

TROOPS, TROPES AND TROUBLES

- Rendering organizational management a privileged ethnographic object

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A cry for ethnographic approaches in organization studies has been voiced by several authors at different historical junctures¹. Nonetheless, a widespread use of ethnographic methods is very far from being realized. Through the empirical example of the authors own ethnographic fieldwork among top leaders and diverse groups of managers (in Europe and China) in an international light-metal solutions provider, the paper argues that this lack of ethnographic proliferation within organization studies is due to a) a series of inherent conceptual constraints in how ethnography has become conventionally conceived and “fetishised” in social anthropology, and b) the particular ways the organizational “field” is perceived in light of these conventions is not particularly susceptible to ethnographic methods. The mismatch between the fetishised method and the reified field is palpable. The paper outlines a series of transformations that must be conducted in both the perceptions of ethnography and of the organizational field to make ethnographic methods conducive to exemplary organizational research.

Drawing on historical and contemporary literature from cultural and social anthropology, the first part of the paper outlines how anthropology through conceptions of ethnography and the use of different sets of rhetorical devices has rendered its privileged objects of study throughout history. One of the major contentions of this part is that the privileged objects, although changing considerably over time, always have brought along the notion of “the primitive” either explicitly or implicitly. The legitimate ethnographic fields has emerged, so to speak, as opposites to the cultural environments of modern societies, social contexts historically enacted by the scientific revolution, the enlightenment and the industrial revolution (Larsen 2005). In short, organizations as field sites are situated in

¹ See for example Van Maanen 1979, 1988; Pettigrew 1979; Martin 1992, 2001; Czarniawska-Joerges 1992; Schwartzman 1993; Frost et al. 1991; Stewart 1998; Smircich 1983; Smircich & Calas 1987; Alvesson 2002.

the defining negation of ethnography as conceived throughout anthropological history. Thus, a common approach by contemporary researchers wanting to do anthropology in organizations, is the strategy of exotization (Linstead 1997). The often well educated and rational modern members of organizations, working within an instrumental and bureaucratized production logic of some sort, needs to go through a representative “primitivization” process to be accounted for in anthropological terms. Then magic could be found among leaders and their followers, rituals are observed, myths are discovered and an abundance of irrationality is uncovered.

The latter part of the paper discusses more in-depth the characteristics of the organizational field, especially studies of management. Here my own experiences with fieldwork among managers in a multinational firm is brought forward. Through analysis of particularities of the field in consideration, for example through my process of getting access, my role(s) in the field and my different field activities, I show how the organizational field is constituted differentially from the “ideal type” field site along many more dimensions than its fundamental “flaw” in lacking the (implicit) “primitive”. The “holy trilogy” of ethnographic fieldwork; one geographic site, one continuous period of time, done by one single researcher, are all often broken in ethnographic studies in organizations. So also for my own research.

Subsequently I discuss the ambivalence of the management object. The appreciation of critical approaches in the social sciences has to some degree, leaving out large parts of management studies “itself”, made the study of management somewhat impure and suspicious (Sørhaug 2004). It may seem that many social scientists feels somewhat embarrassed studying elites if one cannot issue some absolute guaranties for concluding with a critical approach towards them. In the paper I argue that management practices in organizations are extremely valuable sources for study and theory development because it is embedded in ambivalence and doubleness, and enacted as conceptions and regulations of boundaries and borders, for example through the creation and regulation of connections and delimitations between internal and external organizational processes. The multiplicities that may be illustrated and thematized by management are numerous,

for example the relationships between person and institution, sense and sensibility, the unique and the governed, the instrumental and expressive, between power and trust, the destructive and the constructive, the central and the marginal, and the particular and the general (Sørhaug 2004: 26), and the relationship between continuity and change. And to be able to come to terms with these kinds of themes, ethnographic studies nonetheless seems to be among the most fruitful approaches.

The paper concludes with implications for ethnographic approaches in organization studies, arguing that because of the characteristics of the organizational field and the historical trajectory of ethnography, thus far an image of “quasi-ethnography” has proliferated in the context of organization studies. To emerge from this situation reinterpretations and reorientations of some of the most basic (implicit or explicit) notions underlying the ethnographic traditions is most necessary, if a fruitful development in organization studies is to be achieved. Some of these fundamentals relates to the conception of the categories of time and space, and of “exorcizing” the (implicit) assumptions of the primitive, of the reified object, and rather engage in ethnographic studies, not *of*, but in collaboration *with* co-subjects and co-actors.

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Brief bio:

Emil André Røyrvik (32) has six years of experience doing contract based research in the domains of organizational learning and knowledge management, in collaboration with private and public organizations in Norway and internationally. He is currently conducting his PhD in social anthropology within the field of organizational anthropology. He is investigating the development and intersections of knowledge traditions in management practices across cultural (Europe/China), organizational and epistemic boundaries within a global leading light-metal solutions provider.