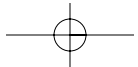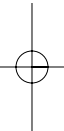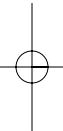# Part I

Ethnographic Doing and Writing

1

Getting Going: Organizing Ethnographic Fieldwork

Kees van der Waal

introduction

The work of ethnography is to make the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic, to problematize what is taken for granted, to 'suggest in writing what it is like to be someone else' (Van Maanen, 2001: 235). A characteristic of ethnography is its criticality, its radical challenge to received ideas about people and society (Bate, 1997: 1153). In this book, the core question is: what is the contribution of the ethnographic approach to the study of organizations in both familiar and exotic settings? Organizational processes dominate our lives more markedly than ever before over large parts of the globe, given the articulation of complex production and consumption processes that connect us to more people in larger networks, demanding more streamlining, efficient coordination and precise planning in shorter time periods. While this book focuses on the complexities of organizations fundamental to everyday work and economic life, this thematic focus should not prevent us from keeping an eye on the many interconnections between various sites and between symbols of home and workplace.

Ethnographic fieldwork can be defined as the 'firsthand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation' (Atkinson et al., 2007: 4). It makes use of field research tools in the interpretative tradition of social science in which participant observation, conversational interviewing and the close reading and analysis of documents are key. In this chapter, I look at the way in which doing ethnography in organizational settings has been represented in the literature and how this relates to my own research experience. How is ethnography in organizations actually done? What are the characteristics of different approaches to organizational ethnography? I will refer to my ethnographic experiences in the following inter- and intra-organizational settings in South Africa: local development planning processes in two rural areas (a tribal hierarchy and a development committee in Limpopo Province, a housing planning project in the Western Cape), as well as two university settings (university labour relations in Johannesburg and higher education language planning in Stellenbosch). I write from the perspective and preoccupations of

an anthropologist although I attempt to present the ethnographic process here in more general social science terms. I refer to 'ethnography' as a generic research approach and 'anthropology' as a specific social research field.

The core idea within this chapter is that the ethnography of organizations has characteristics and challenges that reflect crucial current methodological and theoretical concerns in ethnography in general. These have to do with the nature of the object of study and the relationship between the ethnographer and this object. Specific issues that surface in organizational ethnography are the problematics of access and intervention. The focus in the most insightful work in this field is on organizations as symbolic and social processes as discourses and practices in specific contexts, rather than as institutions. The implications of this choice are apparent in the delimitation of 'unit of observation' and 'unit of analysis' as well as in the emphasis on power relations. This chapter is organized around issues that often emerge in an organizational study: choosing a research question, choosing a research site, how to gain access, what ethnographic fieldwork entails, the significance of various types of data and the importance of issues of power and ethics. I argue against a narrow, purely inductive and empiricist approach to ethnography in view of the important role of the ethnographer's life experience and prior cognition for the research process. As the personal and subjective dimension is so central to the ethnographer's being, this needs to be recognized and reflected upon. Ethnographic research, I maintain, benefits from the awareness of it being an open and contingent process.

choosing a research question: the importance of theory and prior assumptions

Although ethnographic research is celebrated for its closeness to experiential knowledge, the importance of theory and other prior knowledge for ethnographic research should not be obscured. My own trajectory from a more conservative and closed perspective on ethnography, to a more critical and open perspective proves this point for me. My training in anthropology occurred within the conservative framework of the Afrikaans-speaking academic environment of Pretoria University in the late 1960s and 1970s in which *volkekunde* (the study of 'peoples') was the accepted theoretical approach. The task set by this paradigm was to understand human life in terms of separate traditional cultures that were supposed to be stable and homogeneous ethnic forms, such as 'tribes'. This academic knowledge confirmed popular fantasies in white South Africa about the incommensurability of 'races'. *Volkekunde* studies, like most older ethnographies, were characterized by several exclusions: of the ethnographer's position, of 'modern' or 'powerful' social subjects and of the wider social context (Macdonald, 2007: 71). My own work for a master's degree (Van der Waal, 1977) fitted into this paradigm by focusing on the use of space in Venda (an area on

the border with Zimbabwe) as mainly a cultural phenomenon that needed description in terms of widely shared cultural patterns. In line with our train-ing, my methodological approach did not include participant observation, as this would have overstepped the apartheid taboo on social interaction between 'races', but it also rested upon the wrong assumption that one could gain sufficient insight into cultural life primarily by asking questions during ethnographic interviews.

Some years later, I was fortunate to experience a paradigm shift towards a more critical and Marxian informed position when I moved to the anthropol-ogy department of Rand Afrikaans University (now Johannesburg University). This was sociologically an exciting period during the run-up to the South African political transformation. The members of the department started to ask new research questions (Kotzé, 1982) and to initiate fieldwork among the black population based on participant observation, something that we had not done before because of the apartheid ban on cross-racial social intimacy. Apart from discarding bounded notions of cultural and social entities, we also began to foreground social process and context as important theoretical and analytical concepts with important implications for the way we were doing ethnographic fieldwork.

This account of my personal trajectory illustrates how theory informs the choice of research questions as well as the methods used in the field. In my *volkekunde* period the research questions I pursued were mainly descriptive, restricted to issues within bounded cultural entities and with no attention to organizational issues. In my later work (Van der Waal, 2001; 2003a), informed by the anthropologies of development and of organization, I started to give more attention to issues of interpretation (what caused these particular forms of organization, in this specific setting, in this exact context?), looked at relationships across cultural and social boundaries and included managers and political figures in my analyses – studying up. Since the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), ethnographic writing has become more of a focus, leading to increased self-awareness, emphasis on the biographical dimension of fieldwork and the questioning of the legitimating claims of ethnographers (Atkinson et al., 2007: 3, 4). This theoretical orientation, too, affected my work in its later phase, for instance, in the ways in which I framed research questions. The above illustrates the dialectical relationship between the theory that one employs and the way one does research.

There is, however, a theoretical approach, known as 'grounded theory', which advocates an a-theoretical position when entering the field (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2007). It is true that much that occurs during ethnographic work is unpredictable (Van Maanen, 2001: 253), meaning that there are always experiences in the field, unforeseen in one's theoretical preparation. A strong grounded theory position would argue that one cannot know the questions to be addressed in a research setting in advance; therefore one needs to reflect on such questions while in the field and to test one's insights continuously. It is indeed important to prioritize the issues that are central to

the people among whom one is doing ethnographic research – above one's own theoretical preoccupations – in order to discover local knowledge (Hirsch and Gellner, 2001: 8). While acknowledging the importance of theory, it is sobering to relativize all knowledge, including social theory, by regarding all voices as equal and problematic, following the insights of Foucault and Latour (Abram, 2001: 200).

Although I prefer to go into the field with an open mind and also agree that theoretical interpretation needs to be built on empirical research, I do not think one can escape the reality that theoretical conceptions inform ethnographic fieldwork. Social theory is the ethnocentric burden of the ethnographer, although it is, after all, the best set of interpretations that one can take along into the field. There is value in an open-ended approach, but there is also a need for an initial theoretical disposition or at least in having a set of carefully formulated possible interpretations as a starting point for ethnographic work, while constantly testing these insights and retaining a flexible research approach (Burawoy, 1998). In the end, ethnographic work aims not only at describing and interpreting, but also at contributing to theoretical understanding, based on new field-work-based insight (Bate, 1997; Hirsch and Gellner, 2001: 9). The implication is that both social scientific theory and local frameworks of thinking need to take their place in the ethnographic work of making sense of organizational process.

As my argument suggests, a merely descriptive study will not suffice when choosing a research question for an organizational ethnography. It may add to our knowledge to know the 'what', 'how' and 'who' of an organizational setting, but in order to progress beyond taxonomy and description, the 'why' (or 'criticality') question also needs to be engaged with. In order to answer the question of why a set of relationships or symbolic understandings is the way it is, it needs to be set against the background of other factors and processes. In other words, it needs to be contextualized. A lasting contribution of a Marxian theoretical approach in social science is its emphasis on forces (especially historical and political economic factors) that impact on small-scale relationships and cultural forms. One should therefore not study an organization per se as an isolated entity. Additionally, the main point of interest would not so much be the form and function of an organization, but rather the organizational process as it unfolds between sets of actors, including other organizations. Core to the organizing process is the tendency to set up a governing ethos (organizational culture), rules for interaction and resource allocation, and the necessity to monitor these (Hirsch and Gellner, 2001: 3, 4). In choosing a research question the boundaries of organizations and other social settings should not be taken as given and homogeneity in the research setting should not be assumed.

As such, some possible research questions in the ethnographic study of organizations might include the following:

- What are the relationships between different actors in a specific organizational process?

- What form does the organizing process that is studied take and how does it change?

- Why does this particular form of organizational interaction occur in this specific context?

- How do relations of power and contestation emerge in organizational processes, and how are these related to meaning (symbols and cultural forms)?

- What are the effects of a specific organizational process on particular socio-economic relationships?

situating oneself and gaining access

Organizational ethnography potentially ranges from the very local to the global, from a village development committee setting in its interaction with local offices of the national state to a United Nations agency in Geneva or a multinational headquarters in a metropolis. It may encompass several organizational levels and follow the relationships between and among them. Mostly, however, due to the constraints of time and location, researchers choose a local setting as the primary research site and follow the connections between that site and other sites as far as is feasible and to the extent that these connections are relevant to a research project. Organizational ethnography often tends to be done in a specific site, within the boundaries of an organization selected as the unit of observation. However, the possibility of multi-sited organizational research work is very promising. In this way important connections between organizations and their interactions can be followed from local to global levels (Hirsch and Gellner, 2001: 4). In choosing a research site, one will be led by the theoretical understanding one has of the issues to be studied. It makes sense to develop several possible lines of approach to the main research questions and then decide on a specific approach in light of its viability.

Ethnographic research sites have often been characterized by large differences in class between researcher and researched. This used to be the case in colonial contexts and is still the norm in development situations. Class differences often meant relatively easy access for a researcher to settings where her or his social position was socially powerful. But many organizational settings are now very challenging in terms of access. Organizations' gatekeepers in industrial, urbanized settings tend to be more assertive and less accessible than those in community settings in rural areas. One reason for this difference is that organizations that are publicly active in economic and political realms tend to be very vulnerable regarding their reputation (Chapman, 2001: 31). Despite legislation promoting transparency and commitment to free flows of information, many gatekeepers are well aware of the damage

that can be done by the publication of 'misinterpretations' by social scientists. Therefore, it is quite common to experience problems gaining access to organizations, or even to be denied access. In many cases trust has to be established before intensive research work on the ground can begin. The initial contact, the way in with the help of a contact person, and the nature of first meetings are all very important, but difficult to control. Much of the success of the 'way in' depends on the impression you make and the time that you take to establish social contact with decision-makers or brokers who can facilitate or block access to a research setting. Even where access is denied, it may, nevertheless, be possible to study an organization through the available literature, through informal contacts with people involved in the organization and through the study of the effects of the organization.

Ethnographic research is time-intensive, and the first stage – that of reconnaissance – should not be rushed. Time should be taken to find out which organizational setting would be most useful to study in terms of its role in the organizational process and to develop a sense of possible alternatives. Spending time in alternative research settings, getting to know local role-players informally and establishing contact with gatekeepers is absolutely essential, preceding the formal process of requesting permission to spend time in an organization or to peruse its records. It is quite important to point out the need for and the benefits of the research project without making unrealistic claims or promises. One of the main issues in this regard is that the emphasis in ethnographic work and in presenting the proposed research plan to gatekeepers should not be on scrutinizing specific role-players or conflictual relationships, but on the understanding of organizational processes. In the negotiations about access, especially if there are fears about possible harm from the publication of research results, it may be wise to offer the draft publication for comment. By the time that the research has been written up, it will be of great value to have established dialogical relationships with persons in the organizational settings that were studied, in order to be able to discuss a draft publication, settle factual questions, and corroborate one's understanding of the social processes studied. Such an exchange can, however, lead to difficulties, of which researchers should be aware ahead of time. These may include issues of interpretation and emphasis. Workshopping these differences in meetings with role-players from the ethnographic setting may lead to new insights. However, what should be avoided at all costs is to be tied to obligations to obtain approval of one's work in order to publish it, as this will compromise the necessary independence of the researcher. In some cases it may, however, be unavoidable to have to submit a report for approval by the management of an organization, especially where research is done in the organization where one is employed (see also Chapter 8 by Alvesson, this volume). Hilhorst (2003) gives a fascinating account of her study of a women's movement in the Philippines and how her conclusions were ultimately rejected by the women she studied. Despite the breakdown in relationships, she felt sufficiently justified in her social scientific analysis to proceed with publication.

Gaining access to an organizational research situation, similar to other ethnographic work, is an ongoing process (Smith, 2007: 226). Getting in for the first time may be the most daunting step, but in multi-sited fieldwork it may be necessary to renegotiate access several times. Getting access should neither be underestimated nor overestimated. Being aware of the openness of ethnographic research and making the most of this flexibility is the best preparation for turning unexpected difficulties into fascinating opportunities (compare Chapter 7 by Moeran in this volume). The basic requirements for participant observation – being open to opportunity, maximizing social relationships and building on shared social experience – should be optimized for gaining access while one gets to know the field. Making use of oneself as the basic research instrument, through one's social skills, honest self-presentation and genuine interest, is usually a sufficient guarantee for developing new social relationships that lead to mutually beneficial partnerships and opportunities for research. A measure of assertiveness is needed. However, too much pressure on people with busy schedules, or a lack of conviction in the value of your research project, may inhibit entry. Above all, sensitivity to social situations and lots of patience are needed.

Instead of going against the flow of resistance to a research project in a reactionary way, it is advisable to use the tension that is generated creatively in order to make sense of the underlying forces that may throw light on the reasons for resistance (possibly arising from a sense of vulnerability felt initially by some role-players). One may reflect on the situation and develop alternative strategies (including the use of a developing network of contacts). Don't give up too easily. It may be possible to adapt a research proposal to accommodate the sensitivities of the organizational players and to integrate the needs of these players into the research project. These tensions and one's efforts to overcome them are heuristic tools for understanding the methodological path of a research project at the analytical stage of writing. It is, therefore, advisable to document the phases of the research process, including one's reflection on initial assumptions and experiences, in order to make sense of crucial periods in the research project at a later stage.

My own recent research experience has proved to be a learning curve in terms of gaining access. After arriving in Stellenbosch in 2002, I decided to do an organizational ethnography of inter-organizational interaction concerning local development in the Dwars River Valley (Van der Waal, 2005). This is a historical and scenic rural landscape in the Cape Winelands, just outside Stellenbosch, where white-owned wine farms exist side by side with a mainly 'coloured' population in several settlements, going back to the days of the emancipation of slaves in 1834–38. Interesting processes of change in governance and land-use are occurring in the valley.

First, under the old political order the settlements were part of Coloured Rural Areas with their own form of local and national government. They became part of the Stellenbosch municipality when rural areas were integrated into municipalities in South Africa after 2000. Second, agricultural

land-use has shifted from intensive viticulture and deciduous fruit farming to luxury rural estate development in combination with agriculture. The genealogy of land ownership of a large part of the valley goes back to the seventeenth century French Huguenots and their descendants, then to Cecil John Rhodes, the Cape tycoon and prime minister at the end of the nineteenth century and, more recently, in the twentieth century, to Anglo American, the largest multinational corporation in the country. In 2003 this corporation sold its land to Boschendal, a new company with a strong Black Economic Empowerment component. The farm worker population was moved off the farms into a newly established farm worker village, Lanquedoc, where they gained home ownership.

To follow inter-organizational interaction around these processes, I had to gain access to the villages and organizations, each uniquely different in this regard. As I was new in the area, I decided to make contact with one of the local municipal councillors. She was willing to see me, immediately sensed my interest in historical processes, and took me to meet a retired headmaster. After a long discussion and a quick tour of the area, I met several of his friends and contacts to whom I could return from time to time for interviews and for hints about other people to see and meetings to attend. In contrast, getting access to the staff of the multinational and the new owners of Boschendal proved to be more difficult. Emails and telephone calls were often ignored, and some individuals proved close to inaccessible.

As my previous research had been mostly done in rural areas with easy access, I found these difficulties unsettling, interpreting them as a refusal to let me into the organizations, only to learn that this was not the case at all. It merely proved necessary to work step by step, taking sufficient time to get to know the right people and to build on an emerging network of contacts. At a certain point I started to receive documentation about the public participation process concerning the development plans for the estate development and its associated social development plan. This happened because I had put my name on a list at a public meeting, thereby becoming one of the 'interested and affected parties' in the planning process.

I now have a much more realistic understanding of the accessibility of people involved in complex and highly structured processes. One has to nourish a network of contacts, follow processes over time and be prepared to wait for new opportunities to arise. In following the unfolding process of the institutionalization of development-oriented processes, the most efficient ways to strengthen my research network were to be present at events when those opportunities presented themselves and to build on existing contacts. This has involved me attending church meetings, bazaars, meetings of ward committees, neighbourhood watch groups, etc., depending on opportunity and research focus. What seemed to be inaccessible corporate environments at the outset proved to be much more open once my students and I became known in the area. For instance, documents that I did not even consider asking the companies for were handed to me by villagers who were summoned

to court for occupying houses or who served on development committees. I have learned to become much more opportunistic and to let things unfold, rather than pressing for information. In that way access has become less of a preoccupation and more of an opportunity, although I do remain eager to find out more about unfolding processes.

fieldwork – getting it going

Once all the preliminaries are done (usually including the production and approval of a final research proposal, getting the financial and time resources in place, selecting a research site or sites, and obtaining initial access), it is time to start doing 'real fieldwork'. At this stage the researcher may experience strong feelings of anxiety, due, for instance, to the lack of control one typically has over the unfolding process, the challenge of identifying unknown factors that influence the way the research may develop, the lack of local knowledge, and the sense of having to prove oneself academically. It is important to reflect on one's experiences and feelings and to record them – they may be useful indicators of the initial reception of the research process. The assumptions and research strategies that one brings to the field will be tested by the realities one encounters, especially in the initial process of getting to know the 'lay of the land'. Ethnographic research needs time, often entailing a year or more of fieldwork and a writing process that may take equally long (depending on what other work is competing for one's time) to produce a book or a series of academic articles.

Spatial exploration is often a good strategy for getting going (see Jordan, 2003: 21–4). It may be very enlightening to spend time getting to know the layout of a research site and its immediate physical context. When an insider comments on the use of space, for example parts of a building, sites of production or places in a neighbourhood, it helps to understand important aspects of relationships, processes and social categories that make local sense. Discussing these spatial connections and divisions, as reflected in maps, organizational charts and photographs, with local experts can be extremely useful for getting a sense of how relationships between social roles and spatial arrangements are organized and conceptualized. The spatial is an expression of the social and can therefore be used as a heuristic tool for making sense of underlying social frameworks. The use of space is often expressive of social status, as in the relative location and size allocated to different offices, and of the social values that underlie organizational processes. For example, the presence and use of meeting-places might indicate that value is placed on participatory decision-making, and signage of offices and socially relevant space often reveals perceptions of status (Jordan, 2003; Tilley, 2007).

Apart from mapping the socio-spatial, another approach that reveals much of the organizational process is to follow events. This may include attending meetings, or shadowing people willing to take the researcher along, focusing on

specific issues that happen to occupy the hearts and minds of an organization's members at the time of the research. An example of this approach would be to follow decision-making about a development project during the different stages of its implementation in order to assess forms of exclusion and inclusion.

While it is important to get going by focusing on specific events and the use of space and symbols, the whole picture needs to be explored as well in as far as it is practically possible. Information relating to many other key issues in one's research setting may be available in various kinds of documentation or in oral narratives. Of course, what is said and what is available as text are only partial reflections of much more complex social interactions. One has to continuously interpret these (often idealized) narratives in terms of one's understanding of local social differentiation and broader processes, while exploring other possible interpretations (often derived from theoretical literature) in terms of their heuristic fertility. Organizational processes are rich in symbols that reveal important meanings and relationships, such as status differences, local values and a sense of heritage. Such symbols provide condensed indications of socially relevant knowledge. These are indicated in the nomenclature and self-presentation of organizations, but also in the actual use of space, time, speech and writing (as employed by individual agents) (see Kamsteeg and Wels, 2004).

During ethnographic fieldwork the danger of essentialism (Fuchs, 2001) must be recognized and prevented. Due to the small-scale settings in which much ethnographic work has historically been done, ethnographers have often been trapped by the boundaries of their research contexts, e.g., the village, tribe, neighbourhood or organization studied. Seeing the local setting or the cultural context or a prominent aspect of either of these as a 'thing' or essence easily leads to taking the part for the whole. For example, the researcher might take the totalizing accounts of one social category (for example, men) as the complete narrative about local relationships, thereby assuming homogeneity where differentiation and contestation may be cardinal, if not necessarily immediately apparent. Generalizing beyond what is justified essentializes specific characteristics.

It should be our aim to go beyond the limitation of idealized images presented to the researcher as an outsider to the ethnographic situation. Also, it should be our aim to go beyond the static impression gained from studying organizational settings only at specific points in time. One can, indeed, follow multiple actors in their wheelings and dealings, the organizational process in its different forms, complexities and settings, the pathways of materials and things in organized trade and consumption, the meanings and models being pursued or attached to organizational relationships, and so forth (see for example, Appadurai, 1996; Van Maanen, 2001).

In my research on inter-organizational interaction around local development in the Dwars River Valley, it was important to get an introductory overview of the setting. As mentioned, this was initially provided by a local retired headmaster whose valuable introductions opened many doors. Driving around

with him and later with the chairperson of a housing association gave me a direct introduction to the local setting. I walked parts of the valley in the company of a local expert in the archaeology and local planning of the area, using routes onto private land that local people still regarded as their right of way into the mountain area. In addition, I found very useful written overviews of the area on tourist websites, economic and demographic data on the local government website, and an extensive spatial and development planning document from the office of a prominent local planning company (Dennis Moss Partnership, 2005). The guided tours and documentation afforded a quick entry into the rich and complex ways of naming and claiming that accompany historical and current engagements with land, social identity and economic development (Van der Waal, 2005).

Another benefit to be gained from following people was the insight it provided into the border between frontstage and backstage settings. I got to know the difference between meetings that were open to researchers and those regarded – at least by – some as private. When I asked about meetings that I could attend in the local setting, villagers told me about a meeting arranged by the municipality for discussing the budget in the local municipal ward. I could listen there to how development objectives were phrased by representatives of the municipality as well as to the questioning of these budget items by villagers. However, when members of a housing association said I could come along to a meeting with officials of the District Council, I was taken by surprise when the senior official chairing the discussion ruled that my presence was unacceptable. I was chaperoned to his office, where I was told that the sensitivity of the matter (involving the clarification of responsibilities for infrastructure provision and contractual obligations of contractors) made my presence problematic – this was to be a private meeting. Of course I left, but I had learned a valuable lesson in terms of naively accompanying people to their meetings, while at the same time getting an immediate indication of what were regarded as sensitive issues in housing development implementation. I also learned, from visits with students to the research area, that when leaders in the local setting can tell the story of their organization or of a development initiative to a captive audience, the event often becomes an energetic public performance. The emphases intended for public consumption are then much more formally and clearly communicated than in the subdued setting of one-to-one interviews. In a personal meeting, on the other hand, there is often more chance for 'off the record' comments.

Being present when events unfold during fieldwork, means sensitivities, local meanings and strategic alliances can be witnessed first hand. In the Dwars River Valley the identity of the oldest village, Pniel, goes back to the early 1840s when it was established as a labour pool around a church for emancipated slaves. Social identity in the village has recently become more strongly tied to the former slave history and the symbolism it generated for heritage purposes, especially since the democratic transition made it more valuable to relate back to an early non-white and oppressed origin.

In 2004, in the public space in front of the church (*die werf*), a monument was erected to celebrate freedom from slavery 170 years earlier. The bell that had been used by the first missionary in the early days of the settlement to indicate the evening curfew was remembered as a 'slave bell'. In the 1940s this bell was damaged in a storm and then hung in the office grounds of the large, local company, Rhodes Fruit Farms. In recent years the bell became a focus for restoration as it had strong symbolic value tied to the slave past in Pniel. This was realized by the company, which responded to the claims made on the bell by having it repaired and officially handing it back to Pniel. A big celebration was arranged on Heritage Day in September 2006 where the links between the church, as representative of the Pniel community, big business and the South African Heritage Resources Authority were reinforced. This helped patch up relations that had become strained because of the resistance leading residents from Pniel had initially shown to real estate development plans involving the immediate environ-ment around the village. These forms of symbolism – and the sensitivities related to them – only became evident in the course of my fieldwork, as the available documents did not allude to them.

types of data

When studying organizations and their interactions, a variety of types and sources of data, apart from published organizational or industry-related liter-ature, are important. First, many organizations have websites containing useful information, such as annual reports and links to other important sites.

A second important source of information is the range of documents mostly available at the organizations themselves. These take the form of minutes, reports with limited distribution and files of correspondence and other 'gray' (unpublished) literature that may be of great significance. Often one may need to negotiate with representatives of the organization about the use of these documents. In my experience, once a researcher has become established in a relationship of trust, they may be given access to sets of files, even sometimes to take home. This, of course, places a responsibility on the researcher to use their contents with great care – and to return them, if borrowed! Of course, you may be denied access to internal documents and have to rely only on whatever materials are available.

Third, as with other forms of ethnography (Bernard, 1995; Hirsch and Gellner, 2001: 13), organizational ethnography requires close attention to detail at events and interactions. This entails participant observation: immersing oneself in the social context that is being studied and being open to events and interactions taking place. In organizational ethnography this research strategy often means using fragmented bits of immersion wherever this seems viable, for instance, attending a meeting, having lunch with someone involved in the everyday running of an organization, and attending to small talk.

One of the core features of participant observation is that it is meant to reduce reactivity during ethnographic fieldwork, to the extent that this is possible (Van Maanen, 2001: 240). Limited or full participation needs to be accompanied by the documentation of one's observations – that is, the writing of field notes – on a regular basis, preferably daily, in order to build up a record of the flows of events witnessed, people talked to and documents read during the research period.

Fourth, interviews are part of the research methodology that could be employed during participant observation for organizational ethnography. Although more formal than informal discussions during participant obser-vation, most interviews should remain, preferably, semi-structured rather than structured, thereby allowing maximally for the organization of knowledge from the inside perspective (Chapman, 2001). Much of the material gathered during interviews or recorded during public events is in the form of 'official' narratives that strengthen and reproduce an identity, or that structure experience. But a great deal is also less structured and informal, requiring the researcher to be perceptive and open to all kinds of unofficial knowledge. At the other end of the spectrum, some highly structured interviews in the form of surveys may be needed for representative or comparative samples.

Key to recording 'data' during participant observation is to cultivate your ability to listen and observe carefully. You may need to put your list of questions aside at times or let a discussion develop naturally. Many pieces of information, moreover, are only revealed when you interact informally with people who know the local conditions. Listening closely to these cues is essential for developing an awareness of the complexity and multi-layered character of meanings and relationships.

The growing body of information that emerges in daily notes about events, interviews and other interactions needs to be systematically organ-ized in order to find specific detail easily and to see the emerging patterns in the information. Fieldnotes should already be used as a resource while in the field to make sense of the masses of detail collected. Reading and re-reading notes is a sure way of allowing different parts of the body of information to come together and to lead to a range of insights, while still in the field. As indicated in the section on choosing a research question, some of the benefit that grounded theory offers, namely to let theoretical insight emerge from intensive engagement with the data, can begained during fieldwork and analysis. While this process of sense-making remains somewhat intuitive in nature, it is not a 'black box', but is based on logical and disciplined thought processes. These are informed by your training into the craft of ethnography, by reading extensively, by comparing field notes with one another, contextualizing them and looking for answers to recurring basic questions: What? Who? Why?

A system of recording is necessary for each research project. This could consist of chronological field notes, sets of interviews, survey results, etc.

Much of this material will nowadays be stored on computer but will also often be handwritten and printed. A characteristic of field notes is that they are contemporaneous with the events recorded. Another is that they reduce and represent events selectively, rather than accurately describe them (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2007: 353). Not everything that is consciously and unconsciously experienced can be noted in a physical, written record. When finally writing the ethnographic text, much of what becomes relevant in the analysis is that broader set of intuitive understandings of the fieldwork situation that was hidden until the formulation of ideas in the process of creating a written account.

For my work in the Limpopo Province I wrote notes during field visits in quarterly holiday breaks and also collected texts written by research assistants in the periods that I was not present in the field. In the Dwars River Valley project, I was able to follow much more of the local dialogue (mostly in Afrikaans) and could therefore pick up local meanings as expressed in everyday discourse more easily. As I live close to the research area, I am less dependent on research assistants living in the local settlements, although I still use such texts written by local people with some success. Fieldnotes and analytic notes are best stored in both hard (paper) and soft (electronic) copy format. Computer database programs are available that help record and analytically process materials. Examples are Ethnograph, NUD*IST and Inmagic.

power and ethics in fieldwork relationships

Ethnographers have focused on 'local-level politics' (Swartz, 1969) as struggles for power and resources that take place in villages, organizations and other micro-settings. Ethnographic fieldwork itself is such a setting in which the reflexive ethnographer appreciates that they are part of a field of asymmetric relations of power. Ethnographic fieldwork requires great care in managing relationships as these may acquire privileged dimensions with ethical implications. While entry to an organization may be gained on the basis of initial, formal negotiations, much depends on your social skills in making progress towards long-term relationships conducive to open dialogue. Being yourself, showing genuine interest in other people, and giving time and patience to research relationships will usually lead to unexpected opportunities. As far as possible, try to nourish a strong relationship of trust with anyone you interact with. There are, of course, people who might remain sceptical of the stranger who is nosing around in other people's business, and sometimes access to information is denied. Here it is important to strive towards a more informal relationship in order to build trust and thus overcome the resistance that might accompany doubts about your motivations. Again, time is needed to establish relationships (some of these may become friendship relationships), although these might retain many of the utilitarian and instrumental characteristics that accompany the search for information. To a large extent the participant

observation mode of doing research facilitates relationships that are less instrumental and more open to non-utilitarian aspects than in other modes of research, although the predatory character of all social research needs to be recognized and resisted (Rock, 2007: 36).

Relationships in fieldwork have important ethical implications. Ethnographic research can harm those studied, especially in the publication of accounts of their lives (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007: 341). Therefore, ethical guidelines have been developed (Anthropology Southern Africa, 2005) that emphasize especially the protection of research participants' interests, for example by keeping their identities confidential, where necessary. Other interests that need to be protected are those of colleagues and collaborators. The ethnographic method differs from many other field research approaches in that informed consent cannot be obtained from every individual during participant observation, for example when working in a dense social context.

Two of my research experiences illustrate different researcher roles in organizational research and their ethical implications. At Stellenbosch University, I started to do research on diversity politics in the institution, against the background of the 'language debate' regarding the position of Afrikaans in South Africa (Van der Waal, 2003b). I had access to information as a member of staff that I could not use directly in my research, but which helped me to make sense of the material that I was collecting. Newspaper reports and letters to the editor in an Afrikaans daily, *Die Burger*, reflected various positions taken during the 'debate' on how the university should transform itself. The material also consisted of official public documents and press releases made by the university. The university had to comply with the demands of the state for improved representation of the whole population in terms of student and staff profiles, which would lead to more communication in English. On the other hand, a large part of the staff, students, their parents and other white Afrikaans-speakers wished to retain Afrikaans as the main teaching medium. I had to be careful not to let my own bias towards inclusivity obscure my understanding of the positions taken by conservative colleagues and alumni.

In contrast, when I did ethnographic fieldwork in the Limpopo Province in the early 1990s on development initiatives involving a village development committee and external actors, I had a totally different role profile. My local role there was more than that of a researcher as I had friendship links with several people and had been able to arrange bursaries for senior learners. I had a house in the village to which I periodically returned for fieldwork. I had access to many snippets of private information that helped me understand local relationships, but which had to be treated with care. I managed this situation by avoiding identifying specific persons in my writing. The two research contexts, Stellenbosch University and the rural village in Limpopo Province, had different implications for the way I did research and used information, due to the different ways in which I was embedded in these situations as more than a researcher.

_____ conclusion _____

In this chapter, organizational ethnography was unpacked in terms of 'getting going', the crucial points in starting an ethnographic project conceptually and practically. Basic questions were addressed with regard to theoretical and methodological assumptions and points of departure. These issues were related to my own fieldwork experiences. Interestingly, while organizational complexity seemed to be greater in the urban setting and organizational interactions more intense, organizational identities were important in both settings, whether tribal or academic. Such similarities indicate that studies of organizations can build on classical ethnographic analyses and social theory. Core questions around essentialism, culture and power emerge in all ethno-graphies, whether focused on organizational or other social settings. An approach that values complexity and processual fluidity was proposed.

In terms of methodology, the challenges around getting access, tracing relationships and following events in organizational ethnography may be high, due to efficient gatekeeping, the multi-sited or de-localized nature of organizational processes and the fluidity of complex interactions. Fieldwork and analysis, as basic and dialectical processes in the course of ethnographic work, were addressed in terms of strategies and ethics. Core issues for any fertile interpretation of organizational process were identified as differentiation, process, power, agency, structure and context.

_____ references _____

Abram, S. (2001) 'Among professionals: Working with pressure groups and local authorities', in D.N. Gellner and E. Hirsch (eds), *Inside organizations*. Oxford: Berg. pp.183–203.

Anthropology Southern Africa (2005) 'Special number on ethics', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 28(3&4).

Appadurai, A. (1996) 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', in J.X. Inda and R. Rosaldo (eds) *The anthropology of globalization: A reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp.46–64.

Atkinson, P., Coffey, A.J., Deramont, S., Lofland, J. and Lofland, L.H. (eds) (2007) *Handbook of ethnography*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Bate, S.P. (1997) 'Whatever happened to organizational anthropology? A review of the field of organizational ethnography and anthropological studies', *Human Relations*, 50(9): 1147–75.

Bernard, H.R. (1995) *Research methods in anthropology.* Walnut Creek: Altamira.

Burawoy, M. (1998) 'Extended case method', *Sociological Theory*, 16(1): 16–25.

Chapman, M. (2001) 'Social anthropology and business studies: Some considerations of method', in D.N. Gellner and E. Hirsch (eds), *Inside organizations*. Oxford: Berg. pp.19–33.

Charmaz, K. and Mitchell, R.G. (2007) 'Grounded theory in ethnography', in P. Atkinson, A.J. Coffey, S. Deramont, J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of ethnography*. Los Angeles: Sage. pp.160–74.

Clifford, J. and Marcus, G.E. (1986) *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dennis Moss Partnership (2005) Boschendal Sustainable Development Initiative. Planning policy and development strategy. Inception phase report, consultative draft on CD.

Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I. and Shaw, L.L. (2007) 'Participant observation and fieldnotes', in P. Atkinson, A.J. Coffey, S. Deramont, J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of ethnography*. Los Angeles: Sage. pp. 352–68.

Fuchs, S. (2001) *Against essentialism: A theory of culture and society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hilhorst, D. (2003) *The real world of NGOs: Discourses, diversity and development*. London: Zed.

Hirsch, E. and Gellner, D.N. (2001) 'Introduction: Ethnography of organizations and organizations of ethnography', in D.N. Gellner and E. Hirsch (eds) *Inside organizations*. Oxford: Berg. pp.1–15.

Jordan, A.T. (2003) *Business anthropology*. Prospect Heights: Waveland.

Kamsteeg, F. and Wels, H. (2004) 'Anthropology, organizations and interventions: new territory or quicksand?', *Intervention Research*, 1(1): 7–25.

Kotzé, J.C. (1982) *Volkekunde en grense*. Inaugural lecture. Publication Series of Rand Afrikaans University A142. Johannesburg: Rand Afrikaans University.

Macdonald, S. (2007) 'British social anthropology', in P. Atkinson, A.J. Coffey, S. Deramont, J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of ethnography.* Los Angeles: Sage. pp. 60–79.

Murphy, E. and Dingwall, R. (2007) 'The ethics of ethnography', in P. Atkinson, A.J. Coffey, S. Deramont, J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of ethnography.* Los Angeles: Sage. pp. 339–51.

Rock, P. (2007) 'Symbolic interactionism and ethnography', in P. Atkinson, A.J. Coffey, S. Deramont, J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of ethnography.* Los Angeles: Sage. pp. 26–38.

Smith, V. (2007) 'Ethnographies of work and the work of ethnographers', in P. Atkinson, A.J. Coffey, S. Deramont, J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of ethnography.* Los Angeles: Sage. pp. 220–33.

Swartz, M.J. (ed.) (1969) *Local-level politics: social and cultural perspectives.* London: University of London Press.

Tilley, C. (2007) 'Ethnography and material culture', in P. Atkinson, A.J. Coffey, S. Deramont, J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of ethnography.* Los Angeles: Sage. pp. 258–72.

Van der Waal, C.S. (1977) Die woning en woonwyse onder die Venda. MA thesis, University of Pretoria.

Van der Waal, C.S. (2001) 'Participation in development: South African rhetoric and practice', in H.C. Marais, Y. Muthiln, N.S. Jansen Van Reusburg, M.P. Maaga, G.F. de Wet and C.J. Coetzee (eds), *Sustainable social development*. Menlo Park: Network. pp. 115–22.

Van der Waal, C.S. (2003a) *Culture, power and inequality in South Africa: the relevance of the anthropology of development and organisations*. Inaugural lecture, Stellenbosch University.

Van der Waal, C.S. (2003b) 'Diverse approaches in a South African debate on language and diversity in higher education', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 25(3&4): 86–95.

Van der Waal, C.S. (2005) 'Spatial and organizational complexity in the Dwars River Valley, Western Cape', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 28(1&2): 8–21.

Van Maanen, J. (2001) 'Afterword. Natives 'r' us: Some notes on the ethnography of organizations', in D.N. Gellner and E. Hirsch (eds) *Inside organizations*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 233–61.