Review article

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Ethnography beyond anthropology: potentials and problems

Ann L. Cunliffe, Stephen Linstead and Karen Locke (eds.) 2009. 'Telling tales', *Qualitative Research in Organization and Management: An International Journal* 4: 7–102

Ann L. Cunliffe (ed.) 2010 'Retelling tales of the field', *Organizational Research Methods* 13: 224–319

Melissa Cefkin (ed.) 2009. *Ethnography and the corporate encounter: reflections on research in and of corporations*. New York: Berghahn

The announced launch of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* in February 2012, with three British management professors as its main editors, may serve as a pretext for examining what appears to be the growing influence of ethnography in the fields of management, public administration and organisation studies. Such an influence, with its origins dating back at least to the late 1970s with the hiring of Eleanor Winn and Lucy Suchman by Xerox Parc (see the introduction to Cefkin's volume and the final essay by Michael Fischer), is now heralded by a considerable number of edited volumes, special journal issues and Internet forums. Furthermore, this is also being acknowledged by renowned academics such as George Marcus and Douglas Holmes, who speak of a corporate para-ethnographic turn (Holmes and Marcus 2006) and consider these new forms of collaboration between anthropology and business as a possible means of transcending the current stagnation pervading the core of the field (Marcus 2008). Both volume 4 number 1 of *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* (edited by Ann L. Cunliffe, Stephen Linstead and Karen Locke) and volume 13 number 2 of *Organizational Research Methods* (edited by Ann L. Cunliffe), along with *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter* (edited by Melissa Cefkin), enable us to reflect upon the character of this apparently emergent management ethnography and the challenges posed to academic ethnography produced by traditional anthropology and sociology departments and research centres.

The two special issues of *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* and *Organizational Research Methods* are the result of a conference celebrating the

20th anniversary of Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field* (1988). The five texts gathered in *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* are basically tales of research experiences involving Swedish small- and medium-scale business entrepreneurs (Frederic Bill and Lena Olaison), autoethnography in UK management and business schools (Clair Doloriert and Sally Sambrook), illegal mining in South America, Dutch football hooligans, and American public executions (Gail Whiteman, Thaddeus Müller and John M. Johnson), female professional accountants (Peggy Wallace), and chief executives in UK local authorities (Kevin Orr and Mike Bennett). A quite diverse set of empirical contexts, one might assume, although little is advanced about each of them with these contributions mainly focused on analysis of the research processes deployed. Once again, diversity seems to be the predominant key as the methodological approaches range from applying role-playing to focus groups (Frederic Bill and Lena Olaison), autoethnography (Clair Doloriert and Sally Sambrook), the exploration of researcher emotions (Gail Whiteman, Thaddeus Müller and John M. Johnson), the use of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy in interview analysis (Peggy Wallace) and radical reflexivity directed at deconstructing not the studied reality but rather research practices and assumptions (Kevin Orr and Mike Bennett).

It is impossible to analyse each of these contributions in detail, even though special mention has to be made of the opening piece by Bill and Olaison proposing the use of role-play-enhanced focus groups as an alternative to ethnography, especially when fieldwork is not possible. In such cases, a fictitious situation is enacted in which the willing participants – e.g. SME managers contacted by the researchers and who agreed to participate – are invited to play along and dramatise a problem-solving situation similar to those they encounter in real life. Their accounts prove that, in certain circumstances, focus group members may actually take their role quite seriously and illuminate aspects of their work that would not otherwise be detectable in interviews. For this to happen, however, participants must not be informed a priori of those particular aspects researchers aim to investigate through role-playing (such information is delivered only a posteriori). Though finding people available to engage in such experiences may prove even more difficult than negotiating fieldwork, this rare and original approach doubtless constitutes a valuable alternative and one that may also have an impact on regular ethnography. From this perspective, autoethnography might seem far more common, although the same cannot be said of the frequency of its adoption by management PhD candidates and the self-disclosure issues it poses to truly vulnerable researchers who cannot remain anonymous (as in public PhD examinations). Indeed, this is precisely the path Doloriert and Sambrook approach and explore in the second piece in the collection through discussing how to handle traumatic experiences such as rape when the researcher is also a research subject and concluding by pointing either to an intelligent removal of deeply personal content or to its fictionalisation. A third article particularly worthy of mention in this collection is its final piece by Orr and Bennett. They dissect their interview-based research on the use of storytelling as a management technique by chief public administrators: while the research method employed is perfectly conventional, what proves surprising is the level of detail the authors provide about how the interviews were arranged and the questions posed. They effectively reveal the extent to which knowledge actually ends up co-constructed by both researchers and researched.

In a different vein, the *Organizational Research Methods* authors are specifically rethinking ethnographic narrative in a contemporary light. They seem more concerned

with the virtues of ethnographic writing and its explorations, addressing questions related to the character of ethnography and the construction of *dialogic* tales (see John Shotter, Mike Agar) by scholars coming from different fields and studying both in and for organisations. Therefore, in this issue, we read more about the cognitive potentials raised by the 'ethnography' each contributor defends and attempts to write. The authors are drawn from organisational theory (Ann Cunliffe, Van Maanen), communication theory (Bud Goodall), psychology and linguistics (John Shotter) and anthropology (Mike Agar). Notwithstanding the diverse empirical contexts evoked – Huntsville or the witnessing of September 11, 2001 (Goodall), interactions between managers and consultants in large companies (Shotter), California family courts and cancer treatment centres (Agar) – the texts talk fluidly with each other. Since the authors, inspired by Wittgenstein, choose to detail theory grounded in micro-level interactions in organisational settings, they do not feel compelled to engage in the traditional debates around organisations. Here, the organisation remains open, fluid and complex but especially a human milieu.

Each author puts forward their own definition of ethnography, but all agree this is a tale either of or for organisations that needs telling. Ann Cunliffe introduces the featured topic by addressing the reflexive turn in ethnography-based organisational studies, and the need to take more seriously those 'messy texts' (p. 231) making sense of the mundane world. She also introduces the major question sustaining the debate within this same review article: 'Who might be the readers of these tales?' (p. 232). Van Maanen and Bud Goodall represent the academic style, proposing the discussion mainly of ethnographies *of* organisations, while John Shotter and Mike Agar present a problem-solving or, in Shotter's words, a 'problem-setting' style (p. 277), showing how to do ethnographies *for* organisations without having to lose density or simplify theory (see the concluding paragraph below). Van Maanen reinforces the idea of ethnography as a written representation of culture, though culture with a small 'c', built up on the micro-level of interaction's analytical tradition. Thus and interestingly, ethnography is celebrated as a 'storytelling institution' in academia (p. 242). It is not surprising that when Van Maanen describes what he believes to be the contemporary tales – 'structural', 'poststructural' and 'advocacy' – he mentions mainly anthropologists and social scientists while deploying examples of ethnographies ranging beyond organisational contexts. Following this lead, Bud Goodall presents one good example of the popularisation of the genre: his own semi-journalistic semi-detective story approach to Huntsville, which, first refused by editors and only published in the late 1980s due to Van Maanen's blind review, became almost a classic on how to write an innovative ethnographic tale. Goodall also describes how he has been interested recently in exploring 'tales of the future' (p. 261) based on his working experiences with improving strategic communications at the US Department of Defense since 2005 (responding to the 9/11 terrorist attacks). He considers ethnographers may help tell better stories capable of improving the work of politicians and capturing the collective imagination of citizens. Both Van Maanen and Goodall keep to a kind of manifesto tone: what matters here is the literary perspective and narrative creativity rather than any technocratic knowledge *per se*.

Even when all authors agree on the idea of ethnography both as an openly performative way of knowing and writing about the word, a mutualistic and dialogic method, and an evocative and inspiring genre, the second couple (Shotter and Agar) proposes models that more clearly combine fieldwork, theoretical findings

and writing techniques about and *for* organisations. Shotter explores a particular version of a collaborative action research in big corporations inspired by Wittgenstein's social poetics and Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. He pays special attention to vague expressions, 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences' and 'inner dialogues' (p. 270). He believes that only when conducting extremely persuasive and provocative conversations with managers and consultants does he gain the means to inform and help modify practices – a process he names 'situated dialogic action research'. He is very keen in regards to showing where and how to look for the study of those 'moments' – a kind of field and narrative method that combines attention to utterances and the act of knowing by embodiment and interaction. We might imagine the welcoming reception of this narrative by an academic audience but cannot clearly figure out the result in terms of reports and literary products for organisations – or the special tale he in fact wants to tell (and note that he does not mention the word ethnography throughout his text). Believing in ethnography as a 'blurred genre', like Clifford Geertz, and in knowing from 'abduction' (the surprise element), like Charles Peirce, the final text of the collection by Agar proposes a different model for approaching fieldwork based on what he calls 'iterative recursive abductive logic' (p. 289). He proposes an epistemological compatibility between ethnography and complexity theory. Like Shotter, Agar is not looking for straight answers in the traditional organisational consultancy style but rather still believes in ethnography as translation. He looks for organisational indicators and searches out 'leverage points' and 'positive deviance' (pp. 292–3). He may eventually recommend a solution for each case, but one strictly related to the problem he has found only after some intensive weeks of fieldwork.

Finally, the volume edited by Melissa Cefkin offers a series of examples of what might be called 'corporate ethnography', resulting from the encounter between ethnographic methods and the corporate goals of the 'New Economy'. Mainly focused on the US, the volume gathers contributions from some pioneering leaders in this trend, such as Donna Flynn, Brigitte Jordan or Jeanette Blomberg, along with the editor herself. The corporate worlds represented in the volume include some of the most important multinational companies, such as Microsoft (in the article by Donna Flyn), Intel (Jordan and Lambert; Nafus and anderson), and Yahoo (Ortlieb), as well as one of the most important American public healthcare facilities, the Department of Veteran Affairs (Darrouzet, Wild and Wilkinson). With the exception of this latter case, where public service optimisation seems to be the main issue at stake, the whole remainder of the book offers a view of what anthropology looks like when deployed in the service of advanced capitalism – a circumstance that might enable a comparison with previous colonialist engagements of the discipline, although this problem is more hinted at (in the article by Jordan and Lambert, p. 109) than properly developed.

Again, the articles assembled are less ethnographies of the corporation than accounts of research practices therein conducted. Some of the constraints of doing ethnography in corporate contexts are indeed well documented: from unclear and changeable goals to limited time to do fieldwork, to permanent surveillance by corporate supervisors, to professional secrecy obligations, to the difficulty in coping with differently positioned corporate actors, through to the vague manager perceptions as to what ethnography is about – and the list goes on. The essay by Jordan and Lambert is particularly illustrative with regard to some of these constraints, while the following piece by Nafus and anderson offers an interesting discussion of how anthropological traditionally self-centred knowledge tends to be problematised through collective discussions inside

project rooms (which can indeed be viewed as locus of radical reflexivity, to recall Kevin Orr and Mike Bennett's explorations in the *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* issue). The variety of corporate ethnographic outputs is another interesting aspect, ranging from personas to focus groups, to use scenarios, to prototypes and experience models, to design recommendations, and feature and function lists. Some of these outputs are conveyed orally or through orally-dependent inscription techniques (like the use of photographs or post-its on walls inside project rooms), while most are generated in a distributed manner (involving several persons other than the ethnographers). As Jeanette Blomberg states in one of the two final and recapitulative essays, research conducted under such unorthodox circumstances may indeed provide important results, with the instrumental value of ethnography recognised and its contributions to specific sets of problems praised (pp. 217–20). And, when corporate ethnographers are given enough space to explore their findings scientifically, the results are fairly remarkable, as the works published by Lucy Suchman, Graham Button and Wes Sharrock, and Julian Orr clearly demonstrate (p. 223). To sum up, in this collection, ethnography is celebrated as the most 'sensitive' of methods for understanding corporations.

That said, it is our impression that the effects of corporate ethnography on the corporation are not entirely clear. The authors claim their research projects attained success with appreciation for the results, but the reasons for this remain diffuse for readers unfamiliar with the corporate world. A better ethnographic chartering of the enterprise milieu would be required, but this is something this collection of texts does not afford (as with the two special issues previously presented, with the honourable exceptions of the pieces by Agar and, to some extent, Shotter). Some general allusions to profit, organisational efficiency, innovation and product adaptability are made, but the reader is left to wonder about the way ethnographic findings may have contributed to the accomplishment of such emblematic goals. Both the fact that many corporations still look at culture as an ensemble of values and dispositions eventually manageable through stereotypes (as noted in the article by Ortlieb) and the fact that this objectifying view of culture may provide cheaper approaches and quicker returns than more emergent conceptions adds to the impression that anthropologically trained ethnographers are but one among an excess of corporate research types, and perhaps one of the least influential. In the same vein, Jordan states that even when notions such as 'communities of practice' and 'tacit knowledge' are part of manager vocabularies and the corporation in question (Intel) already has a strong tradition in 'ethnography', the limitations imposed on fieldwork are so striking that the researcher begins to doubt the meanings attributed to such concepts by those at the top of the firm (p. 101). Only in the case of the Department of Veteran Affairs is there explicit acknowledgment of the organisational improvements added by ethnography, but the fact that the authors (Darrouzet, Wild and Wilkinson) are members of an independent company working for several different organisations makes of this kind of demonstration, we think, a more predictable outcome.

Likewise, potential conflicts between ethnography and other viewpoints inside corporations are not sufficiently stressed in this volume, particularly in regard to quantification procedures and other practices commonly associated with economic rationality and scientific objectivity. A contrast with statistics and similar calculations is indeed mentioned in some of the journal articles cited earlier, but – apart from some trivial allusions to 'results', 'profits' or 'return on investment' – quantification is almost

absent in Melissa Cefkin's volume. We know, however, that it plays a crucial role inside modern corporations, particularly in accounting, risk management, statistics and information systems departments. How do corporate ethnography and other qualitative methods stand in relation to these forms of quantification? Or, to put it more fairly, what is the place of ethnography inside marketing, public relations and human resources departments, where it does seem to be most regularly integrated? These are legitimate questions prompted by the reading of these works that we feel the authors could have made a more visible effort to address. If, as Blomberg notes (p. 220), ethnography has the potential to reconfigure priorities, values and relationships in the contexts of capitalistic production, it would be worth reinforcing this idea with a few concrete examples.

A complementary impression is that of the reduced impact of corporate ethnography (and other forms of applied qualitative methodologies) in the academy, especially in those anthropology and sociology departments where such methodologies have long been nurtured for the purposes of scientific research and social and cultural critique. The increasing number of trained anthropologists working in marketing or management university departments suggests that ethnography travels easily from what would appear to be its university headquarters to other academic and institutional realms. In fact, few of the contributors in these three collections come from traditional anthropology departments. This proves that ethnography, fieldwork, participant observation, ethnomethodology and other qualitative approaches may constitute a link between universities more devoted to knowledge production (now under reform) and the rest of society. However, the subjects behind the methods seem to occupy more fixed positions, either inside or outside academic centres of anthropology. Few contributors tell us tales of mediation as if one somehow had to choose between either fundamental research in social science departments (from where capitalism can be more comfortably criticised) or knowledge application elsewhere (from where a better service to the commoditisation of ethnography can be rendered). A division of labour is thus designed and one that certainly brings its own implications for the future of anthropology as we know it.

The majority of the authors presented here choose to talk about methods applied to the study of micro-level interactions in corporations and state agencies, but they rarely address the mezzo- and macro-level implications of this kind of engaged research – a circumstance that ultimately reminds us of the strange silence around the recruitment of anthropologists into military agencies and secret services for the Iraq War (cf. Robben 2009). This and other similar controversies allow us to question just whether it is possible to advocate the humanistic type of well-intentioned fieldwork and better storytelling (to paraphrase Goodall) in the 'wrong' organisational milieu – and ask what price anthropology and the social sciences have to pay when deployed in the service of the advanced capitalism. Eric Wolf (2001: 391) somewhat nostalgically wondered about the strange relinquishment of the study of the organisation inside anthropology with the subject ending up more frequently discussed in management manuals than in our own publications. After having read these collections of texts, we feel that many anthropologists were indeed co-opted by management and organisational studies and entered onboard the big boat of interdisciplinary knowledge where ethnography plays an integral although minor role. We concur that anthropologists may have something particular to add, as Agar's study clearly reveals, but we would expect to see this question more generally answered.

After all, it proves no coincidence that the articles in these collections are so eloquent on methodology while simultaneously so elusive regarding their fields of study. In fact, to talk reflexively about their methods is maybe the only topic left for researchers highly committed to corporate goals. This debate is certainly far from pointless but at the same time we feel that this focus on methods is also the result of institutional constraints deriving from economic competition that hinders authors from revealing too much about the businesses they are studying. We therefore consider that it is about time to abandon general considerations about both the critical potentials of ethnography applied to corporate contexts and the potential applications of fundamental ethnographic research and to start investigating the reasons for this persisting divide. As stated in the articles by Ann Cunliffe and Zickar and Carter (both published in *Organizational Research Methods*, though the second independently to the collection), the history of qualitative research inside corporations is longer than we would suspect (see also Schwartzman 1993, Van Mannen 1998 and the concluding essay by Michael Fischer in Cefkin's volume), stretching back to the first decades of the 20th century in the United States. How come so little is known about the transformative potential of ethnography applied to business when so many stories have already been told about the compromises and the challenges of European colonialist ethnography, for example? Perhaps the answer lies in a sort of continuous invisibility and silence that surrounds corporate ethnographic projects and leading to cyclical rediscoveries of qualitative methodologies – every few years or so, as Jeanette Blomberg suggests (in Cefkin's volume, p. 220). To a certain extent, this invisibility or silence may be explainable by the same institutional constraints mentioned above. However, it most probably reflects the marginalisation of qualitative methodologies as a consequence of the dominant role of numerical inscriptions in organisational life (a fact clearly highlighted in Fiona Moore's essay, in this issue). Hence the impression of a history that keeps repeating itself: outside academia, the insistence on the promises and virtues of applied ethnography that have yet to materialise; inside academia, where criticism and detachment are nourished, the permanent debate about how to take anthropology further and beyond its traditional disciplinary boundaries through the appliance of ethnographic research.

Nevertheless, the articles by Shotter and Agar demonstrate that anthropologists (as well as psychologists and linguists) have something specific to add to this domain of research-action. Skipping from the usual celebratory tone to the epistemic and methodological validation of ethnography for organisational and systemic change, both authors present us with concrete and substantive models designed to improve organisational strategies and socio-interactive practices from a grounded perspective. They simultaneously reveal some of the contextual, political and economic constraints that these models ultimately face. This is best shown by Agar when he describes how, despite credible knowledge and even positive reception of his creative suggestions towards organisational change at cancer treatment centres, the implementation phase was postponed. Additionally, one of the most interesting achievements of the *Organizational Research Methods* issue is the way the articles propose the combining of genres instead of only choosing between opposites such as theory vs practice, quantitative vs qualitative, 'true' ethnography vs ethnographic-*like* or academic vs non-academic tales. Influenced by Van Maanen's traditional clarity of discourse, all such mixing and inter-dimensional proposals seem feasible and relatively easy to achieve, although in most cases they involve sophisticated approaches both to the field and to the act of knowing/writing.

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