Lies from the field: Ethical issues in organizational ethnography
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 introduction

Idealized visions of how professionals should work are difficult to reconcile with ethical compromises that are made in practice. In an earlier paper, Fine identified ten moral dilemmas in ethnographic field methods that arise from an inability to comply with ideals (1993). The actions of organizational ethnographers and, as important, how they report those actions, are constrained by their complex working conditions, the demands of academic standards, and accepted textual practices. As a result, presentations of fieldwork in organizational ethnographies may be varnished, and will lead to incomplete accounts of the practical moral dilemmas that are involved in, and perhaps unique to, completing an organizational ethnography. This chapter depicts some of these covert ethical dilemmas and ‘lies’ of fieldwork, and offers examples of how they occur as predictable difficulties when conducting organizational ethnography.

Every job has techniques for doing things – standard operating procedures – that practitioners will avoid exposing to outsiders. Life in an operating room, in a kitchen, in a factory or in a police station is not always the stuff of heroic public images. As insiders know, the production of good things is not pretty. Workers are caught in a web of demands that compel them to deviate from formal and idealistic rules. Yet for public consumption, practitioners must present glossy versions of how they work. These illusions are essential for occupational survival. When the work is messy, workers have to clean up well.

Depictions of how organizational ethnographies are conducted are similarly varnished. They may omit the problematic details of how fieldworkers gathered their information. Such antiseptic accounts cost readers and practitioners, offering an incomplete account of the practical ethical dilemmas that are involved in completing an organizational ethnography. There are layers of gatekeepers, greater numbers of people to interact with and all sorts of conflicting responses from organizational stakeholders. Our goal is to expose the nuts and bolts of organizational ethnography.

We focus on how ethical dilemmas in organizational ethnographies can reveal fieldwork, as practised, in a less flattering but more realistic light. Organizational ethnographers make tough choices and confront moral dilemmas. The situations
in which they work often veil those choices and dilemmas. More than many informal settings, organizations are explicitly hierarchical and political, and the ethnographer must confront the power gradients of organization life. Yet, as in other settings, much fieldwork is hidden and backstage. Analysis *in situ* is private, field notes are rarely available for secondary analysis, and much ethnographic writing is accepted on faith. We comfort ourselves that good and sufficient ethical rationales exist for this secrecy. Fieldworkers tell themselves that they must maintain confidences and their own autonomy. Yet this space also creates opportunities for deception.

In fashioning halos to preserve their professional reputations, practitioners also may deceive themselves. Illusions about work can grow, lay down roots, and become taken for granted. Organizational ethnographers would benefit from greater self-awareness. They should recognize explicitly that they are making choices that result in their behaving differently from how they would like the public to assume that they behave.

Idealism must be balanced against a reality that fieldworkers in organizational settings engage in exercises of unvarnished opportunism. To collect a thrilling story, we become manipulative suitors, seducing organizations and individuals into sharing information. We potentially harm our organizational hosts by taking time, focus and energy from their pursuits to suit our own purposes. We also flatter to develop a rapport to acquire secrets and whisper sweet nothings to ferret out the truth when we feel deceived. Despite this emotion work, our published tales of our fieldwork may account for our activities in a more clinical, orderly, and principled way than had actually occurred.

Although researchers are fundamentally honest, as lawyers, clergymen, politicians, and car dealers are fundamentally honest, everyone’s goal is to permit life to run tolerably smoothly – to engage in impression management, preserving reputations in local domains. The actions of organizational ethnographers, and how they report their actions, are constrained by their working conditions, the demands of academic standards, and accepted discursive practices.

The moral dilemmas in ethnography that Fine (1993) labelled as the ‘ten lies’ of ethnography, constitute illusions about work that practitioners offer for public consumption, based on partial truths or self-deceptions. We revisit those ten lies: accounts of the kindly ethnographer, the friendly ethnographer, the honest ethnographer, the precise ethnographer, the observant ethnographer, the unobtrusive ethnographer, the candid ethnographer, the chaste ethnographer, the fair ethnographer, and the literary ethnographer, connecting them to organizational ethnography.

These ten lies represent the common images that ethical and competent field researchers would wish to embody through their reputations. Some represent challenges to the ‘classic virtues’ of ethnographers. These virtues – sympathy, openness, and honour – have been challenged by postmodern researchers, but they remain touchstones of how a ‘true’ ethnographer should treat informants. These ‘classic virtues’ represent the standards of observational morality, grounded in science and the Western ethical tradition.
A second set of issues lies in challenges to 'technical skills'. When we teach students to perform the mechanics of ethnography, we are adamant that they must be precise, observant, and passive. How could we claim that our work should not be precise and observant or that we should direct the scene? These challenges are grounded in the inevitable limits of competence. Other lies are tied to discursive practices, ways of preserving the 'ethnographic self', and refer to the conventions which ethnographers use to present themselves to their colleagues as morally upstanding and trustworthy.

The classic methodological issues of informed consent, avoiding harm, and even-handedness are pressing ethical concerns at the inception of all research. To address those issues, fieldworkers must provide assurances about their intentions to gain organizational access and meet standards of professional practice. Those promises can sometimes be easier to make than keep.

The fieldworker is supposed to access a research site without compromising editorial freedom (even while agreeing to the conditions for entry); disclose their research goals fully (even though doing so may lead to them being rejected); reassure readers that the site fits the project's aims (even though the site may not be ideal); and argue that the research will not harm the organization (even when the findings may be detrimental).

Ethnographers are more often beggars than choosers. Often we don’t contact the perfect organization, set an appointment with a top executive who can provide access, and then commence a trouble-free ethnographic expedition. Instead, we may have to rely on a convenience sample because that chosen site is what is available. Sometimes we may rely on friends, family or acquaintances to secure access (Buchanan et al., 1988). Morrill (1995) gained initial entry to an organization depicted in *The Executive Way* by jogging with a manager. Ethnographers do not disqualify themselves from using their networks in establishing access; using connections can be valuable. Yet, as in other careers, admitting to relying on friends for one’s professional success is slightly shameful.

We also may apply a misdirection in claiming one research goal while pursuing another. Consider the difficulty Robert Jackall had ‘breaking in’ when starting his research for *Moral Mazes*:

Jackall ran into trouble starting his research because thirty-six corporations had flatly turned down his request to study ethics on their premises ... Eventually, he found his way into a chemical company that encouraged him to study the effect of chlorofluorocarbon regulation on corporate practices. (Allen, 1997: 10)

After revealing some unsavoury examples of *in situ* ethics:

Jackall received phone calls from managers deep within the company (and other companies) congratulating him for his acuity, but the top dogs demanded to know why he had
been allowed on the premises. 'All the managers had to do was pull my proposal out of the file and say, "We thought he was here to study chlorofluorocarbon regulation" ', explains Jackall, adding that what looks like deception can sometimes be part of an elaborate linguistic code in which no one is really fooled and nearly everyone is satisfied – not least because there is always someone else to blame for the researcher's unflattering revelations. (Allen, 1997: 10–11)

Ethnographers are supposed to be fond of their respondents, but this is not inevitable. Sometimes we will research unpleasant groups and organizations – and we will choose to do so with malice aforethought, all the while camouflaging our disdain. Examining disparaged groups – groups that one begins the research expecting to dislike – occurs in the social sciences (e.g. Peshkin, 1986), although not frequently. An illusion of sympathy can help the research process move forward but it is deceptive.

When an ethnographer portrays more sympathy than he or she really has, such a stance presupposes limited informed consent in that what is being informed is less than what the subjects would wish to know in hindsight. It is also less than what the researcher recognizes that s/he should report.

In research on unsympathetic organizations, we sometimes neglect the standard ethnographic injunction to understand the world sympathetically through the informant’s eyes (Wax, 1980: 278). We dehumanize our informants, placing them outside our moral community. The researcher appears to be a kindly soul, but turns out to be a ‘fink’ (Goffman, 1989: 125), an undercover agent operating against the interests of the observed group (Johnson, 1975). Even though this approach is justified in terms of its overall benefit, it is based on a lie – a lack of kindly intentions, a secret hidden from the start.

Most, if not all, ethnographers will appeal to their subjects by suggesting that they are intensely sympathetic and kind chroniclers. Carolyn Ellis (1986) presented herself deceptively in researching Fisher Folk, an ethnography of coastal fishing communities on the Chesapeake Bay. Ellis wrote disparagingly about this community, but never warned her respondents that she was conducting in-depth research, even while she befriended many members of the community. In the words of one embittered woman, ‘I thought she was nice … but she turned out to be a liar’ (Allen, 1997: 2). Coming across as kind, interested and sympathetic helps to gain access, but at a price when the masquerade ends. The inverse can also occur. When studying an organization to which social scientists are sympathetic, peers can apply pressure to be more kind than the data warrant.

The most aggressive strategy in organizational ethnography for gaining access is not to reveal that one is conducting research. Here the organization lacks informed consent. A long and contentious debate still exists over employing covert identities to access research sites. Critics believe that disguised observation
makes the researcher an espionage agent, reflecting a lack of concern with the ‘right’ of informants not to be deceived, particularly when the beneficiary is the deceptive researcher. Supporters, such as Judith Rollins (1987; see Reynolds, 1982), would suggest that hidden research does little harm and may be important in studying elites. Although organizational ethnographers are not undercover journalists or ex-employees with axes to grind, one might wonder what organizational secrets would remain unknown had someone not been hidden in order to expose them. Sometimes only insiders will have a privileged enough position to learn valuable information about how an organization works, such as Melville Dalton (1959) had in Men Who Manage. That strategic positioning may be unavailable to fieldworkers who are honest about their true purpose.

Some ethnographers have called for an investigative model of conducting ethnography, in which deception is justified because informants in organizations will dissemble rather than reveal discrediting truths (Douglas, 1976; Shulman, 1994). Some organizational ethnographers are willing to contravene professionally pleasing ethnographic techniques to avoid being tricked. Informed consent, harmlessness, and empathy are ethical issues that are intertwined with the idealized virtues of a kindly ethnographer.

the ‘friendly’ ethnographer

Many organizations and groups operate in private spaces. If management grants access, workers in organizations may be directed to speak with or tolerate an observer. However, gaining access is necessary but insufficient. The organizational ethnographer must cultivate a rapport by appearing to be friendly and honest. Once organizational ethnographers join a group or organization, they then engage in impression management to sustain that rapport.

Successful emotional labour and play-acting help earn the confidences of informants. We must be friendly, patient and not too explicit about our intentions. We must act interested when bored and encourage informants to provide richer details. We must nod our heads with polite eyes but bored ears at verbose informants and wait for chances to redirect the conversation.

The friendly ethnographer hides their frustration. Who are these people to not allow us to observe them as we please? They may avoid returning phone calls or emails, say no to requests, renege on their promises, and in general be obstructive. Organizational ethnography does not happen on an even playing field. Subservience and deference may be necessary. The organizational ethnographer lacks control, held captive to bureaucracy, the rhythms of work and the fears of workers. Some informants, knowing they have the power to say no, can be especially irksome and require patronization. While in print most fieldworkers will acknowledge their gratitude and debt to all informants, they may silently curse some for having been hindrances.

Ethnographers feel driven to like everyone and are dismayed if some on the scene greet their friendly overtures with hostility. This spurning is not
necessarily idiosyncratic, but can arise from the conditions of research, although it has been treated as an embarrassment to be hidden from the reader’s prying eyes. We can confess to several instances in which bad feeling, developed between our subjects and ourselves. Fine described one instance in the methodological appendix to his study of Little League baseball, in *With the boys: Preadolescent culture and Little League baseball* (1987), but he did not reveal this dislike within the main text itself or in articles, seemingly suggesting that while such dislike was relevant methodologically, it was not relevant substantively.

One coach felt that Fine was collaborating with his rivals in the league, and refused to permit him to collect questionnaires from the boys on his team. During the season, he attempted acts of humiliation, for instance, not accepting a line-up card that another coach had asked Fine to deliver. Fine took pleasure in writing about this man and his son, although he was ‘ethical’ in never mentioning his name and excluding identifying features. Those with access to ‘the media’ have power that others cannot match. Our structural position as reporters makes us gatekeepers. Taunt us if you dare.

Of course researchers should not dislike anyone. Yet, most will discover that they are incompatible with some. We do not like everyone that we meet – certainly not everyone that we meet in workplaces, particularly when goals and motivations conflict. In reality, we will find individuals with whom we do not become close, but with whom we can maintain cordial, if distant, relationships when we do not have conflicting goals. Many relations are ‘provisionally friendly’, particularly in organizations where people may be required to interact with one another. Then there are some with whom we feel acutely uncomfortable and from whom we maintain a distance. Even in ethnographic research we can create elaborate rationales to keep our distance. Finally, we will honour those sacred few of whom we can say with confidence that we actively dislike.

Shulman (1994) abhorred the private detective who enjoyed explaining how he could use his martial arts training to kill people instantly. The other customers at a diner shot strange looks at the table when hearing this man describe how his martial arts skills taught him to use a toothpick ‘like a fucking spear through your brain’. Many ethnographers uncover such persons – targets of distaste. Hopefully not too many or this style of research, which depends on pleasantries, would be impossible. Hated individuals are found within our ethnographic worlds, but in our narrative representation of those worlds, they will vanish. We will crop them from the picture. The illusion is that we have managed our affairs sweetly and well. We wish to present ourselves as likable, and also we know that most researchers outside of the ‘confessional’ mode (Johnson, 1975; Van Maanen, 1988) see any discussion of personal animosities as irrelevant or discrediting.

An ethnographer is not necessarily an official member of the team, but that does not mean that one forgoes an implicit agreement with or sympathy to local norms. An investigator told Shulman of trading sex for pay when an attractive female client lacked money but needed his help. Even if this claim
were true, and not male braggadocio, Shulman felt such compensation schemes were rare and omitted this detective's account from publication. His informant described the kinds of female figures he preferred for the 'best screws'. If informants are willing to talk, ethnographers are ready to encourage them to learn more and build rapport. If informants talk about sexual activities, prowess and objects of desire, we listen. Organizational ethnography requires extending an exquisite tolerance towards informants. Casual interaction requires participating in topics and activities that are part of the organizational culture's norms, like gossiping and going for a drink. Though ethnographers are supposed to be flies on the wall, they will get dragged into the action. Social participation is a source of affiliation that sustains rapport.

Ethnographers are expected to be straightforward about their reasons for being present. The more directive ethnographers are in encouraging informants to talk, the more of a problem they will face in either leading an informant or being led. Many would claim that research subjects have a right to know the ethnographer's goals. This sentiment sounds proper and has been institutionalized through a maze of governmental and academic regulations. However, such advice is contrary to the writings of classic ethnographers (and other methodologists) who are concerned about 'reactivity'. Two valued goals therefore conflict.

Informed consent is complicated by an ethnographic commonplace, gleaned from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory*, that good ethnographers do not know what they are looking for until they have found it: theory is grounded in empirical inspiration. This model suggests that there is a truth here that we must be careful not to pollute. Not only are we unsure of the effects of explaining our plans, but we may not know what we are searching for until well into the research project. Qualitative researchers are often asked to complete an Institutional Review Board form or a grant application that requests the study's hypotheses. Often the only honest response is that we are studying You.

The expanded version of explaining that we are studying you is to say, with vague truth, that we are interested in the problems faced by people in your organization and position, what you do, and how you think. In many research settings, this is satisfactory, particularly when groups feel underappreciated. This explanation proved admirably suited to Fine's (1996, 1998) research with professional cooks and amateur mycologists, both of whom felt that the public did not appreciate them: the descriptive ploy seduces many an informant.

How much and what kinds of explanations we provide during fieldwork in organizations are choices that we make from a position of power and information control. Borrowing a metaphor from the espionage community, Fine distinguishes three strategies of information control: Deep Cover, Shallow Cover, and Explicit Cover (Fine, 1980). In the first of these, Deep Cover, the researcher does not announce his/her research role. Rather, the researcher participates in the group as a full member. Operating under Explicit Cover, the researcher makes as complete an announcement of the goals and hypotheses of the research as possible, not worrying if this explanation will
affect behaviour. The third technique, Shallow Cover, finds a middle ground. The ethnographer announces the research intent, but is vague about the goals. These divisions, and the grey areas between them, remind us forcefully that the line between being ‘informed’ and ‘uninformed’ is uncertain (Thorne, 1980: 287). All research is secret in some ways, since subjects can never know everything (Roth, 1962: 283).

By ‘not being honest’, we do not mean that ethnographers fib, although they might, but rather that ethnographers shade what they know to increase the likelihood of acceptance: placing our ease before that of our informants. Throughout life we will mislead others for goals that appear worthy – or at least convenient. Why should honesty in practice, as opposed to in theory, be seen as virtuous, particularly in the absence of harm?

We assume that in ethnographic texts there exists a firm correspondence between what is said to have occurred, and what ‘actually’ happened. We believe that little of importance was missed – at least when the ethnographer was present. But suppose that this comforting belief is inaccurate. The ethnographer may not have been sufficiently observant. The ethnographic picture will always lack detailed shading, and sometimes these absences are relevant in that other ethnographers might have reached sharply different conclusions by highlighting other material.

This criticism seemingly targets ‘bad ethnography’. Science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon allegedly noted in response to claims that most science fiction is of poor quality, ‘90 per cent of science fiction is crap, but then 90 per cent of everything is crap’. Following Sturgeon’s Law, 90 per cent of all ethnography is crap. While we should dispute the numbers and be wary of transforming quality into a dichotomous variable of ‘crap/not crap’, the point remains. However, we must transcend this chill assertion of scholarly incompetence and recognize that we lack the ability to be totally aware. We mishear, we do not recognize what we see, and we may be poorly positioned to recognize happenings around us.

Everything is capable of multiple interpretations and misunderstandings. Some things we do not see because we are not trained or knowledgeable. Paul Stoller’s rich (1989) ethnography of the Songhay of Niger, *The taste of ethnographic things*, reminds us that we rely on our visual and auditory senses, to the neglect of touch, smell, and taste. We are not observant: the very skill on which competent participant observation is supposedly – and actually – based.

In researching organizations we may lack a wide-ranging familiarity and experience with local activities. In *From hire to liar*, Shulman (2007) had to learn the complex deceptions that are particular to specific lines of work. For instance, market researchers can deceive clients by fudging sampling procedures, and software programmers can deceive by writing bugs into their
programs that they then are paid to fix. A naive observer must learn how to uncover examples of deception that are transparent only to those who know what to look for.

A further cause of being unobservant results from personal, temporal, and situational pressures. Ethnography can be stressful even in the best circumstances. Hours of observations are followed by hours of composing field notes. When Fine was conducting research with fantasy role-playing gamers – those who played *Dungeons & Dragons* – he would spend the lengthening hours from seven in the evening until four the following morning with these young men. It would have required a very dramatic event to capture his attention in the wee small hours of a long night. For much of the time he was simply present, barely monitoring what transpired among these gamers. When he drank alcohol or puffed marijuana with informants his powers of concentration were altered. When he had a vexing day at the university or a dispute with his wife, his concentration diminished. Researchers who bring their children into the field must also cope with multiple distractions (Cassell, 1987). How could it be otherwise? As we know from straining to decipher scribbled field notes, sometimes we simply do not type all of the things we have noted or, worse, cannot read our own handwriting. Some ethnographers, in fact, do not write field notes, instead trusting their memory. One claims, memorably, 'I am a fieldnote!' (Jackson, 1990: 21).

What is depicted in the ethnography is not the whole picture. The pace of watching multiple activities, and the limitations of physical endurance, concentration and experience, make missing information inevitable. Obviously for reasons of space some events are excluded, but much is excluded because it passed right under our nose and through our ears, and because our hands were too tired.

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**the precision of organizational ethnography**

A dearly held claim is that field notes are data and reflect what 'really' happened. We trust that quotation marks reveal words that have been truly spoken. This is often an illusion, a lie, and a deception. We engage in the inverse of plagiarism, giving credit to those undeserving, at least not for those precise words. To recall the exact words of a conversation, especially if one is not trained in shorthand (and not even then, as stenographers and court reporters can attest), is impossible. This is particularly applicable with those who maintain the illusion of 'active' or 'complete membership' (Adler and Adler, 1987) by not taking notes within the limits of the public situation. We bolster an illusion of omniscience by recreating a scene with attendant bits of talk, skating on ever-thinner ice.

We become playwrights, reconstructing a scene for the pleasure of readers, depicting ongoing events in our minds and inscribing those scenes (Bartlett, 1932): turning near-fiction into near-fact. We claim that the scene really happened, but the scene didn't happen precisely in the form we proclaim.
We are like popular biographers who in order to make a scene compelling and 'real' create dialogue, and in the process we support our own arguments. The dialogue is not accurate in that an attestation that these 'precise' words were said is futile. One would need a gifted, encyclopedic ear: an ear never seen. When conscientiously compiled, the quotations are both true and false. They are true in that with conscientious researchers they represent something 'along the lines' of what was said – transformed into our own words that we place in a methodologically unsanitary way into the mouths of others. We make our informants sound like we think they should sound, given our interpretations of who they 'really' are (Atkinson, 1992: 26–7).

The illusion of verisimilitude is crucial for qualitative research. We embrace our method's rich precision. The belief that this is 'real life', and not fiction or guesswork, provides a charter for ethnography. This depiction of reality gives ethnography an advantage over survey research and experimentation, but it is a belief that is at best only approximately true. In organizational settings tumult makes ethnography complex.

the passive but intervening ethnographer

Most textbooks on qualitative research emphasize that an observer should avoid influencing the scene (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Underlying this attitude is the principle that the researcher should not become a 'participant' observer. After all, what would we learn if researchers burst into a social scene and took charge, pushing events in directions in which they would not otherwise have gone? While this would still be a social environment, it might not be the environment one had planned to examine. Too great an involvement in a social scene can transform ethnography into a field experiment.

Yet, recognizing that the researcher should not direct a scene, we might wonder whether active observers do not and should not have influence. Ultimately the methodological goal is to become a full member of a scene: to 'settle down and forget about being a sociologist' (Goffman, 1989: 129). How is this possible when one is just an observant piece of furniture? While we should avoid putting too great a spin on a setting, we will add ourselves to the mix, and attempt to understand how we feel as participants.

The degree to which one is an active member of an organization affects the extent to which this sympathetic understanding is possible, and this is a function of one's social location: Fine was more involved in being a fantasy role-play gamer and mushroom collector than as a Little League baseball player, high school debater, or a professional cook. Kleinman (1991), describing her research on a holistic health centre, bids us recognize that our emotions directly influence what we see, how we feel towards others, and the strategic choices that we make in our ethnographies. We can never be a cipher.
To do no harm is a prime injunction for all ethnographers. Yet we do leave tracks. Ethnographers are sometimes motivated to 'give voice' to groups and organizations as a form of social justice advocacy. They also may expose information that is harmful to an organization and that informants vociferously oppose exposing. John Braithwaite's study of corporate crime in the pharmaceutical industry was delayed for two years by lawyers who represented managers that Braithwaite had interviewed, arguing that Braithwaite lied about them. Braithwaite (1985) advocates that all interviewers studying corporate crime use two interviewers and/or a tape recorder to prevent managers from arguing that the ethnographer fabricated their comments.

In field notes published in *Kitchens: The culture of restaurant work*, Fine notes 'the workers trust that I will place myself on their side as a true, if limited, member of their group, embracing their underside' (Fine, 1996: 234). This is a mild example of role conflict, whereby ethnographers participate in light deviance with workers, helping to establish a rapport. Does the ethnographer have an obligation to management gatekeepers to report the deviance that management opposes? The ethnographer usually asserts that he or she will not be an undercover operative for management, but that does not necessarily mean that the ethnographer must participate in activities that management deems improper. Yet, it is doubtful that kitchen staff would have accepted Fine so warmly had he been unwilling to participate in and/or overlook this slight malfeasance, like taking food home or receiving free beer.

The ethnographer also has an undeclared relationship with those clients that the organization serves, who may be unaware that an ethnographer helped prepare the meal that they ate or that the advocate helping them is also studying them. The client is an unwitting participant in the research. Role-conflict occurs when ethnographers do not tell organizational clients that they are observing. When studying private detective agencies, Shulman was once mistaken for an investigator. He was with an investigator conducting surveillance on a person suspected of submitting a fraudulent worker's compensation claim. As they watched the suspect's home, the investigator decided to confront the suspect. The investigator requested that David say nothing. They approached this man's door to be greeted by a frail-looking man who looked to be in his late fifties and who walked with a limp. The investigator identified himself. The man asked why two investigators were there to hassle and intimidate him. Did the suspect have a right to know that Shulman was not an investigator?

A conflict exists between disclosing one's research identity to outsiders and being deceptive. How far does informed consent stretch? Does it only pertain to the researched group or to all those people who the organization and the observer affect? Shulman did not lie to his host organization, but deceived others, by omission, that the organization worked with, such as the organization's targets and, in other instances, clients. This deception is secondary, while lying to the organization itself is a primary deception.
writing organizational ethnography:
how candid should one be?

Ethnographers differ little from Erving Goffman’s social actors; they rely upon impression management. Although Goffman (1989: 128) proposes that a good ethnographer must willingly look like a ‘horse’s ass’, this is easier said than done. No one wishes to look bad, and self-conscious ethnographers censor much information. Many researchers adopt a fly-on-the-wall model – ethnography without an ethnographer: the fully unobtrusive ethnographer, as described above. Indeed, much journalism operates on this claim, not just of objectivity, but also on the more radical belief that, in Edward R. Murrow’s terms, You are there. This illusion can be recognized for what it is when the writer relies on the passive voice, indicating that someone ‘was asked’, eliding the reality that the asker was the writer.

The question ultimately becomes who is the ‘who’ in the text? How many imperfections will one report? The issue of what and how much to report does not have any eternal answers. Answers are always grounded in choices, wherein the cynic can claim, as we do here, that the researcher is either not being candid or, on the other hand, is over-glorifying the self in a report that none but one’s relatives might voluntarily read.

The choice is not entirely theoretical. We cannot disentangle the personal demands of presentation of self – how one will appear to others – from the question of what one should do ‘in the name of science’. Being candid is a situated choice, forever linked to how the candour might affect one’s scholarly reputation. We have our careers to think of, and issues of honesty and ethics must be analysed within this personal nexus (Barnes, 1979: 179). Recent attempts to move oneself into the centre of ethnography can no more escape the dilemmas of candour than can attempts to pretend that one wasn’t present. Every other technique of ethnographic description demands the same bracketing of candour as does the claim of the absent ethnographer. The sour reality is that the presentation of one’s role is invariably an exercise in tact. The reader always looks over the writer’s shoulder.

the chaste ethnographer

As an example of ‘candour’, one dirty little secret of ethnography, so secret and so dirty that it is hard to know how much credence to give it, surrounds saucy tales of lurid assignations, couplings, and trysts between ethnographers and those they ‘observe’. The closest that we usually come to this in the published record is the inverse: cases in which male subjects harassed female ethnographers (for example, Conaway, 1986; Easterday, Papademas, Schorr, and Valentine, 1977; Hunt, 1984; Wax, 1979). These noxious and brazen attempts at sexual acquaintanceship are part of the territory in a sexist and sexual world. Why should the female ethnographer be treated differently
from any other female? One wonders about male ethnographers and their female informants. Are academics more moral than other professions?

Erich Goode's (1999; 2002) disclosures about sleeping with several of his respondents during different research projects opened the door to a deeper consideration of the ethics and impact of sexual relations by fieldworkers. Goode's sexual activities caused a stir but also led to an exploration of this often omitted and sanitized subject. Katherine Irwin (2006) recently wrote about her experience in marrying a key informant whom she met while observing a tattoo parlour. The relationship crossed many of the boundaries of research relations. How the fieldwork is presented to readers becomes more salient because of the marital relationship. Irwin had to introduce her informant to colleagues as a 'husband', a startling departure from the typical compartmentalization of subject and researcher.

Just as long-term relationships arise, so too do brief encounters – equally passionate, if limited in time and space. Humans are attracted to each other in all domains. They look, leer, flirt, and fantasize. The written record inscribes little of this rough and hot humanity. Of course, ethnographers value and demand their privacy. This desire is surely understandable and from the ethnographer's perspective defensible. Sexual contact stigmatizes the writer – particularly female writers (Whitehead and Price, 1986: 302). We are to create social science, not porn. Malinowski's (1967) diaries were only published posthumously and one rare book about a female anthropologist and her relations with a male informant appears under a pseudonym (Cesara, 1982: 55–6). The taboo on including these data may mislead naive readers about the emotional and personal qualities of this methodology. The question is whether we can preserve our privacy while we reveal the impact and relevance of our private and public behaviour.

__________ the fair ethnographer ____________

Is fairness ever possible? The label 'fair' can consist of two alternative meanings: objectivity and balance. Each is problematic, and each is far from universal in qualitative research narratives. Some would urge that they should not even be goals.

Qualitative researchers need not be warned about the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of claiming objectivity. Objectivity is an illusion – an illusion snuggling in the comforting blanket of positivism – that the world is ultimately knowable and secure. Alas, the world is always known from a perspective, even though we might agree that frequently these perspectives do not vary dramatically. An ethnographic movement, enshrining subjectivity and originating in anthropology in the writings of James Clifford and his colleagues, has steadily spread into other arenas of ethnographic work – including education and sociology (Atkinson, 1992; Gubrium, 1988). Few ethnographers accept a single objective reality, but in realist ethnographies
such a doubt was not explicitly stated. The illusion was quite the reverse.

Fine’s study of Little League baseball masquerades as informing the outsider about the ‘real facts’ of this hidden social world, without being self-conscious about his role (except in the appendix). He demands trust, even while his theories of child rearing and his own fitful and unsuccessful experiences as a young athlete are discretely ignored. Fine presented himself as an honest broker with nothing to hide and with everything to share, parsing the facts about this organizational form. This claim bolstered his professional reputation, while ignoring the romanticism of a sitcom suburban life that he never shared.

Ignoring the motives and themes of researchers in interpreting ‘reality’, accepting an image of fairness in the name of objectivity is misguided. However, excising such a claim does not solve the problem. The response, embracing subjectivity, is equally problematic. The reality of occupational backstages is that values inevitably conflict. By admitting one’s perspective or by describing the world in terms of ideology and narrative, we wear a mask of openness without doing justice to all the ways in which a setting might be understood. We do not present the diversity of worldviews, because we are an interested party whose definitions of the scene are distorted by what we can see, and by our unwillingness to admit that our informants believe the world is objective. This cannot be avoided, but we should admit the paradox. As Margery Wolf (1992) demonstrates in A thrice told tale, the same set of events can be understood quite differently through separate discursive practices.

Charles Bosk (2003) recently made a startling admission in his revised methodological appendix for the second edition of Forgive and remember, his ethnographic study of medical errors in surgical training. Bosk admitted changing the gender of a surgical trainee from female to male to protect her identity. He offers a mea culpa that his omission of the gender of this informant, though done to protect her identity, meant that he covered up gender discrimination and social control. To know that the medical resident was a woman would have clarified that his depiction of this person as irrational partly reflected an atmosphere of gender discrimination at the hospital. That interpretation is not available to readers of the first edition of Forgive and remember, because the irrational person appears to be a male being judged by other men, not a sole female, who was judged as irrational by male surgical attending physicians. Bosk embraced the ethic of anonymity but was not fair when he did not tell readers a critical detail that affected their ability to understand the gendered environment of surgical training.

This issue of fairness becomes particularly salient for ethnographers engaged in policy-relevant or applied research: a branch of qualitative public sociology that expanded in the 1980s (Estes and Edmonds, 1981; Loseke, 1989). The classic instance of ‘motivated ethnography’ is Kai Erikson’s (1976; see Glazer, 1982: 62) Everything in its path, an ethnographic examination of the aftermath of a dam collapse in the Buffalo Creek area of West Virginia. Erikson was hired to collect data for a law firm that was suing the mining
company for negligence. We do not suggest that Erikson was dishonest, but his perspective channelled the data that he collected (and couldn’t collect) and shaped his interpretations.

However, policy issues need not be central to the research for the selection and self-censorship of data to be an issue. Data are never presented in full, and choices are inevitable. In protecting people, organizations, and scenes we shade some truths, ignore others, and create fictive personages to take the pressure off real ones (Adler and Adler, 1993; Warren, 1980). A colleague once informed Fine that he shaved data that might harm the public perception of the ethnic group with which he was in sympathy, feeling that they had enough trouble without having to confront his truths. Car salesmen, clergymen, politicians, and ethnographers massage the realities they share with their audiences.

Participant observation may become participant intervention. In finding a problem, we wish to fix it. Identifying with our informants we take their side (Barnes, 1979: 171): to protect them from harm and make everything right. As a result, qualitative evaluation research, like all evaluation research, is contaminated by the perspective of the researcher and by the emotions that arise in the field.

Ethnographers do not wish to be wrong. We develop an expertise in a particular organizational arena, hoping we are not misled or gullible. Objectivity is a strategy that defends against insecure fears of incompetence and carelessness. Naivety can be camouflage. In consequence we may emphasize those claims of which we feel most confident and that appear most impregnable to criticism. We hope that objectivity shields us from being declared wrong and that balance hides that we depended more on some informants than others to buttress our claims.

——— writing the literary ethnography ————

Ethnography is nothing until inscribed: experience transformed into text. The idiosyncratic skills of the ethnographer are always evident, nowhere more so than in the literary production of ethnography. Each text attempts to fit a world into a genre (Atkinson, 1992: 29-37), and make the account seem a competent version of the kind of thing that this genre should entail. This is at the heart of the textual practices of the qualitative researcher.

Inscription is dangerous for all writers (Fine, 1988; Fine and Kleinman, 1986) – for those who are ‘bad’ and those who are ‘good’. For the bad writers, the problem is in keeping the interest of readers, assuming that one can get published. These writers must ensure that the writing is not so muddled that their intention or the reader gets lost (Richardson, 1990). Bad writing, assuming we can define it, is a simple problem. Teaching social scientists to write, while not easy, is something that we know how to do.

But what about writers who are not burdened by literary incompetence? Many writers write well, but in a language that is not easily translatable by
those outside of the community. Typically associated with postmodernists and some radical theorists, they may express themselves fluently, but not enough of their readers can acquire a ready sense of what words mean in context. These authors belong to a different universe of discourse from their audience.

Other writers may write so well in conventional terms that the reader is more entranced by the writing than by the substance. The writing can hide a lack of evidence, as sometimes happens in quasi-popular works (Becker, 1986). Ethnographers must be willing to share the messiness of their observations without tidying them up excessively. This is a methodology that depends on the presentation of the lives-in-full of an organization and its workers. Those who write too well and share too little do a disservice to readers.

In addition, ethnography can feature hidden co-authors that have helped to craft the literary quality of the work. Reviewers, editors and friendly peers can police problematic prose. Much of this editing is unannounced, separating the polished ethnographic product from its humble origin in fieldnotes. The finished product may appear to be a personal expression, but several sets of eyes and editors have made the words sparkle more than they would have done otherwise. Each ethnography tells a tale of multiple sites – the field site and the sites of the interventions of colleagues, mentors, reviewers and publishers.

\[ \text{the lies of organizational ethnography} \]

All trades develop a body of conceits that they hope to hide from those outside the boundaries of their domain and so it is with ethnographers of organizations. We do not denigrate our common enterprise, but we must not be blind to our limits. Let us open our conceits to our readers and ourselves. Knowing oneself, one can improve but, more significantly, the limits of the art are part of the data. Some lies are more crucial than others in that one can hope to be reasonably observant and precise, whereas protecting one’s self from harsh critique is central to one’s professional standing.

Workers must learn to manage the informal and formal demands that confront them. Their initial naivety can be cured. Should it remain uncured, it will impede their professional progress. Similarly, an organizational ethnographer must conquer two planes: those demands inherent to studying an organization and the idealized professional expectations of ethnographic practice. Reconciling these produces practical moral dilemmas that sometimes mean that an organizational ethnographer will avoid full informed consent, engage in deceptive impression management, and exclude information in published material. Organizational ethnography may require a Faustian bargain, but hopefully a benevolent one. Yet the nature of ethnographic practice is that naivety often loses out to the benefits of being streetwise.

For the most part the lies of organizational ethnography are not lies that we can choose to avoid; the reality is that they are part of the methodology by which we prepare reality for presentation. Ethnography is ultimately
about transformation. We take idiosyncratic behaviours, events with numerous causes, which may – God forbid! – be random (or at least inexplicable), and we package them as an understanding of an organization. We contextualize events in a social system, within a web of meaning, and then name a cause, excluding other patterns or causes. Transformation is about hiding, about magic, about change. This is the task that we face and the reality that we must embrace. Ethnographers cannot help but to lie, but through lying we also present truths about organizations that escape those who are not so bold.

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1 This has been a particularly salient issue in social movement research, in which there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ social movements, often studied differently. Civil rights groups, gay rights movements, and pro-choice lobbies are treated quite differently and examined more often than groups that are identified as racist, homophobic, and anti-choice.

__________references___________________________________________


