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POINT
COUNTERPOINT

Ethnography as Work: Some Rules of Engagement

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ABSTRACT Ethnography is both a methodological approach to and an analytic perspective on social research. It has a long history and pedigree in organization and management studies and well beyond. Perhaps the most distinctive features of ethnography are its pragmatic orientations and its written products. As a way of responding to Tony Watson's essay, I look at three constitutive (and overlapping) tasks – fieldwork, headwork, and textwork – as a way to sketch out a few craft-like rules for 'how things work' within ethnographic circles. This is an enlargement of Tony's argument rather than a challenge. I conclude however with remarks on two areas (i.e. the native's point of view and the peripheral position of ethnography) where Tony and I seem to differ.

INTRODUCTION

Almost all of Tony Watson's remarks in taking the *Point* for this *Counterpoint* I find helpful and illuminating. The melody is graceful, resonant, and sure to carry well. I too have been humming a similar tune – perhaps less gracefully – and know well the pitch and rhythm of this familiar ode to ethnography. I do have some modest quibbles of course but they are put forth here less as correctives than elaborations. What I find most useful in Tony's essay are his remarks on ethnography as defined by its writing practices, his commentary on pragmatism as too long overlooked as something of a non-paradigmatic approach and perspective, informing – if implicitly – some of the best classical and contemporary ethnographic work, and his take on the various ways we might encourage more people in organizational studies to take up the ethnographic craft as a way – perhaps the most telling way – of learning 'how things work' in the equivocal and enigmatic worlds of organizations and management. Where I disagree with Tony (cue the lone vuvuzela in the orchestra) is with his argument that practicing and wannabe ethnographers cannot and should not claim that they capture the 'lived experiences' of organizational members as well as his take on the necessity for ethnographers to 'go mainstream'.

I take up each of these matters in turn but embed my commentary by looking at ethnographic work more generally, thus providing a sketch of the broader context within

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which fieldwork based studies of organizations and management take place. The aim of my short essay here is not only to respond to Tony's remarks but also to represent ethnography as it is constituted by some of the social practices (forever shifting) that lead to its production – a kind of brief ethnography-of-ethnography. A few of the rules I have in mind are more or less institutionalized and taken-for-granted as constitutive of the trade, a few are strategic with particular ends in mind, but most are pragmatic, created and modified by ethnographers as their projects unfold in and out of the field. I begin by casting fieldwork as a distinct but curious kind of scholarly work. I then consider a few of the problematic conceptual knots with which those taking on the job must grapple and follow this with a brief look at the writing and reception of ethnographic texts. I conclude with two *Counterpoints*, one supporting the venerable if still problematic notion of 'the native's point of view' and the other advocating an outsider role – beyond the mainstream – for ethnography in organizational and management studies.

ON FIELDWORK . . .

Ethnography is first and foremost a social practice concerned with the study and representation of culture (with a distinctly small c these days). It is an interpretive craft, focused more on 'how' and 'why' than on 'how much' or 'how many'. Ethnography claims a sort of informative and documentary status – 'bringing back the news' – by the fact that somebody actually goes out beyond their ivory towers of employment, libraries, classrooms, and offices to 'live with and live like' someone else. These are ironclad matters, more or less given, not up for grabs. One becomes an ethnographer by doing it. Fieldwork of the immersive sort is by and large definitional of the trade.

However, as Tony notes, fieldwork practices are biographically and contextually varied – stunningly so. Studies differ in terms of working style, place, pace, time, and mix of evidentiary approaches (interviews, surveys, content analysis, network mapping, etc.) yet all rely on some form of lengthy participant-observation, a rather stock if oxymoronic phrase that indexes one of the most impressive ways yet invented to make ourselves uncomfortable. But, if one cannot do lengthy and sustained fieldwork among others who are often initially recalcitrant and suspicious of those who come uninvited into their lives, one has no business doing ethnography and is perhaps best advised to take up a pleasant academic career in economic sociology or experimental social psychology.[1]

Fieldwork is a technique of gathering research materials by subjecting the self – body, belief, personality, emotions, cognitions – to a set of contingencies that play on others such that over time, usually a long time, one can more or less see, hear, feel and come to understand the kinds of responses others display (and withhold) in particular social situations. In any hard discipline, be it engineering, gardening, auto repair, or ethnography, the learner must submit to things that have their own intractable ways, an authoritative structure that commands respect. For fieldworkers, this means subjecting one's self to at least a part the life situation of others after getting there by one (often sneaky) means or another. While ethnographers can leave the field whenever they want to, on the scene, they must customarily act like this is not true. In many respects, the legendary – if too frequently overhyped – ethnographic sympathy and empathy comes

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from the experience of taking close to the same shit others take day-in and day-out (or, if not taking it directly, hanging out with others who do). Even when studying professionals, elites, or high-ranking organizational members, the fieldworker inevitably must come to terms with the situational dictates and pressures put on, expressed, and presumably felt by those studied.

In the field, one must cut their life down (to the bone perhaps). In many respects, fieldworkers must remove themselves from their usual routines, havens, pleasures, familiar haunts, and social contexts such that the fieldwork site provides a social world. And to get at this world, one has to need it. This is not easy and to varying degrees requires one to question if not tear down at least a part of their own systems of belief and their preconceptions about themselves and the various communities from which they come. As the 'reluctant ethnographer', Tony's personal ruminations about the difficulties and the anxieties fieldwork raises for him are not only spot on but highly general. There are no shortcuts, no ways to 'learn the ropes' without being there and banking on the kindness of strangers.

Often shaping fieldwork is the counter-intuitive idea that to become culturally astute and knowledgeable in a studied domain requires one to begin work from a state of innocence if not near ignorance. The position is that one's learning, insight, sensitivity, and eventual powers to represent are advanced by being clueless at the beginning of a study. Fieldwork may appear romantic and adventurous from the outside, but on the inside there is a good deal of child-like if not blind wandering about in the field. Cultural oversights, misunderstandings, embarrassments, and ineptitudes are common. Relationships based on a certain kind of rapport form only with time, patience, and luck. Choices of topics, frameworks, and substantive domains emerge only after considerable thought and experimentation. And all writing is of course rewriting and rewriting and rewriting. In short, learning in (and out) of the field is uneven, usually unforeseen, and rests more on a logic of discovery and happenstance than a logic of verification and plan. It is anything but predictable or linear. The unbearable slowness of ethnography – from 'getting in' to 'getting out' to 'writing it up' – is an enduring feature of the work. The question both Tony and I ask is why the devil would anyone put himself or herself in such a woeful situation voluntarily?

There are of course many good answers here. Tony's answer is that this is how one can best learn 'how things work' in organizational settings. I agree but would add that 'how things work' is a cultural and hence often disputed matter and inevitably implies trying to grasp the meanings (and meaningful forms) those studied make use of as they go about their everyday activities. Culture is of course one of the more contentious and complicated words in our lexicon. Like the term 'force' to a physicist or 'life' to a biologist, 'culture' to an ethnographically inclined social scientist is multi-vocal, highly ambiguous, shape shifting, and difficult if not impossible to pin down. When put into use, contradictions abound. Culture is taken by some of its most distinguished students as cause and consequence, as material and immaterial, as coherent and fragmented, as grand and humble, as visible (to some) and invisible (to many). In anthropology and sociology, the term has had a long yet sharply contested career, and today, a few of the more prominent and vocal students of culture suggest the concept should be duly honoured but packed up and retired.

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Or should it? One of the charming but endlessly frustrating things about culture is that everybody uses the term, albeit in vastly different ways. The notion of culture as used by ethnographers today is more a loose, sensitizing concept than a strict theoretical one. It signals a conviction that agency and action (be it word or deed) rest on social meanings that range from the rather bounded and particularistic to the more or less institutionalized and broad. Over the past several decades, however, ethnographers of all varieties have been paying far more attention to the former than the latter. Certainly the view of culture as an integrated, shared system of interlocking ideas, routines, signs, and values passed on more or less seamlessly from generation to generation has withered away (thankfully), as have most notions of organizations as tightly bound 'cultural islands' and the evolutionary or managed theories of culture generated by such notions. But as long as meanings are taken to be central to accounts of human activity and meanings are seen as coming forth – somehow, someway – from human interaction, it is most unclear what conceptual framework might step up to replace culture as a way to imagine and think about such matters as 'how things work'. In terms of understanding how things get done by people on the ground in the organizational worlds we are – or become – familiar with, culture, and the social processes associated with the concept, however trimmed down and inevitably flawed, still seem to me indispensible.

Culture simply refers to the meanings and practices produced, sustained, and altered through interaction, and ethnography is the study and representation of culture as used by particular people, in particular places, at particular times. More important perhaps is not what culture is (and the semantic elasticity surrounding the concept) but – and in keeping with pragmatic principles – what culture does. And what it does most critically is the work of defining words, ideas, things, symbols, groups, identities, activities, and so forth. We all live our lives in terms of the definitions that culture creates. These definitions however are far from consensual. The view of culture I take is a distributive one that would contest the idea of culture as necessarily a coherent entity of collective sharing. As clusters of meaning, culture can be seen as comprehensible and distinct even though it may also display indeterminacy, indifference, discord, and ambivalence. Perhaps more important these days than in times past, culture should be understood to reside largely within a sphere of social relationships and only indirectly tied to places (or organizations). To paraphrase Clifford Geertz's (1973, p. 22) shrewd remark that anthropologists do not study villages, they study in villages: organizational ethnographers do not study organizations, they study in organizations. The aim is to provide a localized understanding of the cultural processes – meaning making – as it occurs from a few vantage points within the organization.

ON HEADWORK . . .

What I am doing by trying to conceptualize, contextualize, and communicate current notions of culture and cultural processes for the reader in a neat and tidy way is a bit of both ethnographic headwork and textwork. My headwork, such as it is, comes from my reading of the ethnographic literature, my fieldwork (and, sigh, my 'life experiences'), my understandings and interests in organization studies, my ethnographic tastes, my sense of what I want this short paper to convey, and an almost infinite list of other constraining

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(and liberating) sources, some obvious to me, some not. Headwork is of course always a part – a huge part – of any project, be it social research or otherwise. One could not pick up rocks without some sort of theory to guide them.

I use the term headwork to refer to the conceptual work that informs ethnographic fieldwork and its various representational practices. Such work is perhaps most obvious when we are composing (or reading) an ethnography. While it may be true that when the narrative pleasures of ethnography are great enough – meticulous detail, drama, surprise, irony – no one asks for conceptual niceties, and the analytic frames, aims, and implications are overlooked by readers (although surely not absent). But, as Tony notes, given the shrill call these days to students of organization and management to be 'theoretically informed and informing', it seems to me that ethnography is expected to do more work of an abstract and analytic sort than has been required of it in the past. This is perhaps in part to give theory-obsessed and cherry-picking readers beyond ethnographic circles something to hang on to and take away and, in part, an odd result of the opened-up (yet trimmed down) version of culture I just put forth.

Here in particular is where I think Tony's invocation of pragmatism offers some aid. Ethnography's focus on the 'empirical' alongside its 'I-witnessing' ideal – meaning its intense reliance on personalized seeing, hearing, and experiencing in specific social settings – has always generated something of a hostility to generalizations and abstractions not connected to immersion in situated detail. This is certainly in keeping with pragmatists such as John Dewey and Charles Pierce who favour fallibilism and theoretical pluralism when trying to work up accounts for how a part of the world might operate. They suggest that some theories work better than others depending on the particular problems addressed and the equally particular situations and times in which they are used. While we are accustomed to the rule that we should allow our research questions to determine our methods, pragmatism suggests that we should also allow our questions to determine our theories. This is not a claim that all theories are equally valid or that research questions are themselves pre-theoretical. It is simply the recognition that one need not stake out a theoretical claim on how the world is before beginning a research project.

This view of theory resonates well with the ethnographic research process both in the field and at the writing desk. It may lead at times to a rather shameless eclecticism as various theories are drawn on to explain and perhaps generalize certain matters as the specific nuts and bolts of various theorists are selectively put to use. No overarching theory required. Use only what fits such that analytic and empirical inquiries run in parallel and adjust to one another. A recent example of this kind of theoretical cocktail is found in Jakob Krause-Jensen's *Flexible Firm* (Krause-Jensen, 2010), a splendid ethnographic account of several 'cultural projects' undertaken in the Danish electronics firm Bang and Olufsen. The writing offers up passing reflections on theories of magic, ritual, resistance, ideology, labour process, identity, control, and power coming from a broad set of social theorists – the usual suspects – including Foucault, Turner, Weber, Bourdieu, Barth, Giddens, Geertz, and Goffman as well as organizational theorists such as Weick, Schein, Bendix, Jackall, and Kanter. There are many theoretical muses at play here – mostly canonized – but the author's touch is subtle and the engagement with theory critical, sharp, and original. Much the same could be said of Michel Anteby's

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Moral Grey Zones (Anteby, 2008), a work that looks closely at a dying occupational community formed among craftsmen working for a French manufacturing firm that quite smoothly (and cleverly) mixes and matches various theories that are, on the surface at least, incompatible (e.g. functional, symbolic, new (and old) institutionalism, structural, exchange) to account for his field materials.

This is of course a gloomy view if one is awaiting, like the good member of some cargo cult, the arrival and elaboration of *Le Grand Paradigm* in social or organizational theory. Pragmatists would argue that there are many truths to be found that can help shape and order organizational life. But there is no requirement that such truths be universal or even consistent with one another. I am reminded here of the master of contextualization, Erving Goffman, who was often taken to task by critics for being too specific, too carried away by particulars, too ready to wrap a concept around every situation he analysed. He responded bluntly but eloquently to those who took his work to be 'un-theoretical' by saying that it is 'better perhaps (to have) different coats to clothe the children well then a single, splendid tent in which they all shiver' (Goffman, 1961, p. xiv).

The point here is that a good deal of the headwork involved in ethnography is in developing concepts, theories, or frameworks that fit one's particular research questions and studied situations. And there is, I submit, a good deal of social theory – indeed a brain-numbing amount – well advanced in the social sciences on which to draw.[2] We read, listen, converse with others, ruminate about different but attractive concepts and theories, try them out, judge them in accordance to what is currently going on in our respective fields, and then attempt to put them to use in the context of the work we are doing. This usually requires tinkering with them ever so slightly to make for an arguable fit between theory and data. Some work for us, some don't, and we move on.[3]

In practice, theory choices (the rabbits we pull out of our hats) rest as much on taste as on fit. And taste in ethnography, as elsewhere, results from what is no doubt a complex interaction involving ethnographers, their mentors, their readings, their disciplinary orientations, their colleagues, their students, their subjects, their friends, their critics, and their readers (increasingly their subjects too). The process is altogether de-centred and beyond the grasp of any one interested group to fully monitor or control. The majority of us are no doubt most comfortable working analytic lines that follow the traditions in which we were trained and are thus committed generationally and institutionally to certain broad perspectives, research etiquettes, and topical, if not stylistic, preferences.

Such lines are helpful to be sure and inform theoretical and substantive choices, but ethnographic approaches have multiplied and spread far and wide such that today organizationally relevant ethnographies can come from students almost anywhere – cultural studies, engineering, education, journalism, business and medical schools, media and communications departments, urban affairs, women's studies, ethnomusicology, criminal justice, and other fields, both large and small, too numerous (and growing) to list. Each develops more or less distinguishable analytic and substantive interests and traditions, thus widening the ethnographic landscape. This is partly a result of the spread of the distinctly modern idea of culture as something constructed (and construed) – thick or thin – by all self-identifying groups. Everyone these days, except for those who bowl alone, has a culture and more likely multiple cultures from which to draw meaning. Hence we have lively ethnographic accounts of exotics abroad as well as exotics at home,

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culture as built and sustained by motorcycle gangs, second life enthusiasts, high-profile entrepreneurs, and those abducted by aliens who have been mercifully returned to us.

ON TEXTWORK . . .

What makes for a lively ethnographic account brings me to the matters of ethnographic composition and its genres. There is now an acute textual awareness and self-consciousness across most ethnographic circles. If ethnography is something of an art, science, and craft rolled into one, writing style (and pride) cannot be overlooked. The very materials of cultural characterization (and, I might add, theory making) are terms, images, idioms, labels, frames, phrases, categories, sentences, stories – words not worlds, maps not territories, representations not realities. As I have argued elsewhere, truth, proof, and validity are as much issues of style as content (Van Maanen, 1995). Ethnography occupies a borderland between the social sciences and the humanities, thus the virtues and felicities of stylistic writing and the narrative conventions and experiments that carry ethnography to readers are of more than passing concern.[4]

I use the term textwork as a suturing together of two words meant to convey that writing is a labour-intensive craft and represents a good deal of what we do as intrepid ethnographers. Put starkly, there is simply no such thing as ethnography until it is written. Tony usefully and rightly ties his definition of ethnography to its representational practices – its texts – that he denotes as 'a style of social science writing'. Indeed it is, but it is far more than one style. As with fieldwork and headwork, textwork involves choices, innumerable ones concerned with such things as voice, authorial presence (or absence), analogies and metaphors, allusions, professional dialect and jargon, imagery, interpretive moves, tone, empirical or theoretical emphasis, truth claims, figures of speech, and so on. Some of these choices cohere such that recognizable but contrasting ways of treating and representing cultural processes and culture itself can be discerned.

Some twenty-odd years ago, I stuffed ethnographic writings into three categories in *Tales of the Field* (Van Maanen, 1988). I think these categories have held up – surprise, surprise – reasonably well. One category, realist tales, is certainly still with us if in slightly modified forms. Another category, confessional tales, are fewer in number perhaps, but reflexive confessional tales are now rather routinely attached or blended to the ethnography itself rather than split apart and reduced to appendices, turgid and one-off method chapters, or separate, follow-up monographs intended it seems to humanize the initial ethnographic report (and reporter). Impressionist tales, my third category, have grown into several emerging styles, a result of growth in the cultural representation business and the continuation of experimentation with ethnographic forms that has more or less characterized the trade from its beginnings.

A few broad shifts are however apparent across all genres. Ethnography is less confined to single-site studies of supposedly bounded or conveniently distinct and isolated peoples (the cultural island approach). What Marcus (1998) calls 'multi-site ethnography' is on the rise. In the organizational and management domain, consider both Christina Nippert-Eng's (1995) terrific study of integration and separation of home and work and Lousie Lamphere's (1992) collection of ethnographic studies showing how new immigrants from Mexico to South East Asia are making out in several communities and

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workplaces across the United States. There is also some inventive textwork that allows a greater role for the ethnographic subject. Ruth Behar's (2003) emotionally riveting tale of Esperanza, a Mexican street peddler crossing back and forth across the US border, is told largely in her own voice. Notable too is Paul Rabinow's (1997) voice-giving strategy in *Making PCR*, where celebrity biotech researchers and entrepreneurs seem almost to take over the text.

Tony also looks for ways to make more room in our texts for the voices of those we study and hence reduce the indignity of speaking for others that some ethnographers feel. This I think is occurring in organizational ethnography and the career paths of those we study are on something of a roll – from subjects to informants to members to interlocutors to (maybe someday) co-authors. I am impressed here with John Weeks's (2006) splendid work in *Unpopular Culture* in which employees of a large British bank – executives and clerks – are given voice and some of them, mostly managers, are presented as up to much the same mischief as the ethnographer; namely, trying to ferret out and grasp the elusive culture and cultural processes in the firm. The ends sought by each may differ since some of Weeks's interlocutors seek not only to understand and represent but also to 'manage' culture for particular purposes – to 'shape-up the firm', 'to discover the core values', 'to engage and excite the workforce', and so on.[5] Another elegant illustration is Carrie Lane's (2010) *A Company of One*, a multi-sited ethnography exploring 'self-managed careers' as told through the voices of job-seeking high-tech workers in Dallas, Texas circa 2001–02. Throughout the manuscript, authorial commentary is intermingled with lengthy self-fashioning observations made by a number of unemployed engineers and managers, a few of whom we get to know rather well as we read.

As the above studies suggest, the representational burden of ethnography has become heavier, messier, and less easily located in time and space, and innovations in tale telling are on the rise. The faith in ethnographic holism – always something of a fiction akin to Newton's frictionless space – has continued to retreat along with all those quaint claims of earlier writers to have captured the 'spirit' of a people, the 'ethos' of a university, or the 'core values' of an organization. There is less closure and general portraiture in ethnography these days than in times past. A certain instability, rupture, uncertainty, and fluidity of meaning attends then to some of the best of contemporary organizational ethnographies.

As Tony points out, one strength of ethnography has always been to position individuals in a specific social setting, placing them in a context where action takes place. But this setting is no longer, if ever, exclusively local or whole. Organizations, as venues of interlinked relations – local, national, transnational – are indeed at the crossroads of ideas, knowledge, interests, and values. And, as such, they are places where meanings of various origins converge, mix, blend, and often clash. They are also, arguably, becoming more complicated, diffuse, and fragmented as organizational forms and managerial strategies shift in response to what the acronym-crazed business press regards as a VUCCA world – volatile, uncertain, chaotic, complex, and ambiguous. Paul Bate (1997, p. 1157) suggests – rightly I think – that there are now fewer 'grand hotels' to study where all is under one roof as, presumably, it once was. Inscribing culture in the contemporary context – our post-modern, post-industrial, post-bureaucratic, post-structural, post-toasty world – suggests we must now work in organizational contexts where the assumed

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(rightly or wrongly) coherence has been shattered and replaced by a polyphonic pluralism of meaning and interpretation.

Making it messier still is the 'epistemological hypochondria' or 'shaken confidence' that Geertz (1988, p. 149) suggested has attached itself to ethnography. Most ethnographers would now agree that their textwork owes a good deal of its persuasive power to contingent social, historical, narrative, and political conditions, and no meta-argument, reflexive turn, or naval-gazing can effectively question these contingencies. Yet we soldier on, knowing that any particular ethnography must still make its points by pretty much the same means that were available before these contingencies were recognized and absorbed – by putting forth evidence, providing interpretations (and defending them), inventing and elaborating analogies, invoking authorities, working through examples, marshalling one's tropes, and on (and on). While the nature of ethnographic evidence, interpretation, authority, and style may have changed – more modestly I think than radically – the appeal of any single work remains tied to the specific arguments made in a given text and referenced to particular, not general, substantive, methodological, and narrative matters. Changes in attitude and reader response are of course possible and what is persuasive to one generation may look foolish to the next since each generation on coming of age has some stake in showing its ancestors – dead or alive – to be airheads. But ethnography soldiers on not because its findings, facts, methods, truths, and genres remain the same but because, even in the midst of change, some audience continues to look to it for the close study and account of what an identifiable group of people, more or less stuck in historical and situational circumstances they did not entirely create, are up to. How do they live? What do they do? How do they get by?

Tony's call to examine 'how things work' in organizations and management is therefore not likely to fade away anytime soon. It is one however that accommodates – if not encourages – a good deal of topical variety, methodological imagination, and stylistic diversity. Moreover, as younger researchers routinely and rightly question older definitions and representations of workplace culture, more subject matter is created and more opportunities can be taken to breach traditional disciplinary and substantive boundaries. Ethnographers must now rather self-consciously select, defend, blend, stretch, and combine various ethnographic templates or genres (e.g. realist and confessional tales, advocacy and analytic tales, fractured and post-structural tales, etc.) when constructing, for example, a career-making (or breaking) dissertation project or when, as with the examples Tony provides, presenting one's work to colleagues or submitting one's work for publication to editors whose appreciation and knowledge of ethnographic means and products are often quite dim.

Such matters present challenges to be sure. Yet there remains among many ethnographers, perhaps most, a general indifference if not disdain for the seemingly endless effort of social scientists to develop methodological rigour, orthodox and rigid reporting templates, a spare and flat (and boring) writing style of no style, and a set of relentlessly fixed and focused analytic interests that can be more or less articulated before a study begins. Moreover, ethnographers point out that social situations and occurrences can be as interesting for their unique specificities as for their similarities to other situations and occurrences. This often triggers what seems to be a deep and abiding fear of the particularistic among critics of ethnography who wonder what, if anything, can be

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learned from a 'mere case'. The smart-ass but wise answer to this hackneyed but commonplace question is 'all we can'. Indeed, as Tony illustrated via his list of exemplary ethnographic texts – old and new – some of our most revered 'truths about the realities of work in organization and management' have been delivered through small scale, highly bounded, single site ethnographic studies. The universal it seems can be found in the particular.[6]

As matters stand today, ethnography remains open to a relatively artistic, improvised, situated, and pragmatic model of social research where the lasting tenets of research design, canned concepts, and technical writing have yet to leave their mark. Theory also remains something of an ambiguous, polymorphous term, taking on different import, meaning, and value in different ethnographic circles. While I suggested that theory seems to be currently on the move in organizational studies, there is enormous variation in the theories that are moving and put to use. 'Whatever works' seems to be the animating spirit. On these features, Tony and I are in rather close agreement and both of us, I think, are reasonably comfortable with the current state of the art. Two matters, however seem to separate our views some and to these I now turn.

ON THE NATIVE'S POINT OF VIEW . . .

I agree with Tony that we have no direct access to the truth, even to the truth of our own perceptions or emotions. And we certainly have no privileged access or magic key to unlock the 'true' perceptions and emotions of those we study. There is no Archimedean point of Enlightenment – a scientific view from nowhere – to allow us to know with any certainty what others are thinking and feeling. No one is free of culture, prevailing discourse, unreflective rituals, habits of thought, and rather established snug if not smug ways of seeing and being. But accepting these limitations (and reflecting on them as well) hardly means we should not try to understand and grasp another's perspective in and on the world(s) she or he inhabits – the so-called native's point of view. Our grasp may well be tentative and uncertain, but in coming to terms with the meanings others make use of in their everyday or work-a-day lives requires the ethnographer to at least try to (gulp) 'get inside their heads'.[7]

While I would not claim, for example, to be able to reveal with great conviction the 'lived experiences' of the many cops I have come to know in my field studies, I have stood – mostly sat – next to them for a good deal of time. Some of their experiences are my experiences too although we may well understand and value them differently. But we talked (and talked and talked) about such matters. I believe I have come as close to the police as I possibly could without becoming one of them (and then moved as far away from them as possible without leaving the planet). In the process, I have come to appreciate what I regard as the logic(s) that informs a good deal of their action. This is to say I believe I have a fairly good sense – far from perfect of course – of how the police I lived with understand 'how things work' in their worlds.

There are certainly differences and distance between their interpretive modes and mine. I never could see, for instance, the falling down drunk and homeless soul whose meagre belongings were stolen after being mugged by street thugs as quite the 'deserving victim' who simply got what was coming to him that some of my police companions did.

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But, nonetheless, I believe I can fathom and communicate how and why and when they use the tag 'deserving victim' (and render only the most desultory aid). Given that ethnography is about meaning and interpretation, laying out the perspectives of others (and our own as well) comes with the territory. What ethnographers call data are constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their counterparts say and do. It is not about what the ethnographer sees certain people doing but what these certain people see themselves doing.

Tony might say I've erred in trying to 'penetrate' their subjectivity. I would say that such subjectivity is all we've got to go on; there is no other way to figure out what people are up to without attending to the ways they read the situations they face and the many ways they express it in what they say and do. That this is interpretive work and thus subjective and speculative is largely beside the point. At issue is the drawing out and making some sense of the cultural understandings held by others. This is the whole point behind the ethnographic injunction to learn what it is like to be someone else so that one can appreciate – through the eyes of those studied – what they are up to and why. Nor, I might add, does Tony seem to practice what he preaches. Take his succinct and ethnographically informed remarks on the futility of formally interviewing employees as a strategy for learning how things work in their respective organizations. He notes astutely that those being interviewed about such matters will feel enormous pressure to speak positively about what is going on in their organization and will therefore typically treat a one-off interview encounter with an inquisitive organizational researcher as part of their job. And their job – *as they see it* – is to make the organization look good. If this claim doesn't rest on getting into another's head, on what does it rest?

In some sense, ethnographers, because of their day-in and day-out involvement with the people in the social worlds they study are able see the world as others do, not just because they want to scrupulously document what goes on there or because the social benefits of doing so somehow outweigh the costs, but because seeing the world as others do is the only way of being in that world for any length of time with these other people. Of course, spending a year or so in some alien community with people doing a great many unfamiliar things in unfamiliar ways does not lend itself to great subtlety in pinning down their interests, identities, beliefs, knowledge, or values. We have to be, as Tony rightly implies, quite cautious of what we claim to be the native's point of view and be well prepared and able to argue and exemplify our claims. We may well be wrong but others who follow us to the field – and the natives as well – will certainly let us know.

Another cautionary note should be issued here as well. We know from our own social life that spending a good deal of time in close proximity with others – our families, our work groups, our companions at the pub – is as likely to create differences as similarities. People living face-to-face also spend time back-to-back. Thus in line with the downsizing and shrink-wrapping of the culture concept as put forth in contemporary ethnographic accounts, when the phrase 'the native's point of view' is put forth these days, the first question a savvy and critical reader should ask is 'which native?'

To conclude, I am with Tony insofar as not much liking nor quite understanding that hairball of an expression 'lived experience' (or what its 'capture' might mean). The phrase belongs more to phenomenology or humanistic psychology than to ethnography. But I do think Tony goes a touch too far if he is in fact asking us not to inquire and try

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to get at how those we study experience – or at least say they experience – their worlds. After all, how could Goffman (1961) construct such a persuasive, seemingly authentic and moving tale in *Asylums* without also telling us how the inmates experienced and therefore coped and carried on given their tightly constrained role, degraded status, and watchful keepers? Nor is trying to grasp the other's point of view a novel pursuit. We do it all the time in our everyday lives as when we try to figure out, for instance, why our newspaper always winds up in our bushes in the morning or why those damn economists on the seventh floor of our building disregard all that we do. In our social accounting for such slights, we may not of course get it right but then we don't make much of an ethnographic effort to understand the operations of our newspaper delivery service or the workings of the upstairs economics department. Were we to do so, we might well have some answers – if always provisional – to our questions.

ON GOING MAINSTREAM . . .

As something of a conclusion to this textual duet, the ends of ethnography bear some attention. As I see it, among other things, ethnography aims to reduce puzzlement – of the ethnographer as well as the reader. What readers learn is what particular people, in particular places, at particular times are doing and what it may mean to them. Richard Shweder (1991, p. 23) calls ethnographers 'merchants of astonishment' whenever they deliver surprise and wonder to their readers. First-rate ethnography – when the use of evidence is judicious, conceptual frames fresh, and the writing clear and engaging – seldom fails to offer up a number of critical, ironic insights into the world studied. Its representational aims are met (or not) largely on the curiosity generated by a text and the unfamiliarity of readers with the social worlds studied – translating, as it were, what goes on in one culture to readers who live in another. Its critical and ironic characteristics are established against what it is those studied and readers think is or what should be going on in the world examined but, alas, is not.

Surprise of course runs the gamut between the mild to the wild. Illustrations of both can be found in the ethnographies of science as when, on the modest end of the scale, Susan Silbey (2009) reports that scientific laboratories are not at all like most of us imagine them to be (or terribly safe for that matter), and on the spectacular end, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979) show that when the mundane and everyday practices of scientists in the lab are followed closely, the hallowed 'scientific method' is more myth than reality. In organizational ethnographies, reader surprise is also a key feature. Take, for example, Kate Kellogg's recent ethnography, *Challenging Operations* (Kellogg, 2010), telling of several high status surgical units where many residents fiercely resisted a change that would have reduced their work hours with no change in pay from 120 hours per week to 80. What could they possibly have been thinking?

The point here is that without close and detailed studies of these worlds, our conceptions of them would be pitifully inadequate. Ethnography shines a light, sometimes a very strange one, on what people are up to and such doings are rarely if ever predictable or in line with what either 'current theory' or 'the experts' might say. In organizational worlds, ethnographic work often takes issue with managerial claims, with worker accounts, with received wisdom, with elegant models, or with highly generalized con-

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cepts that say little (but assume much) about what particular people are doing in their work-a-day life or how things really do get done (or not done) on the ground. Can ethnographic studies be 'mainstreamed' into the organization and management field? Tony thinks they can and should. What we need to do, he asserts, is bring new researchers into the fold by convincing them that they won't be risking their academic careers by turning to ethnography. We must also train them well, help them get past organizational gatekeepers in order to do their research (especially at higher levels in organizations), and somehow turn the heads of our none too respectful colleagues so they can figure out what to do with the arcane knowledge gained from ethnographic studies.

I am both sceptical and rather uneasy with Tony's proposal. I think it might well bring down what is now a small but vibrant – if marginal – sub-field (or sub-sub-field) whose contribution to broad analytic domains such as organization behaviour or organization theory comes precisely because it isn't in the mainstream where fashionable topical choices, familiar conceptual tools, and stern methodological dictates rule the day. Ethnographers are more likely to identify with their pragmatic perspectives and practices than with substantive areas or disciplinary and theoretical circles. When asked what I do, I usually (and unthinkingly) blurt out something like: 'I am an ethnographer who studies work organizations'. The order of the nouns in my response is a small but telling act of identity. The appeal of ethnography may be greatest – in what seems to me a rather timid and stodgy academic world – to those who believe that not all learning comes from books and articles, from well-formulated theories and methods, from our revered ancestors, from experts, and from those in high positions, including the advice coming from the already tenured in our field or from our department chair. In many ways, I think it quite fitting that ethnography may 'frighten the horses'. Good work will always challenge the preconceptions of some (held with interest) and thus will, to mix the metaphor, 'rattle their stalls'.

There is indeed risk in taking on an ethnographic project, but this is true of any kind of work worth doing. There is risk in doing lab studies of group process or doing survey work on incentive systems. We know well that standards of excellence in all fields of endeavour are power laden and anything but Platonic ideals. Most scholarly work, ethnographic or otherwise, generates little excitement and rarely gets much attention even in the domain in which it is hatched. True that ethnography is painstakingly slow, not particularly journal friendly, takes one away from the university, and its rough methods guarantee no striking results. But the point of doing ethnography is not for the academic career rewards that might result. The point of doing it, as Tony might say, is to figure out 'how things work' in some specified domain and get the word(s) out as best we can.

There are conceptual arguments too that can be made for keeping ethnography out of the mainstream. In the field, for example, ethnographers have been variously described as 'marginal natives', 'self-reliant loners', 'detached participants', and 'professional strangers'. Some of this is of course puffy impression management but genuine is the discomforting, shuffling, peripheral role played by ethnographers as they move in and move out of sometimes dramatically different social worlds. Marginality, detachment, self-reliance, and estrangement provide the distance that allows for the possibility that fresh ways to view and understand what is occurring in the place and time of study will emerge. The same sort of detachment or distance from the mainstream of organization

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studies may also be one reason why ethnographic studies can – when they are attractive enough – push new problems, new theoretical challenges, new concepts into the mainstream. One might argue that it is the very marginality of the craft – being on the edge of (at least) two worlds – that makes it valuable to the field of organization and management. Much movement in either direction might well neutralize its strengths.

There are of course questions of size, visibility, and recruitment. Tony worries that we don't have enough ethnographers at work in the organizational fields and seem not to be able to attract and train new ones with any regularity. I worry about these matters too but also wonder just how many we need? My sense is that there are quite a few well-trained, seasoned, and productive university based ethnographers in Europe and the USA across a broad array of departments and disciplines, although maybe fewer than we would like at play in the organization and management field(s). Tony has some good ideas that I enthusiastically support about how we might up those numbers. However I do have a caveat: exemplary, influential, high quality work in any domain is, by definition, rare. We can increase our numbers and, in proportion perhaps, increase splendid work, but with it will also come more run-of-the-mill if not shoddy work. And I am a bit sceptical that better training will help much given the 'just go there and do it' ethic that still rules the trade in part because of the inevitable twists and turns that occur as an ethnographic project progresses.

My own experience is perhaps relevant here. The supervisory work I have done on ethnographic projects is mostly working with students about positioning the work in the organizational field, guiding some of their readings before, during, and after they've been to the field, helping with conceptual and compositional fixes, and providing as much support and advocacy as I can muster to get their projects off the ground and landed safely. I try to allow a student's own energy, curiosity, and interest guide them both towards and through a project. I rarely work with even a part of the inventory of 'raw material' a student may have developed in the field. I do of course encourage an interest in ethnography among students at large in my teaching, advising, and corridor chats. But there are limits here. I am doubtful that I could provide much useful aid and comfort were I to try to supervise more than a few students at any given time.

There is of course a broader collegial context surrounding ethnographic work within the organizational and management research world but it is a small and loose one, stretching across universities both near and far, sporadically in touch, brought together occasionally by special conferences and at annual meetings. These gatherings are of course welcome and useful. We probably should gather more often not only to exchange a few tips on how we are dealing with the empirical and conceptual puzzles we face but also to comfort and counsel one another as to how we might better deal with such things as Institutional Review Boards, funding agencies, duplicitous natives, unsympathetic journal editors, and nagging departmental colleagues at home. Beyond helping to shore up our solidarity as organizational ethnographers (and having a good time), these little collective identity displays can also help us keep our distance from the mainstream

While Tony frets about our marginality, I celebrate it. But I don't think we are on different planets here since we both want to sustain the critical edge (and delicious ironies) that ethnography when done well can bring to organizational studies. And we should not forget that the field itself owes a good deal to those ethnographers who were

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there in our primordial beginnings, lurking about the bank wiring room in the Hawthorne assembly plant in Cicero, Illinois. And we are still here – a hearty little band – some 90 years later. A good deal has changed of course – in both ethnographic practices and in organizational studies. But as long as there are those who are curious about 'how things work' – here, there, and anywhere – we are not likely to vanish anytime soon.

In the end, ethnography will not be made safe for science and will remain therefore a bit outside the big tent(s) of organization studies. This I don't decry or find terribly bothersome, for joining the mainstream in organization and management studies would surely pinch the disordered and inventive, haphazard, and diverse ways of doing organizational ethnography that I find so attractive. The point and purpose of ethnography remains to render the actual – and to do so persuasively.

The ability to convince readers – most of them academic – that what they are reading is an authentic tale written by someone personally knowledgeable about how things are done at some place, at some time, among some people is the basis for anything else ethnography tries to do – to critique, to theorize, to edify, to surprise, to amuse, to annoy, or to comfort. That widely read and influential ethnographies – 'full-blown' or not – are infrequent in our little corner of the scholarly world is not, as Tony ruefully admits, unexpected or something to loudly bemoan. When they do appear, however, we should take note. My bet is that such work will not have followed any recipe or formula and will surely have breached some of the rules I have laid out here, thus making it something that I would regard as a bit of a mess and a mystery, but mesmerizing.

NOTES

[1] Participant observation (and the fieldwork it involves) is mystifying, largely because it suggests a rather straightforward and clear-cut methodology about which there is wide consensus. Yet, in practice, it covers quite different ways of data collection, and hence leads to different kinds of knowledge and understanding. More mystifying however is that the term neatly elides the critical role of the real participants in the group, organization, community, or society under study, the 'locals' whose decision it really is as to what kind of participation and experience the fieldworker will be allowed (see, e.g. Barley, 1989; Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991; Spradley, 1980). As I once suggested in the context of my police studies, while I was watching the watchers, they were watching me. The results of their studies no doubt influenced mine (Van Maanen, 1978). Awareness of such matters – particularly among anthropologists – surfaced dramatically during what Marcus (2007) tags the 'reflexive turn' of the 1980s, such that today most worthy ethnographies provide at least some meditations on the conditions of their production.

[2] This, of course, raises the question of how any single person in organizational studies can keep up with what is now an enormous, increasingly differentiated and expanding literature. Add to this the full measure of the ethnography industry that now includes the ceaseless production of authoritative monographs, exhaustive reviews of the literature(s), method manuals, encyclopaedias of concepts and theories, meta-critical expositions, themed anthologies, handbooks of door-stopping weight, established and quasi-established journal publications, formal presentations of talks and papers presided over by a number of academic societies, and on and on. The answer then to how a single person can keep up with all this is that he or she can't for the potentially relevant headwork materials are overwhelming and new theories, new problems, new topics, new concepts, and new critiques of older work multiply with each passing year. It seems that the best we can do is to selectively pursue and cultivate an ever-diminishing proportion of the relevant work that comes our way and assume an attitude of benign neglect towards the rest.

[3] How we establish and justify 'fit' is an open, rather circular, and in the end, entirely rhetorical matter. In a determinedly analytic ethnography looking at the merger of the east and west Berlin police agencies after the fall of the wall, Andreas Glaeser (2000) suggests and shows that the best defence an ethnographer can put forth to a challenge of conceptual choice is simply to claim its 'ethnography adequacy'

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and then insist that the theory or concept 'flows' from the field data, 'does no violence' to field observations, or in one way or another 'captures' the scene. A pragmatic justification might be to suggest that the concept 'works better' than others or is 'more helpful' than others. But then we would still be left with the question of 'better' or 'more helpful' to whom? Since ethnographers are not consultants nor is ethnography a management tool, the pragmatic question may well have several answers. For me, the best treatment of such dilemmas remains Becker's (1967) crisp and widely read essay, 'Whose Side Are We On?'

[4] C. P. Snow (1993) famously suggested that a 'gulf of incomprehension' separated 'scientists' from 'literary intellectuals'. The same gulf separates many social scientists of an interpretive bent from those of a more positivist orientation. In rough form, those in the interpretive camp, where most ethnographers pitch their tents, acknowledge – although not always in print – that their empirical, analytic, and narrative orientations are influenced by their own social location, identity, political preferences, training, and so forth. Those in the positive camp do not. Stephen Jay Gould (2003, p. 141), examining the writing styles of the two camps, notes: 'Scientists tend to assert that although brevity and clarity should certainly be fostered, verbal style plays no role in the study of material reality'. He then goes on to demolish such claims.

[5] In days of yore, culture as explored by ethnographers in organizational settings was largely mute so to speak. The most common native understanding of culture was tied to local practices – expressed as the 'the way we do things around here' and seen by organizational members as virtually impossible to objectify. But, as Weeks's study suggests, we are now operating in an age where both member and ethnographer may well share a conceptual vocabulary. This posits problems, for what is 'emic' to the ethnographer is 'etic' to the member and it becomes something of a struggle for both to understand the differences. There is irony too in Weeks's rendering when we learn that the upper-level managers, human resource specialists, organizational consultants, and even the CEO within this most utilitarian and instrumental of social organizations – a hard-headed, no nonsense financial business firm – are seemingly caught up in projects such as 'discovering the bank's core principles', 'building a shared culture', 'articulating the vision', and 'communicating the values'. Weeks's bankers are not alone at trying their hand at cultural engineering. Gideon Kunda (1992) was one of the first organizational ethnographers to draw attention to such enchantment efforts. In the popular domain, alchemists Tom Peters and Robert Waterman (1982) were among the first to claim such things as culture, passion, values, and vision to be the elixir needed to transform dull and unprofitable firms into exciting and profitable ones. Disillusionment was not long in coming. Magic today for managers and their coaches seems to be associated with cultural engineering projects designed to produce leaders (not managers), entrepreneurial spirits full of personal initiative (not loyal and subordinate employees), and widespread identification with customers and the brand (not identification with fellow workers or the organization itself). This too will pass.

[6] Ethnographic culture, like those studied, is constantly shaping and reshaping itself to adjust to new problems. The most vexing of the conceptual and methodological challenges these days concern the increasing scale, range, volatility, and complexity of contemporary organizations. With globalization, increased mobility, the blurring of organizational boundaries, and the apparent end to the social stability and permanence once associated (rightly or wrongly) with organizational life, ethnographies of a people, places and faces sort become more difficult to imagine and realize. Networks not sites (even networks of networks) may become the new *terra incognita* of ethnographic interest. See Hannerz (1992) and Faubion and Marcus (2009) for a look ahead (and look back) on these challenges as viewed from the anthropological perspective. For some intriguing examples of just how scale and complexity can be handled ethnographically, see Christina Garsten's (1994) *Apple World: Core and Periphery in a Transnational Organization* and James Watson's (1997) *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia.*

[7] Taking issue with Tony on this point may be more a matter of semantics than substance. I agree with him that we are not mind readers, nor should we try to plumb the depths of consciousness in others. Yet, current practice suggests that an ethnography must not only tell us what the native does all day but what that native makes of it too. This is always a touchy business. Perhaps the most common technique for producing the native's point of view is by using closely edited quotations along with culturally specific and commonly used terms, slogans, labels, categories, slang, jokes, and the like to convey to readers that the views put forward are not those of the ethnographer but are rather authentic and representative remarks transcribed straight from the horses' mouths. As I have noted elsewhere, there is a good deal of epistemological angst generated on this matter (Van Maanen, 1988). In many ways, the 'native's point of view' is as difficult for ethnographers to pin down as the notion of culture, but the debate today turns more on how such a perspective is to be put forth in a text than on whether or not it belongs in one. How

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one gets at it remains an issue of course. But ethnographers do have a storehouse of raw materials – words and deeds – from which to develop a rendering of the native's point of view. On this matter, Geertz (1986, p. 373) is succinct: 'Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness'.

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