Introduction to the Feature Topic

Retelling Tales of the Field

In Search of Organizational Ethnography 20 Years On

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The special issue arose from the 2008 Qualitative Research in Management and Organization Conference, held at the University of New Mexico, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of John Van Maanen's (1988) book *Tales of the Field*. The theme of the conference, Telling Tales, reflected two of the core issues in the book—the need to think about the ways in which we carry out (our methods) and write up ethnographic work. This introductory paper sets the scene for the four papers to follow by giving an overview of ethnography: what ethnographic work entails, a brief history, issues to consider when doing ethnography, and offers a range of references for potential ethnographers. In addition, it introduces the four authors and situates their "tales" within the broader ethnographic context.

Keywords: *ethnography; qualitative methods; culture*

The Beginning of the Tale

This special issue arose from the Qualitative Research in Management Conference, "Telling Tales," at the University of New Mexico in March 2008. The conference was held to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of John Van Maanen's Tales of the Field. The idea for the conference had been bubbling around in the back of my mind for a couple of years. I had read Tales back when I was doing my PhD, and it had a major influence on the way I began to think about research. As I read more of John's work, it was not just his challenge to become more reflexive about what we do as scholars that engaged me, nor was it just his finely crafted tales about culture and ethnography, but it was also the inimitable style in which he told—and still tells—his tales. He's direct, provocative, and thought provoking. So when he writes:

> I am appalled at much of organization theory for its technocratic unimaginativeness. Our generalizations often display a mind-numbing banality and an inexplicable readiness to reduce the field to a set of unexamined, turgid, hypothetical thrusts designed to render organizations systematic and organization theory safe for science (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 139).

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We are challenged to respond! His passion for a rich and textured organization studies was particularly evident in his exchange of views with Jeff Pfeffer during the "paradigm wars" of the mid 90s, when John argued for plurality in organization theory. As Pfeffer stated, "John is nothing if not a master of rhetoric" (1995, p. 681), and although I suspect Pfeffer's meaning is different to mine—I agree. John's work embodies a rhetoric that's unique, engaging and provocative, a conversational style that as he says himself, "is anything but institutionalized" (1995, p. 142). And this is important, because such prose is a cornerstone of ethnographic writing, a way of connecting readers to the everyday experience of the research participants and offering a credible interpretation of culture.

His approach to fieldwork is similar to his textwork, down-to-earth, accessible, and best summarized in his comment that "qualitative methods are rather similar to the interpretive procedures we make use of as we go about our everyday life. The data we collect and act upon in everyday life are of the same sort a qualitative researcher explicitly attempts to gather and record" (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 521). In reading his work, you know he's been there, observed, talked, and listened to people. But it is not just talk, it is "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) with a purpose—"to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation." (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 540). Through John's work, you begin to understand that organizational culture is about context, everyday life, how people manage to organize themselves and do their work, and that although culture and practices are context-dependent, how this happens has broader implications both for the way we study culture and for how organization members might see their practice differently.

John's ideas about culture, ethnography, and writing resonate with many qualitative researchers—if you check the list of references in interpretive and qualitative-based studies, John's name is there more often than not. Most qualitative scholars in Europe, Australasia, and the United States are familiar with his work. So I felt we should not let the twentieth anniversary of *Tales of the Field* go by without some kind of celebration—hence the QRM conference and this special issue.

By now, you might be under the impression that John is my ethnographic hero, and because I did not know him, I felt some trepidation about contacting him with my idea. When I finally sent an email to see if he would be interested in presenting the keynote speech at a conference to celebrate Tales, he responded enthusiastically. I should have known! So the idea took form . . . Bud Goodall, who was equally enthusiastic about John's work, agreed to be the introductory keynote speaker, Steve Linstead and Karen Locke came in as co-organizers, and John Shotter and Mike Agar as featured speakers.

It is a measure of John's influence that the conference attracted participants from the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Denmark, Poland, the Philippines, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Australia, each with their own tale to tell and their own unique way of telling it. We discussed qualitative research methods ranging from conventional to nontraditional, including NVivo, grounded theory, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, photo-narratives, focus groups, metaphor analysis, content analysis, textual analysis, psycho-phenomenology and narrative analysis. And the topics covered gender issues, leadership, careers, emotion, drug deals, the research process, and research relationships—across a variety of contexts including call centers, manufacturing and service organizations, churches, aviation disasters, business schools, the accounting profession, the music

business, homeless centers, and health care. In Tales, John asked for "narrative ingenuity and novel interpretation" (1988, p. 140) and conference participants responded.

Ethnography: A Room With a View

But before we get to the papers in the special issue, I would like to set the scene by giving an overview of ethnography and its relationship to organization studies. Ethnography has a long history within the social sciences, part of the staple diet of anthropologists and sociologists, it is not so for organizational researchers. Even though back in the 1920s and 30s Mayo's famous Hawthorne studies used an ethnographic approach, since then there have been comparatively few organizational ethnographies. A number of early (e.g., Blau, 1963; Dalton, 1959; Roy, 1958) and contemporary (e.g., Barley, 1986; Kunda 1992; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Law, 1994; Orr, 1996; Watson, 2001) exemplars in org studies have become classics, offering fascinating insights into organizational life (see papers of John Van Maanen and Bud Goodall for more examples). Yet many org studies Ph.D. programs do not cover ethnography in the curriculum, perhaps because contemporary ethnography is not valued as producing rich and intricate accounts of everyday organizational life, but instead is seen pejoratively as a room with a view—as having a "subjective take" on the specific context under study, leading to findings that are not generalizable, valid, or "true" knowledge. And also perhaps because the task of the ethnographer and her relationship with the world under study is not a straightforward one.

It was James Clifford, George Marcus (1986), and other cultural anthropologists and sociologists who drew our attention to the notion that social science is embedded within social, historical, and linguistic process, and that consequently our cultural accounts are partial fictions rather factual accounts. Essentially, that working from a room with a view is unavoidable because ethnographers (as do other researchers) bring their intellectual bags with them, making sense and completing their research with their own community traditions, assumptions, language, and expectations in mind. Their research accounts are therefore influenced as much by these traditions as by the "data" from "natives," and so ethnography is a "form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer *and* those written about" [my italics] (Denzin, 1997, p. xi). By questioning the authority and impartiality of ethnographic texts, this work prompted the interpretive turn, highlighting that culture is not about objects and facts but about everyday activities and meanings of both the researched and researcher, and bringing attention to the processes of fieldwork, writing, and theorizing.

Of course, this is John's point in Tales, that whether we recognize it or not our tale is as much about our "room" and our "view" as it is about the world of others, and that we therefore need to consider how we write our texts. Realist tales are dispassionate and "factual" accounts where the researcher is ironically characterized as expert by a god-like absence in the text; impressionist tales are evocative accounts of everyday organizational life—tales in which the ethnographer is embedded; and in confessional tales the ethnographer is intimately present, reflecting on his or her role in the research process, sometimes in an almost guiltily apologetic or therapeutic sense. So while a room with a view is seen as embedded and inevitable within impressionist/interpretivist-based research, realist/positivist researchers are

intent on detachment and impartiality. One lesson we seemingly still have to learn is that it's important not to judge the rigor and value of one form of work through the lens of the other—a misjudgment that occurs all too often by journal editors and academy gatekeepers.[1]

Other potential reasons why ethnography is less popular in org studies than the social sciences generally is that ethnographers:

a. Have to pack their toothbrush, because meanings and insights are produced from a deep involvement with the research site and its participants. Good ethnographies require time—a luxury when under pressure to publish.

b. Have to be good at dealing with uncertainty, balancing a need to be open to the nuances of local experiences and meanings with the task of translating community life and culture for more general consumption. Much of our academic training prepares us to be disciplined, structured, and ''objective'' in our intellectual pursuits rather than preparing us ''to move among strangers while holding [ourselves] in readiness for episodes of embarrassment, affection, misfortune, partial or vague revelation, deceit, confusion, isolation, warmth, adventure, fear, concealment, pleasure, surprise, insult, and always possible deportation.'' (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 2). It can be difficult to be open to surprises in the moment (see Mike Agar's paper in this issue).

c. Have to translate their experience into research accounts that resonate and have some meaning for readers of their work. It takes skill to write good ethnographies that convey a sense of the richness and intricacy of the culture being studied, are reflexive in/about the process, and offer insights and ideas that resonate with a wider audience.

But this does not mean that we should not do ethnography. Good organizational ethnographies can reveal and explore the intricacies, challenges, tensions, and choices of life in organizations. They can offer interesting resonant tales that draw you into the lives of organizational members,—like a good mystery but with insights about the way we manage, think about and conceptualize organizations. John Shotter's and Mike Agar's papers discuss two very different ways of being open to surprise and generating such insights.

The four authors in this special issue have each found their own way of carrying their bags and toothbrushes: through ethnography, narrative ethnography, situated dialogic action research, and complexity-informed ethnography. Each paper offers a different way of thinking about organizational ethnography and our way of engaging with and writing about the world. It is interesting to compare not only their approaches to research, but also their textwork—the way they tell their research tales. More of this later—but for now, let us look at some characteristics of ethnography as a means of situating the papers that follow.

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is about understanding human experience—how a particular community lives—by studying events, language, rituals, institutions, behaviors, artifacts, and interactions. It differs from other approaches to research in that it requires immersion and translation. Ethnography is not a quick dip into a research site using surveys and interviews, but an extended period time in which the ethnographer immerses herself in the community she is studying: interacting with community members, observing, building relationships,

and participating in community life. She then has to translate that experience so that it is meaningful to the reader. This is not achieved by testing propositions and generating predictive and generalizable knowledge—and not by "fording a stream that separates one text from another and changing languages in midstream" (Tyler, 1986, p.137)—but telling a convincing story using the language of community members and by weaving observations and insights about culture and practices into the text.

Specifically, ethnographic research has the following characteristics.

Ethnographies Are About Culture

In his paper, John Van Maanen says he's interested in culture with a small "c." Why is this distinction important? Because if we look at the history of ethnography, its origins lie more than a century ago in culture with a capital "C"—Culture of societies. Big C ethnography also has its roots in Colonialism, amateur and semi-professional social anthropologists working in the British Empire to describe the so-called primitive cultures to better manage, administer, and control the Empire. During the 1930s, ethnography became more professionalized through the work of scholars such as Malinowski (1922) and Radcliffe-Brown (1948), who developed a systematic ethnographic methodology, a set of procedures for collecting data and describing diverse non-Western Cultures, with the aim of developing a general science of society. Big C tales are therefore realist ones about macro social structures, and often based on "hard data" collected via the scientific model of research: a search for causal mechanisms and behavioral laws typical of positivist methodology.

Little c culture originated in sociology, particularly in the work of the Chicago School where, from the 1920s onward, scholars studied urban and social problems. Based on the premise that humans act on the basis of the meaning of things, and that those meanings are created in social interactions, they argued that fieldwork and native interpretations were crucial to understanding the empirical world under study (Blumer, 1954, 1969). Little c culture is about micro level interactions, patterns of life in segments of society such as ghetto culture and street life (e.g., Thomas 1923[2]; Whyte, 1955), immigrant life (e.g. Park & Burgess, 1925), or hospital life (e.g., Becker, Hughes & Strauss, 1961; Goffman, 1961). It is also about studying social processes and social issues such as deviance (Becker, 1973), suicide (Atkinson, 1978), drug culture (e.g. Adler, 1993; Agar, 1973), and professions (Becker, 1951; Dalton, 1959). Later organizational ethnographies build on the small c tradition to study the lifeworld and meaning-making of people and/or the in situ organizing processes and commonplace practices within a particular organization (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Rosen 1985).

As we have seen, in the 1980s, social and cultural anthropologists (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986) questioned the big C tradition and the dependence on realist accounts, drawing attention to the need for ethnographers to think about their relationship with those they study, about how ethnographic accounts are subject to the disciplinary authorial voice of the ethnographer and how we judge others through our own ethnocentric norms, practices, and cultural lens. Thus we need (contra colonialism) to be sensitive to historical, political, economic, cultural and social silences, and to the modes of oppression and pretension that might be present in our writing. The response included more impressionistic tales (Van Maanen, 1988) and ethnographies engaging in cultural critique. Behar and Gordon's

(1996) book *Women Writing Culture* is a good example of being sensitive to the "silences," particularly to the lack of women's voices and feminist approaches in anthropology.

Ethnographies Are About Context and Temporality

Ethnographers emphasize the need to study people in their naturally occurring settings as a means of grasping the complexity, intricacy, and mundaneity (commonplace activities) of organizational life (see Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). This means considering situated interactions, cultural artifacts, symbols, stories, and meanings. Because ethnographies are context-dependant, they often take an emic rather than an etic perspective—a view from-within that focuses on organizational members' understandings and on knowledge that makes sense to them—as opposed to an outside (etic) view using academic categorizations and theorizing. Because the focus is on primary data, fieldwork is key. Ethnographies are also about temporality rather than a snapshot picture of an organization; about meanings, social processes, continuities, and discontinuities across the past and present. Thus, organizational ethnographers are cultural explorers, discovering how organizational actors make sense and get things done and how organizational communities and identities continually emerge over time.

This is not to say ethnography is purely descriptive and a-theoretical, indeed as John Van Maanen says the nature of our textwork is important. What you see when you read a good ethnography is a text carefully dotted through with interpretive insights about organizational life, the ethnographer's and participants' ways of sense making that connect with the reader and cause him or her to "see differently" or—as John Shotter says in his paper—to "get it" and see possibilities. A browse through the work of the four authors in this special issue indicates the various forms fieldwork and textwork might take: insights that are not conveyed in conventional ways through models or theories, but often as "perspicuous representations"[3] (Wittgenstein, 1953), narrative modes of sensemaking that may include metaphors, analogies, stories, and ethnographer insights. Mike Agar offers such an example in his California Court example, where he found his words "my baby done left me" at the beginning of his report "rang true" with Court employees. For Bud Goodall insight comes from "perspective by incongruity"—a dramatic counterposing of ideas/situations as a means of seeing something differently. So the knowledge generated in ethnography is not the type, as one manager commented to me "you take off the shelf," but is a form of knowing from within—knowing how we create meanings and live our lives with others (Cunliffe, 2002). Writing good ethnographic tales is a literary as well as academic pursuit—one in which the ethnographer finds both the voices of organization members and her own.

Ethnographies Are About Sociality and Meanings

Because ethnographers are concerned with sociality—with how people live their lives and make meanings together—they are interested in interactions (e.g., meetings, formal, and informal conversations), written texts (policies, vision statements, media statements, emails, work manuals), talk (stories, narratives, metaphors, gossip, jokes), actions (routines, work practices), symbols (décor, dress, logos), and language (jargon, common phrases and words, technical language) of organizational members. But different interpretations of what

"sociality" means has led to a bewildering array and blend of genres.[4] Realist, impressionist, critical, noncritical, reflexive, unreflexive, and confessional or autoethnographic tales are particularized in what the ethnographer notices, how he relates to participants, engages with the "data" and writes his account.

Realist ethnographers see sociality in terms of phenomena (structures, institutional practices and processes, customs, norms, values, routines, artifacts, and symbols), true meanings, and are concerned with "telling it like it is." This does not mean that their bags are labeled with "positivist," "scientific method," or "universal laws" stickers—but rather "facts," "observations," and "data." They validate their work as being truthful to the research site by using qualitative and quantitative data, coding techniques, offering detailed accounts of the context and interactions, and/or identifying patterns and processes. Van Maanen's (1991) tale of the Disney smile factory is explicitly realist in that he gives a detailed commentary on the characteristics of Disney's culture, and identifies how social order is maintained through the socialization process, emotional management, close supervision, and stage management.[5] There are many versions of realist organizational ethnographies, including narrative, symbolic-interactionist, and critical (e.g., Boje 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Delbridge, 1998; Kunda, 1992; O'Connor, 2000; Vallas, 2003), and material-semiotic or actor network theory-based approaches, where the focus of study is the relationship between material (including humans) objects (e.g., Bruni, 2005; Law, 1994; Suchman, 1987).

Impressionist (interpretive) ethnographers view sociality as intersubjective: emerging in the interactions and conversations between people. Their bags are labeled "social construction," "meaning-making," and "reflexivity." They are in search of multiple rather than true meanings: how sociality (social relationships and meanings) is shaped and reshaped in the interactions and many voices and meanings within the research site—and how the ethnographer herself is part of the process of interpretation and meaning-making (see Watson, 2000; Yanow, 1998). Although interpretive ethnographers are not interested in objects per se, some may be interested in the process of objectivation—how meanings, language, and the social world become seemingly real (see Fletcher & Watson, 2007; Karreman & Alvesson, 2001)—while others are interested in ways in which a more relational, intersubjective, and fluid sociality emerges ongoingly (Cunliffe, 2008, 2009; Orr, 1996; Watson, 2003).

Within critical ethnographies, which are often informed by postmodern, postcolonial, feminist and Marxist-based theories, sociality is conceived of as discursive, fragmented, contested, and hegemonic. Such ethnographies are often concerned with cultural critique and our ability to create impartial, accurate, and authoritative knowledge about the world, as represented in big C and realist ethnographies: with subverting status quo social practices and conditions and embracing "an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain" (Soyini Madison 2005, p. 5). In other words, to defamiliarize the often taken-for-granted ethnocentric (ideologically Western) and power-ridden nature of social relations and of ethnographic texts. Postmodern and postcolonial ethnographies are about questioning the authority of ethnographic texts and ethnographers, exposing the political and appropriating nature of culture and ethnography through cultural critique, deconstruction, multiple readings, (Badham & Garrety, 2003; Bickham Mendez & Wolf, 2001; Collinson, 1992; Ford & Harding, 2008). As Townsley says, when teaching feminist organizational ethnography she wants communication students to learn "how to identify

the communicative practices from talk to dress to rituals that constitute dominant, marginal, and/or subversive meanings of gender in the workplace." (2003, p. 621).

Ethnographies Are About "Thick Description" and Imagination

Ethnographies offer detailed and rich or "thick" descriptions. In contrast to "thin" descriptions (generalized findings, factual statements, observations, or coded data offering a snapshot picture of organizational life), thick descriptions are about micro interactions in the field, captured through a blend of methods including field notes, recordings of talk and meetings, visual recordings of interactions and gestures, attending meetings, participant verbal or written accounts, shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007), ethnographic interviews (unstructured, semi-structured, exploratory), emails, and so on. Ethnographers do what it takes to understand meaning-making: spending months onsite talking to employees, managers, and union representatives, hanging out at the cafeteria, attending meetings, and so on—to get a sense of their everyday lives. It is this type of fieldwork that generates thick description.

Thick description is important in establishing the "validity" of ethnographic texts. Ethnographic validity is not determined in the same way as scientific validity but is instead based on the credibility of the text: is the text authentic, conveying a sense of the ethnographer being there and grasping the intricacies of life in that setting? Is the text plausible—does the account make sense and connect experience with conceptual elements in appropriate and consistent ways? Does the text cause the reader to think about the issues differently (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993)? Credibility is also about imagination—not in the sense of making things up, but in C. Wright Mills' (1959) sense of the sociological imagination as a means of interrogating the relationship between individuals and the world, between history and biography. He saw the sociological imagination as a "capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two" (p. 7). More recently the notion of the ecological imagination has come to the fore, with ethnographies exploring the relationship between organizational practices and community and ecological sustainability (e.g., Dixon & Clifford, 2007; Taylor, 2009).

Ethnography: Constructing Tales

There are perhaps four tasks involved in becoming an ethnographer (Goodall, 2000, p. 7): learning how to do fieldwork, learning how to write, figuring out who you are as a person/fieldworker/writer, and knowing how, where, and when these all connect. The thread running through all four tasks, I believe, is reflexivity—understanding and unsettling the constructed, fictional, and ideological nature of selves, "realities" and texts (Cunliffe, 2003). Thus our ethnographic tales are not nice neat ones where everything fits (unless perhaps a conventional realist tale), but are in various ways messy texts that "bring out the experiential, interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic process at work in any ethnography" (Marcus, 2007 p. 1128). Within interpretive (impressionist) tales this may take the form of multiple stories and voices in the text, by incorporating excerpts from conversations, and presenting photographs, film, field notes, personal stories, accounts, and the aesthetic experiences of the ethnographer and/or organizational members.

Critical tales are about evading and evoking: evading any claim to truth, representation of the real, or claims of ethnographic authority, and evoking difference by juxtaposing multiple and contradictory readings to expose the fantasy of the text. Critical tales also directly address the power relations, contested discourses, and the disciplinary and hegemonic practices embedded within the site—with a focus on the fragmentation of experience and identity. Numerous rhetorical styles and textual strategies may be used to achieve this: deconstruction, irony, poetry, ethno-drama, performance ethnography, and dialogue with oneself (see Denzin, 1997; Paget, 1990; Pinch & Pinch, 1988; Richardson, 1992).

One form of tale that can cross realist, impressionist, and critical tales is the confessional tale (Van Maanen, 1988). As a first-person narrative about the ethnographer's research experience, it can be seen as autoethnography, autobiography, self-reflection or self-reflexivity, and can be used to illustrate the dramas of hardships and rapport of fieldwork in realist tales, (e.g., Karra & Phillips, 2008; Russell, 2005); as a means of exploring the relationship between self-other where the "other" might be research participants, the ethnographic site, texts, readers, or the issue under study—(e.g., Coffey, 1999; Cunliffe, 2008; Yanow, 1998); or drawing on our own experience, bodies, and emotions as a form of cultural critique (e.g., Behar, 1994; Goodall, 2005; Kondo, 1990).

But ethnography is not just figuring out what tale to tell, it is also figuring out who you are as an ethnographer, because who you are influences what you see and say—your fieldwork and textwork (see Hatch, 1996; Van Maanen, 1996). Whether you see yourself as absent or as a character in the narrative, as a co-constructor or the main storyteller, will influence not only your position in the text but also your relationship with people in the field and with your "data." We can figure this out by reading ethnographies and considering how other ethnographers position themselves.

Finally, one question that has moved to the fore is who the readers of the tale might be? The advent of corporate ethnography has led to a distinction between an ethnography of an organization and an ethnography for an organization (see Hammersley, 1992). Ethnographies of organizations are academic endeavors designed to enhance our knowledge of organizations and organizational processes, while ethnographies for organizations are for organizational purposes in which recommendations for action and change are made to organizational members. An increasing number of organizations[6] are employing ethnographers to study organizational problems and issues. Mike Agar's partly ethnographic, nonacademic tales of the field are examples of ethnography for organizations: a form of problem solving with ethnographic qualities. John Shotter's dialogic action research is a kind of ethnography with organizations because he is not offering solutions to specific problems but using a set of "resources" (social poetics) to help organizational members orient themselves to situations, problems, and other organizational members differently—a process in which they become the ethnographers and change agents.

The Tales and Their Tellers

What makes this special issue unique—and speaks to the nature of ethnography as well as the extent of the influence of John's work—is its interdisciplinarity. I do not recall a journal special issue where (to co-opt Mike Agar's introduction) an organizational theorist, a

communication theorist, a psychologist, and an anthropologist walk into a bar and find themselves telling ethnographic tales of the field … And while they tell different tales in very different ways, they have a common approach—that ethnography is not about a method of data collection, but a way of engaging with the world around us, an epistemological stance informed by a particular set of assumptions about the way the world works and how it should be studied.

John Van Maanen

Over the years, John has both "done" ethnography (e.g., 1975, 1984, 1991; Miller & Van Maanen, 1982) and written about ethnography (e.g., 1979, 1988, 1995). I began by talking about the impact of his work. Here I will focus on his paper, which is about fieldwork and textwork and what has and has not been happening in organization studies between 1988 and 2008. Back in 1988, John not only drew attention to the paradigmatic nature of the tales (as opposed to Truths) we tell, he asked us to become more conscious that we and our work are not neutral, but products of academic conventions and ideologies. He suggested that ethnography is subject to multiple interpretations and thus always open to controversy and debate, and he encouraged us to engage in "narrative ingenuity and novel interpretation" (p. 140)—to craft our work in careful, critical, imaginative, provisional, and reflexive ways.

Twenty years on, John suggests the movement has been more modest than radical, the questioning of standardized visions of culture (via structural, post-structural, and advocacy ethnographies) has led to more opportunities to do different work. However, constraints still lie in the institutional rules and gatekeeping practices permeating PhD, promotion, and publication processes: rules oriented toward conformity and tradition rather than novelty and ingenuity. Yet I think, John is quietly optimistic, for he ends by saying "ethnography remains open to a relatively artistic, improvised, and situated model of social research where the lasting tenets of research design and technical writing have yet to leave their mark."

It is up to us to take up his challenge to be adventurous.

Bud Goodall

One person who took John's challenge on within the discipline of communications is Bud Goodall, as he says, "blame John Van Maanen for me being here." If you look at his work *Casing a Promised Land* (1989), *Living the Rock n Roll Mystery* (1991), and *A Need to Know* (2006), you realize what form narrative ingenuity can take. The words "courageous," "risky," "radical," and "fascinating" come to mind. He works from a perspective he calls new ethnography, "creative narratives shaped out of a writer's personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences" (2000, p. 9). A blend between confessional and impressionist tales—but with a difference.

You get a sense of Bud's textwork from his article: an interweaving of self-reflection, cultural critique, and human and social experience. It is a style known as creative nonfiction in which the author draws from fictional, poetic, and journalistic styles of writing to create compelling stories about human experience and public issues. It is a good example of C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination. The conceptual resources and insights are so

delicately woven into the story that you do not "see" them initially, but they are there (see Goodall, 2005, 2008).

From Bud's paper, we begin to understand that for him, being a good scholar is also about being a good writer: that writing itself is a learning process and ethnography a way of engaging with social, economic, and political issues. This is not purely with the aim of recounting research tales, but also with the aim of making a difference—an example of advocacy tales embodied in his statement, "For me, there must be, in our seminars and methods courses and published research and passing on to the next generation a sense of scholarly purpose, a new urgency to engage the world and its many organizational and management challenges in new narratives." (p. XX). His tales of the future are about creating narratives that connect with a broader audience and have an impact on the world around us.

John Shotter

In his old life, John's output of academic monographs and journal articles was extraordinary, not just in terms of quantity, but mainly because he pushed the boundaries of conventional psychology. Challenging what he calls the pernicious moral effects of Cartesian ways of thinking, he has been concerned with how we live as embodied and related human beings. One of the founders of contemporary social constructionism—which he now refers to as social ecology—his body of work includes *Social Accountability and Selfhood* (1984), *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life* (1993), *Texts of Identity* (1989, with Ken Gergen), and the first book of his that I read, *Conversational Realities* (1993). Since John's "retirement" from University life, he has become more engaged in "doing things" within organizations, drawing upon his previous and continuing academic work to develop what he calls situated dialogic action research—a way of engaging with practitioners. Although John's ideas are deeply rooted in philosophy, his concern lies in portraying "what our everyday world must be like for us from within the middle of our action for us to be able to do what we do within it" (2008, pp. ix-x).

His "tale" offers a rhythmic crafting of ideas about making a difference in organizational life, a blend of philosophical and practical doings and sayings. Dialogic action research is about making connections in living conversational "dialogical" moments, moments that are singular and creative, in which people become sensitive to and begin to orient themselves differently in their surroundings. These moments are shared between ethnographer and practitioner, and so the organizational ethnographer's job is not primarily translating experience for other academics working at a distance but making connections in the moment with organizational members. John lays out the methods, social poetics, for doing this—with the aim of participating in the world in a more socially ecological way.

Mike Agar

Mike Agar is a linguistic anthropologist, who for many years has also been doing anthropology and ethnography differently to the mainstream. His ethnographies include the life of independent truckers during deregulation, the world of heroin addicts, and of the drug war (Agar, 1986, 2006). As an Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, he is still writing, talking, and "doing" organizational ethnography.[7] I first came across Mike's work over 10 years

ago when I read *Language Shock* (1994), where he argues against big C approaches to ethnography, saying that culture is about how we encounter difference and fill in the spaces between them and us—about finding the rich points in conversations—words and moments that carry cultural meanings but also the potential for misunderstandings across cultures. In *The Professional Stranger*, he elaborates, "rich points, the words or actions that signal those gaps [between cultures], are the raw material of ethnography" (1996, p. 31). And this is what his paper is about, how he—and we—can identify and work through those rich points.

Mike Agar's article connects with a number of threads in the three previous tales: John's "improvised and situated model of social research," Bud's concern for making a difference in the world, and John's focus on organizational change through practical circumstances. Mike's style of organizational ethnography comes from a "blurred genre," a mix of partly ethnographic/partly organizational, qualitative/quantitative, theory/practice, linguistic/complexity-based, explicit/tacit knowledge—a style he calls a "negotiated representation." The crux of his paper is how ethnographers translate: about how they make sense of what they are experiencing in the research site, both for themselves and others (organizational members and academics): that black box in which we somehow generate insights from the data. Mike's approach is iterative recursive abductive logic (IRA)—a process in which the ethnographer does not seek to confirm already formed ideas or models, but continually seeks out surprise, the unexpected, the discontinuous, and creates explanations for them. He uses two examples from his own work to illustrate the IRA process and how he translates his findings back to organizational members. It is a process of finding theory in practice, not about practice—a tale of an ethnographer's meaning-making in the field. His prose reflecting the blurring of personal narrative and conceptual resources.

And so . . . .

Four tale tellers—John Van Maanen, Bud Goodall, John Shotter, and Mike Agar—all influential scholars who for many years have challenged mainstream ways of thinking in their discipline and who have pushed the boundaries of our intellectual and empirical pursuits. To listen to them talking at the same "bar" is a delight. And each tale, in its own way, is about preparing to be surprised: by more stylistic forms of writing, by the tale's focus or approach to research, or by its blend of genres. As Mike Agar says:

> One of the things ethnographers must deal with is culture shock. The shock comes from the sudden immersion in the lifeways of a group different from yourself. Suddenly you do not know the rules anymore. You do not know how to interpret the stream of motions and noises that surround you. You have no idea what is expected of you. Many of the assumptions that form the bedrock of your existence are mercilessly ripped out from under you. The more you cling to them, the less you will understand about the people with whom you work (1996, p. 100).

The articles in this special issue may be an academic culture shock—methods and prose with which we are unfamiliar—but is not exploring surprise and difference why we are academics?

And so, in the style of narrative ethnography, the tale begins:

Driving down Route 66 in my Chevy . . . shades on . . . top down.

Sweating.
Shirt sticking to my back like a limpet to a rock.
Squinting in the glare of the sun.
Around me the desert shimmers, nothing real, nothing to get a fix on . . .
Feel like I'm dreaming.
My wheels leave a trail of dust that can be seen for miles—if there was anyone around to see it.
Just cactus, sage brush, mesas rising from the seemingly shifting sand and eagles soaring in the distance.
Mid afternoon . . .
A small square adobe building springs out of nowhere like a jackrabbit chased by a rattler shooting out of its burrow.
Neon sign flashes—Lil's Bar.
Park the Chevy, ditch the gum, hitch up my pants and walk in.
Momentarily blinded in the darkness.
Four guys in the corner playing poker,
Low murmuring.
Toss a beer
Walk over . . .

Notes

1. See 2008 *ORM* special issue on Determining Quality in Qualitative Research, 11, 3.

2. A study of ''delinquent'' and ''maladjusted'' women documentary material. See http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Thomas/Thomas_1923/Thomas_1923_toc.html for the text.

3. See Shotter's paper in this issue for further explanation.

4. See Brewer, (2000); Denzin, (1997); Gobo, (2008); Kostera, (2007); and Neyland, (2008) for examples and further explication.

5. See also Leidner's (1993) account of routinization in McDonald's.

6. The Xerox Palo-Alto Research Center (PARC), Intel, IBM, Microsoft.

7. See his homepage http://www.ethnoworks.com for information and links to his work.

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