ethnographic research). And this seriousness soon became clear to me as a result of a foolish mistake which I made. [...A] women asked, quite reasonably, about what I was studying at university. None of them had heard of sociology and so I floundered around gabbling about social structures, social roles, cultures and the like. Eventually, to make it simple, I said that sociology was “not the study of people” but “the study of the relationships which existed between people.” “Aha,” said one woman, “relationships.” “Yes,” said her mate, “Tony’s at college studying sex.” Stupidly—so very stupidly—and with a foolish grin on my face I said, “that’s it, I am a trainee sex expert.” So that was the information which was immediately flashed around the workshop: the lad in the chopper room knows a lot about sex.

At first it seemed that this had not been a bad idea. An opportunity had been created for some good “laughs.” There were jokes about “chopper doctors,” jokes about lecturers on sex courses appearing naked in lecture theatres and, inevitably, jokes about the experiments that “sex students” might be required to perform in the course of their studies. But it was not long before it became apparent that there was something more serious going on. I think this first occurred to me when one of the younger women asked me whether it was true that sexual intercourse performed “standing up” would not lead to pregnancy. I was about to make some trite quip in response to this but the expression on the girl’s face (a very young face beneath a blond fringe, which I can still picture) made me hesitate. She was indeed genuinely anxious (or was acting out a part in a way which has left me convinced to this day). She said her boyfriend was insisting that there was no problem in his entering her without protection when he was “saying goodnight to me up against the wall in the alley-way next to our house.” And the way I dealt with this, and subsequent such queries, put me in a trap. I felt that the only way I could answer her was with as realistic a response as possible. But in telling her that I understood that there was as much chance of getting pregnant from vertical intercourse as there was from horizontal coupling, I was confirming my alleged role as a sex expert. If I simply made a joke of the matter, I might be condemning her to an unwanted pregnancy. But in telling her that her boyfriend was either “badly informed” or “trying it on” I

was setting myself up with an authority I did not possess. It was a horrid ethical dilemma which my naïve joking about sociology being sex studies had got me into [...] One morning a woman came in to see me, with her roll of corrugated cardboard and some measurements. I recognised her as the mother of a youth with whom I had worked on the ammunition box line. She told me that every time she had sexual intercourse she found herself bleeding for some time afterwards. As she spoke, I found myself shrinking inside. “But surely your doctor ... ,” I stammered. She cut me off with “My doctor is useless.” “But I have no idea about this sort of thing,” I insisted, “This sex expert business has got out of line.” There was an awkward silence. And to break the silence I stupidly turned to humour and, with a forced laugh uttered, “Oh it must just be that you are doing it wrong—perhaps you should try some new positions.” I thought my tone made it clear that I was making a joke to close the conversation. She said nothing. And she left without a glimmer of the smile that I hoped I might see on her face to signal that we were both retreating from an embarrassing conversation. That was it. And before long it was lunchtime [...] When I returned to work, I dashed into the guillotine room to avoid being late. I immediately found myself looking into the eyes of a man in workman’s overalls. He stood with his booted feet slightly apart and his arms folded. I was convinced I was going to be beaten up. In a way, it might have been easier if he had thumped me. What he did was much worse. With an utterly sincere look on his face he said, “I understand you know about these things, mate, and that you think the missus and me ought to go about things in a different way. Perhaps you could.” At this point my memory fails me. I was utterly and totally embarrassed. I was ashamed of myself. That very night, as my girlfriend (now my wife) tells me, I could not remember what happened next. I no doubt offered mumbled apologies and attempted some sort of explanation of how we had got into this situation. What I am sure I did not do was to try to make any kind of joke of the matter. I had learned an important ethnographic lesson: think very hard before you make any kind of joke in a fieldwork situation where there is any kind of cultural ambiguity. (Tony Watson)

As the author points out, one has to be very careful in situations where there is cultural ambiguity, and such situations abound in the everyday life of ethnographers. The described position is completely hopeless. The ethnographer has no third option of an exit between Scylla of incompetence and Charybdis of perceived ill will; there are just too many cultural mazes in which to get lost. The protagonist takes the emergency exit of banishing a part of the incident from his memory.

Losing the Zone

The fourth category contains only one story in which the ironic twist is constructed around an insurmountable disruption between the ethnographer’s and the Other’s realities. Sometimes there is really nothing more to add, and no way to repair the failed encounter with the field. Alf Rehn’s

story of not arriving at the site is potentially such a narrative, but the unmet field remains fascinating and taunts a memory of a promise unfulfilled and an endeavour unrealized. The following story is different in that the ethnographer, who actually got to the field and met some of the actors, had some of his social, ethnographic, and organizational sense taken away from him.

My expectations had been huge. ... I expected to conduct at least 5 interviews, to take numerous field notes, to personally experience what this company is really about. I was hoping to gain precious research material. But I did not.

I arrived to Sleepy Hollow (let's call it this way, it was actually a small town in the west of Poland) quite early in the morning, which meant that I had to get up in the middle of the night. But it wasn't really a problem. The first problem I had on that day was to get any piece of information from my first interlocutor—The Boss. Not getting into much detail, I should probably add that I was interested in how the HR company policy of a very particular and quite unusual kind—compelling all its employees to participate in a spiritual course where they were told about various spiritual techniques and ethical issues, and after the course finished, strongly encouraged to participate in diverse spiritual follow-up activities—affects various organizational functions. But any attempt at getting The Boss to talk about these matters had an interesting effect: he was getting deeper and deeper into issues such as the immortality of [the] human soul, numerous levels of consciousness, instant materialization and dematerialization of various objects and the frequency of encounters with aliens, to name just a few. After two hours I gave up. His demonstrative avoidance of any of the topics in any possible way related to organizational/managerial issues was intriguing, but hey, I still had more interviews coming, so no worries, right? Wrong.

When we finally arrived at the company my conversation with The Boss, or more accurately, his lecture, took place in one of the neighbouring restaurants, and I was introduced to the employee which I was supposed to [...] interview [...], I thought that from now on it will be just fine. I wouldn't probably have thought that, had I noticed how tense (not to say terrified) the employees were when they saw their boss. That, I noticed a second later. Precisely when we all went to yet another restaurant, sat around the table and started our conversation. "All" means me, my interlocutor, her boss and his little daughter. When I made a remark that this could be boring for him, The Boss answered that, on the contrary, he was vitally interested in what his employee had to say. What a lovely picture we must have made: me, trying to get some answers pertaining to [the] employee's version of the effects of the company's policy; she, almost trembling and occasionally directly asking her boss for the permission to answer my question; The Boss, sitting comfortably and scrutinizing his employee's face; and the little girl eating her ice cream. According to what I heard from the employee, working for this company was idyllic. Needless to say, I heard otherwise from another source.

Once we were done, I asked The Boss if I could talk to someone else as well. My question seemed rhetorical since I was supposed to talk to many people there. Well, apparently it was not. No, I will not talk to other employees. Reason? I quote: "it doesn't make sense, they are not really interested in what is taught to them, they don't even attend the post-course meetings. They will have nothing interesting to tell you." Obviously, they were the only people who could have told me something interesting on that occasion. But, the day hadn't finished yet. I had the rare opportunity to spend some time in The Boss's luxurious residence located on the outskirts of the town and dine together with his family, just before I took the train back. And going back was probably the best part of my stay in Sleepy Hollow. Still, jokes aside, although I planned to achieve something else, what happened on that day was also quite revealing. And I don't necessarily refer to what I've learned about reincarnation and the UFO, but rather about this organization's culture and the impact of top down imposition of various company policies on employees' behaviour. Or, on the [sic] second thought, maybe I didn't learn anything and it was a perfect, spectacular disaster. (Michał Izak)

Although the experience of studying people who were being observed by their boss could, perhaps, be very refreshing, it failed utterly to meet the researcher's requirements. As authors of this paper, we have both at some time in our careers taught courses on the principles of management and have insisted on sending students out to the field. McDonald's as an organization was banned from the course after several groups of students reported McDonalds' employees to be extremely happy with their work (needless to say, while being interviewed in the presence of their manager).

The ethnographer never returned to Sleepy Hollow, but he turned up at other places and is, to our best knowledge, still happily collecting his field material. When all else fails, ethnographers can at least hope for better luck next time. They are often rewarded with it, as the abundant and fascinating ethnographic literature about organizations shows. However, the dark side of field research is much less known.

Discussion

Summary

Why are these recalled incidents funny or ironic? Why are they important? We are inclined to think that the reason is linked to how organizational ethnographers construct their identity. In social sciences, identity is the continuity of experience, consistency of role, and a sense of agency (Alvesson, 1994; Côté & Levine, 2002). Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1994) understood identity as a modern institution and as the assumption that a given kind of actor will undertake a given kind of action. The actors' actions shape their identity and may form patterns of relationships and interactions with the context over time. Thus, the context influences the actors and vice versa. According to

Czarniawska-Joerges, identity construction is a contextual social process, always in progress and always tentative. However, there are cues and expectations about the iterations and the outcome. The cultural context defines the actors' desired/desirable identities. The actors may use these cues as well as their own ideas and translate them into an actual enactment of their identities: In the process, "traveling ideas [encounter] a frame of reference, that is ideas in residence" (Czarniawska-Joerges, p. 209). As a result of this highly fluid and iterative process, one is rewarded by a sense of stability and coherence, as these are the central features of what identity is supposed to be.

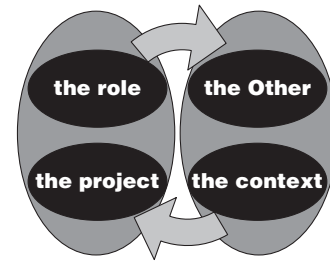
Some identities are more strictly socially defined than others. The identity of the ethnographer, or the professional stranger (Agar, 1980), is perhaps among the less defined. As such, it is open to paradoxes and inconsistencies, which are easier to cope with if the actor adopts a distance toward her/himself (Rorty, 1989). For Rorty (1989), someone adopting such a distance is a liberal ironist, whom he defines as someone who emphasizes contingency in seeking a situational and contextual awareness, and as someone who does not believe in one central idea beyond the cultural context. The ironist possesses neither a final vocabulary, nor the conviction that certain words, such as truth, reason, and faith, carry a value beyond reflection and problematization. The ironists are social actors who distance themselves from their vocabularies; they refuse to take themselves too seriously.

We have noticed that the ethnographers who contributed their accounts of failures to our text practiced ironic distancing in their identity construction in order to deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in their role of ethnographers doing research in organizational fields. They did so by exposing a major incongruence they encountered in their research, one that disturbed or sabotaged their identity work in the field, and then distanced themselves from it. Describing the errors long passed is, after all, a way to come to peace with them and move on.

They narrated four different kinds of incongruence: placed within the role, within the relationship with the Other, within the context, and, finally, within the ethnographic project itself.

Due to its intrinsic vagueness, the role of the ethnographer can be a source of many contradictions. These contradictions are also a result of the field's lack of knowledge about its scope and content. Paradoxically, it is not necessarily true that because cultural anthropologists visit foreign and exotic lands that they only immerse themselves in unknown contexts while organizational ethnographers operate only in familiar environments. Organizational ethnographers come from academic environments that differ very much from the organizations they study. Indeed, some may say that being separated from the object of the study is the key to successful research, as the more traditional approach to ethnography demands that one should not study

Figure 2.
Types of identity incongruity in ethnographic work



one's own culture. Furthermore, the field does not necessarily understand who the ethnographer is or, indeed, that such a legitimate social role even exists. How many times have we encountered reactions ranging from happy surprise to outright condescension from puzzled practitioners, who expected a more business-type kind of person ("you, coming from a management department, should be able to offer some practical advice on how to run my business"), or a more traditional scientist ("what hypothesis do you work with and how many questionnaires do you want to send out?"). The ethnographer may be truly lost in this conundrum, and unable to adjust to the expectations of the field. Perhaps worse, the ethnographer may be lost in his or her own conceptions of what being an ethnographer is or is not about.

The second source of clash in identity construction is the way the relationship between the ethnographer and the Other in the field develops. Both sides may expect different things of the relationship and hold differing mental maps. Ethnographers know that when doing inductive and idiographic research, they need to keep their mind open and receptive to new ideas. However, lacking the strict rules and guidelines of quantitative researchers, they often think they are facing raw chaos and experience a need to tame and order it, at least by having a general plan of what they are supposed to do. The field, alas, has a tendency to sabotage plans and denounce initial ideas and assumptions. As this is part and parcel of any ethnographer's work, be it the cultural anthropologist's or the organizational ethnographer's, the best and perhaps only approach to numerous situations when the plan breaks down is ironic distance. Sometimes the Other in the field reciprocates the ethnographer's uncertainty with his or her own insecurity about how the relationship should develop. In Mary Jo Hatch's tale, the manager who torpedoed her research probably had no intention of doing so. The researcher had a plan, and so did the Other in the field. Unfortunately, they were both doomed to fail.

The third type of incongruence derives from the cultural context of both the ethnographer and the field. In the

case of organizational ethnographers, the context may seem similar, but the similarity is illusory and the illusion can be dangerous. Contemporary cultural anthropology is preoccupied with colonialism and its devastating consequences for the understanding of and between different cultures (Wright, 1998). Ethnographers may not be as innocent as they would like. In organizational ethnography, there may also be some risk of postcolonial insensitivity, but mainly the risks of cultural clash derive from other colonizing discourses within the societies, such as the colonizing of the public sector with ideas from business (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994), or the colonizing of the life styles of the working class with values and sensibilities of the middle classes (Sennett, 1998). These tendencies, like the rifts between cultural contexts, even within the same “national culture,” can add ambiguity and confusion into the ethnographer’s identity construction.

Finally, there is the major rift depicted in the last story, where differing approaches to reality make the continuation of the project impossible. Of all the collected narratives, only this one is of a final failure, where the Other and the researcher simply fail to meet and no process of identity construction can ensue. The ethnographer wanted to conduct an ethnographic study and become familiar with the organization and its actors by free interaction and cultural immersion. The manager had no intention of letting him do that but pictured him, instead, as a mirror that would reflect a preferred identity. The scale of the clash was of cosmic proportions—the manager and the ethnographer inhabited separate realities not likely to overlap. The only thing left to the ethnographer was irony in which to allow the hole in his identity construction process to heal.

Contributions to Scholarship

This leads us to the question of the role of irony in the identity construction of the organizational ethnographer. We are not attempting to create a universally valid conceptual model, but rather to decipher the narratives collected. We believe that this may be a relevant endeavour, inasmuch as the stories may be of interest to other ethnographers, learning and taking heart from the tales of others who have encountered similar problems and done similar things. Our ideas are thus more of a model for experiential learning than a general explanation of identity construction.

We would first like to consider the outcomes of the collected narratives and the role of irony in leading the plot to the outcome. All of the stories describe a serious disruption, showing the defeat of the protagonist in a struggle against misfortune. Their defeats are not in vain, because they raise their own and the consciousness of the readers. For all purposes, this description matches Hayden White’s (1973) definition of tragedy. However, while none of the narratives are sad, neither are they amusing. The circumstances remain depressing but the outcomes are not. This is due to the pro-

tagonist’s ability to distance him- or herself from the tragic finale, thus providing the narrative with an ironic twist and a valuable ingredient for the construction of the ethnographer’s identity. When the reader begins to empathize with Katarzyna Wolanik-Boström, whose interview literally made her sick, she ceases to be a victim and turns into a cheerful character who can laugh at herself. In the same way, just as the reader begins to commiserate with Alf Rehn on his unpleasant journey and failure to reach his destination, the mood of the story shifts and the reader sees the whole event as comical, and one that Rehn does not take seriously, as demonstrated in the last sentence of his account. In the collected stories the ironic finale corresponds with the kind of emplotment Hayden White (1973) called *romance*: the main character transgresses and triumphs over the everyday world.

All tales point to obstacles beyond the protagonist’s powers, ranging from geography to a lack of understanding of the role of the ethnographer, or even the ethnographer’s lack of understanding of the culture under examination. The latter is a formidable objective obstacle because the ethnographer is supposed to enter the field with an open mind and no preconceived ideas. However, with open-mindedness comes misunderstanding, as in Dominika Latusek’s story of the offensive phrase that she used in a conversation with a Jewish programmer, or in Tony Watson’s account of a disastrous clash between the cultures of different classes. However, the final ironic twist to all of the tales shifts the ideology from radical to anarchist. The liberation of the subject through the adoption of ironic distance lifts the accounts to a level at which transcendental change becomes possible, which is beyond the former frame of reference. In Katarzyna Wolanik-Boström’s tale, the final irony changes her identity from heroic to comic, and liberates her from acting valiant and insensitive to hardships. She leaves the reader with the image of herself swaddled in several layers of warm clothes, not taking her former sufferings seriously at all. Mary Jo Hatch and Michał Izak both describe a major failure in their fieldwork and then admit philosophically that it was indeed a failure. Their fieldwork may have been compromised, but their identity as ethnographers seems to have gained additional value. These failures, then, become valuable to the ethnographers because through them is it possible to truly understand successes.

Applied Implications

Many of the narratives presented in this article happened early in the contributors’ careers. It may just be that many of them decided to reflect on the situations that happened a long time ago. However, we believe the reason may be more complex. Experiencing of failure and accepting that we all occasionally make fools of ourselves is a crucial part of maturing as a researcher. Realizing that we can all make mistakes is not only ironic, but also edifying.

The shift from vulnerable and restricted social actor to someone who can rise above and have a good laugh is a transcendent change characteristic of all of the tales. This is not an autobiographical attribute of style but is, in our opinion, an interesting element of the ethnographer's identity. All authors are capable of performing that lift. The ethnographer is capable of turning tragedy into romance and of teaching the ideological lesson of transcending immovable institutions.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our study is obviously limited by the responses we received. The biggest failures are probably rarely confessed, and we have been able to collect only the accounts of what our fellow ethnographers and we ourselves consider safe to admit. This, however, is perhaps even more interesting than the "real" disasters: Acknowledged slips take part in defining the professional role of an ethnographer. Following the narrativist tradition, we drew from the "near misses" often considered the most educational.

Our study can lead to future analyses of the role of irony in professional identity construction. It would be informative to examine the role of irony in some other scholarly as well as nonacademic professions. Another path for study is to more closely research ethnographers themselves to better understand their occupational culture. Although this task may seem suicidal or, at best, very difficult because of the self-awareness and reflexivity they may display, it is still quite crucial in revealing the fundamentals of our work.

Conclusion

The narrators of the stories we have collected could address their fellow ethnographers: The story is over, now get on with your identity construction projects as you see fit. Even if you don't find the stories humorous, their authors do; the ability to perceive themselves ironically made them mature and grow into the identity of professional ethnographer.

Joseph Campbell, in his interesting analysis of the structure of myths (1949/2004), argued that most cultures repeat the same plot in which the hero is separated from home (or a safe place) and in departing, goes through an initiation in order to return with new found wisdom and power to the place of his or her origin. This cycle, borrowed from the anthropological observations of Arnold van Gennep (1909/1966), forms the basis of the perpetual Monomyth. In the same fashion, the ethnographer's identity narrative (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994) can be seen as a retelling of the story of the Wise Old Man or, in Jung's words, a senex (Jung, 1959). As such, the narrative can be said to be archetypical, as it touches profound layers of the human psyche

known as the collective unconscious. It can also be considered a type of linguistic framing because the contributors refer to the narrative schemes that are deeply rooted in human culture (Kostera, 2008). The ethnographer, like all characters referring to the senex archetype, comes from another world, sometimes offering advice to the people, but usually keeping to his/her own goals. Through the heroic adventure, the ethnographer comes to understand his/her lore better and comes back to the beginning enlightened, only to smile at his or her former self. Thus the identity can be said to contain elements of self-control, an authority internalized within the role itself, which is symbolized by this inner sage who is capable of saving the day in face of failure.

From this perspective, our stories of irony and failure go beyond the initial interpretation. They are not really accounts of slips; they are much more. By becoming part of the current neglected discourse on ethnographical errors, these stories become successes and important lessons in the development of mature ethnographers. Prasad (1997) mentioned empathy as one of the key attributes of the ethnographic methodology. An empathic professional needs to be not only open to the Other, but also able to incorporate self-irony into his or her identity.

In summary, our findings reveal the role of irony in the identity construction of organizational ethnographers in response to slips during fieldwork. We consider the slips crucial to the identity construction process. Thanks to their slips, ethnographers are able to position themselves as wise outsiders who can handle ambiguity and failure. The implications of our findings for future ethnographic work concern first and foremost a more open attitude towards failure. Such candour among ethnographers should be encouraged. A second implication is the conscious use of irony for the maturation of the identity. The development of such a skill can be advocated during the training and mentoring of young ethnographers.

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