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Introduction

This first sensibility sets out some of the basics that ethnographers frequently take into account prior to entering the field. Like each of the sensibilities in this book, it does not set out a single set of instructions to follow in doing ethnography (as each ethnographic setting and each experience of doing ethnography is different). Instead, I will set out some questions to address, ideas to consider and possible paths to take in entering into ethnographic research, and ground these in the experiences of other ethnographers. First, I will address what is meant by an ethnographic strategy and why a strategic vocabulary is useful for organizational ethnography. Second, I will look at ways ethnographers have conceived strategies for entering into and staying in research settings. Third, some alternative takes on ethnographic strategic content will be presented. Finally, the discussion will close with a look at ethnographic strategies in action, including questions of adapting, scrapping and stubbornly sticking to an ethnographic strategy.

Prior to this analysis of ethnographic strategy, I should point out that I will not deal in detail in this discussion with the question of whether or not to complete a study ethnographically. I am assuming to some extent that readers choosing a book entitled *Organizational Ethnography* have already demonstrated some interest in ethnography. Briefly stated, there is no simple, single formula for calculating if ethnography is the most appropriate methodology for addressing a particular research question or whether ethnography is any better or worse than another method for addressing particular research objectives. However, readers contemplating ethnography for the first time should be able to decide by the end of this discussion if ethnography is for them.

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What is an ethnographic strategy and why should I have one?

In the Introduction to this book I suggested that ethnographies can be exploratory in nature and can involve long periods of immersion in the field of study. This can involve the development of numerous relations with those who ordinarily go about their business in the field of study. It can also involve the ethnographer in a constant move between being at times more of a participant in the field and at other times being more of an observer. This can generate an amount of ethnographic complexity, centred around the ethnographer themselves, who must manage a set of relationships, a research project, observations, being a participant member, trying to figure out what they want to find out as an ethnographer, while also not limiting the exploratory scope of ethnography, sticking to a budget, a deadline and producing something (hopefully insightful, interesting and/or useful) at the end of the ethnography. This sounds like hard work – and it is. However, the complexity of completing an ethnography can be managed through the development of an initial ethnographic strategy.

Prior to entering into a detailed analysis of the likely contents of an ethnographic strategy, it is important to note the kind of strategy I am recommending. The aim of developing an ethnographic strategy is not to build a step-by-step plan to be followed slavishly in subsequent research. The aim is also not to build a hypothesis to be tested in the field (see sensibility two). Instead, an ethnographic strategy involves collating an initial set of ideas that the ethnographer can carry into the field, use to negotiate access, adapt as the research progresses, scrap if necessary or stubbornly stick to at times when it appears the ethnography might be under threat (see 'Ethnographic strategy in action' below). An ethnographic strategy can be developed in line with recent management research on questions of strategy.

Much of the management literature on strategy tends to search for a prescriptive means of establishing the ideal method for carrying out strategy. For example, Goodman and Lawless (1994: 288) look at ways in which to build 'defensible competitive advantage' and Thompson (1995: 199) suggests 'successful change needs planning, champions and persistence'. Corral (1994: 3) argues in the academic arena that 'Planning helps us to prepare for a better future; it is good management practice and an organisational requirement'. This kind of prescriptive plan of action remains unavailable for ethnographers. Ethnographic research needs to develop in the field, in connection with the experiences the ethnographer has in the setting they are studying. Also, most ethnography tends to have at least an exploratory aspect which would be undermined by a rigidly prescriptive strategy developed prior to entering into the research (see next section).

However, recent developments in management research on strategy can provide us with some more compelling ways to think about doing

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ethnography. First, recent research treats strategy as an ongoing, inclusive process. In much of this work, prescriptive approaches to strategy are replaced through considerations of strategy as providing opportunities to draw people together around particular focal points for discussion (see, for example, the work of Ackoff, 1981; Pettigrew, 1987; Morton, 1988; Reponen, 1993; A. Smits, van der Poel and Ribbers, 1997; Lee, 1999; Orna, 1999; Fjelstad and Haanaes, 2001). Hence Ackoff (1981: 70) argues that strategic processes should involve 'continuous monitoring, evaluation and modification', and Reponen (1993: 102) suggests that 'strategy development is seen more and more as an interactive organisational process'. According to Reponen (1993: 103), the 'strategy generation process is thus a kind of research project where multiple participants are involved and multiple methods are used'.

Second, the possible futures which strategy might involve are engaged with as problematic possibilities rather than things which can be definitively planned. Problematizing the future is treated as a way of thinking about strategy (see, for example, Ackoff, 1981; Arfield, 1995; Smits, van der Poel and Ribbers, 1997; Earl, 1999). Earl (1999: 162) suggests that: 'The future has to be brought back into strategy-making.'

Exemplar One

R. Harper (1998) *Inside the IMF: An Ethnography of Documents, Technology and Action* (Academic Press, London)

Harper's ethnography stems from a tradition of research known as Computer Supported Collaborative (or Co-operative) Work (CSCW). This tradition is technology focused and uses a form of ethnography to shed light on interactions between people and technologies. Harper's ethnography looks at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and analyses the features which make and maintain the IMF as an organization. Harper particularly concentrates on the life of documents in the organization and the ways in which documents move between particular groups of people within the IMF to help us to understand something of the way those groups operate. Harper suggests that the documents are used and understood differently by different sections of the IMF and this tells us something of the practices of each aspect of the organization. Harper draws on broader ethnographic experience within other organizational settings (such as air-traffic control centres) to help illuminate the particular organizational issues that arose in his study of the IMF.

This ethnography is not solely a study of the organization. To some degree it is also a study for the organization. Harper suggests, however, that making what might be termed practical recommendations based on ethnography raises a range of questions regarding precisely how an ethnography will be carried out, how it will be written up, how an analysis based on the ethnography will be produced and what kinds of recommendations could be made from the analysis. This summary of Harper's

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ethnography will begin by looking at how the ethnographer went about designing a research strategy and the questions involved in producing practical recommendations. It will then go on to investigate what organizational ethnographers can find of use in Harper's study.

Designing an ethnographic strategy

Harper is clear on the principle behind his ethnographic work: 'My concern in this book is to report on how ethnographic findings can be used to improve the design of organisational work practice and supporting technologies' (1998: ix). Initially, however, Harper points to the problems of defining what ethnography might mean and to whom. For some within the IMF ethnography was described as the 'E word': a mythical method by which (what appeared to be) just looking at what people did was transformed into 'a marvellous new technique that will revolutionise computer systems' (1998: 49).

For Harper, the key to navigating the ethnography of the organization and translating its findings into something useful for the organization lay in establishing a 'field work programme' (1998: 50). Such a programme would involve 'the vexing and obdurate problem of how to make ethnography robust enough as a method to prise open the kinds of issues made salient by design type concerns' (1998: 9).

Harper suggests that what makes a good ethnography stand out are the ways in which the ethnographer manages to evoke the particular situation that has formed the focus of study and intertwine this evocation with insights from other ethnographies, making available a variety of forms of argumentation and analysis. Although this might appear somewhat unspecific, it is designed as a counter to ethnographic textbooks which sometimes suggest 'recipe book' type approaches to ethnography (as if the methodology were entirely unproblematic and easily mobilized from one setting to another). There is a problem of ethnography being indefinable on the one hand and too rigidly defined on the other. In order to avoid such difficulties Harper develops a programme (or what I term a 'strategy') which establishes that not just anything gets to count as ethnography. Harper's programme/strategy has three principle elements.

First, he sets out to follow 'the career of information' (1998: 68) through an organization. He focuses on a particular form of information to study and tracks this information through its various moves within an organization, and the various interpretations and uses made of the information. This provides a set of ethnographic material from which to build arguments.

Second, Harper focuses as an ethnographer on going through ritual inductions within the organization. A ritual induction is an ethnographic moment through which the ethnographer is made aware of some features of the organization that are taken as important by members of the organization. Although this varies widely between organizations, a ritual induction is an event noted by members of the organization as a necessary thing to go through to understand something of the organization. The first part of the programme provides material for judging the second part of the programme.

Third, Harper suggests that ethnographers should develop, analyse and further develop reasons for doing observations and interviews in the field. 'Reasons' here are taken fairly broadly to cover such matters as what kinds of thing the ethnographer might want to find out about an organization (for example, the ethnographer might

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develop an interest in how a seemingly diverse organization manages to hold together as a coherent unit). These 'reasons' may develop as the research progresses and through consideration of the first two parts of the programme.

What does Harper's programme tell us about organizational ethnographic strategies? First, it confirms the notion that an ethnographic strategy should not be fixed and rigid. Despite using the title 'programme', it is by no means a straightforward ethnographic recipe to apply to all settings. Instead, Harper's approach provides a fluid way of thinking about the organization, of thinking through what might count as an adequate ethnography and, in Harper's case, of considering what might count as useful.

Second, the programme provides three areas that ethnographers could take into account in thinking about engaging with an organization. These areas offer a starting point which each ethnographer can consider in terms of its relevance for their own ethnographic research. Considering (1) the career of organizational information, (2) ritual inductions and (3) what the ethnographer wants to find out could all be useful points to orient an ethnographic study. Thus Harper's programme provides for three ethnographic starting points which can be utilized and moulded for a particular research project.

Third, Harper's programme gives us an opportunity to begin thinking about ethnography for, and not just of, an organization. What are the advantages of being able to set out an ethnographic programme or strategy? How might this help us negotiate access to an organization? Would an organization look more favourably on research which appears to have a clear programme of work, a clear rationale, and a reasonably clear set of questions? On the other hand, would this risk limiting the exploratory scope of the research? These are questions which cannot be answered in general, but need consideration in relation to specific research experiences (they will be taken further under sensibilities three and four).

Aside from this focus on ethnographic strategy, Harper's work provides several stimulating insights for organizational ethnographers to take into consideration.

Why has ethnography risen to prominence in organizational IT settings?

Harper identifies three trends which can help account for the recent rise in interest in ethnographic research in organizational IT settings. The first of these trends has been the development of research into social issues involved with computing from sociology and anthropology, and from those involved with computers themselves. This melding of social science and IT, Harper suggests, has led to an increasing number of researchers and research outputs on social and organizational aspects of computing. The second trend, developing from the first, has involved the production of a 'set of seminal publications that were a kind of clarion call for a new interpretive, loosely sociological/anthropological approach to requirements capture' (1998: 52). In place of more rigid requirements capture, which might not look far beyond narrowly construed technical issues, these newly emerging publications opened up the question of requirements more broadly. The third trend involved organizations themselves taking a greater interest in ways of getting more from technology or in ways of losing less between the marketed promise of technologies and their introduction into the organization. Harper suggests that the willingness of the IMF to support his own research is further evidence of this attitudinal shift.

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Ethnography doesn't just have to be about people

Although this may seem an obvious point, given the previous discussion in this exemplar about organizational documents, it is worth drawing out. Ethnographic research can be all too easily restricted by assumptions that it is focused on culture or cultural variables or social issues which can often be taken to mean people not things or technology. Of course an ethnographic study cannot draw such stark boundaries. From the traditions of anthropology we find tribes studied as people, but also through their material artefacts and the ceremonial significance of things. In the same way, most modern organizations would make little sense if they were studied without the range of things, technologies, processes, documents and so on upon which the organization's day-to-day operation is focused. What Harper's study does, which is particularly useful for organizational ethnographers, is to centre on the things (in this case, documents) rather than people. It is through the movement and work done to make sense of the documents that we find out something about the people. This shifting of focus opens up a range of options for organizational ethnographers, who could consider centring their ethnographic strategy around, for example, technology, documents or processes; they need not limit their central focus to people.

Treating strategy as an ongoing process is a useful way of thinking about ethnography as a method of drawing together multiple participants and views and co-ordinating those people and views. Problematizing the future avoids tying the ethnography into a prescriptive process which might carry with it assumptions that the ideas established at the start of research are the ideas which should define the research. Holding on to the possibility that the future is not always clear, that research develops in the field and that outcomes for research cannot be determined prior to doing the research, means the direction of the research is always available for further consideration.

Although I have presented here two aspects of thinking about ethnographic strategy (strategy as an ongoing process and treating the future as problematic), it should not be assumed that these two areas are straightforward. The ongoing process of ethnographic strategy is (I think) most usefully conceptualized as connecting multiple opportunities to dispute, redirect and reconstitute the direction of study. The 'process' of ethnographic strategy is not a smooth, linear progress towards a fixed goal, but is the (sometimes multiply sited) location for ongoing disputation, the purpose of which is to allow for multiple reconstructions of the research to exist in a reasonably coherent, connected form (for more on improvisation and ethnography, see Humphreys, Brown and Hatch, 2003).

I have called the ethnographic strategy a sensibility because it provides a basis for ethnographers to think about what it is they are doing while they are doing research, to reflect on the principles they carry into the research and because it gives a basis for ethnographers to move back and forth between the everyday practicalities of their research and the general direction in which they would like the research to move. Such movement also involves constant consideration of the appropriateness of the direction

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in which the research is going and constant questions regarding the possibility of taking an ethnographic study in a new direction. Just as ethnographers can be thoroughly sceptical about the field of study (holding everything up for ethnographic inspection and attempting to take nothing for granted, see sensibility two), ethnographers can apply that scepticism equally to the development of their own research. If strategy can be usefully thought of as a fluid and interpretable set of principles for drawing people together, then what kinds of principles should an ethnographic strategy incorporate?

Conceiving an ethnographic strategy

A research question

Although I have recommended treating an ethnographic strategy as an ongoing process, a focal point to bring people together, and have suggested thinking about futures as problematic possibilities (rather than a single target to aim towards), in this section I will begin looking at ways to build initial content for an ethnographic strategy. This content is not designed as a step-by-step ethnographic programme, but instead provides a series of areas that ethnographers can consider in building a strategy to be subsequently worked on in doing the research. The first of these areas involves the development of a research question. Such questions can be broadly or narrowly conceived and the subject of particular constraints (time, funding, colleagues' expectations) which might set some of the scope for the kind of question to be addressed.

The development of an initial outline research question can form the starting point for developing an ethnographic strategy. If an ethnographer wants to study conflict among corporate executives (See exemplar thirteen), the difficulties of unionisation in Japanese automobile transplants (exemplar seven) or the social organization of marihuana users (exemplar twelve), this can form the starting point for considerations of where the study might take place, who might be included in the study, how the study might be initially shaped and so on. However, these initial research questions can be more or less broadly defined prior to doing the research. Hence entering into research in order to analyse the use of documents in the IMF (exemplar one) provides a narrower definition of the scope of the research than exploring the possibilities of ethnographically studying the internet (exemplar ten). A narrower question might well set some more strict parameters for developing an ethnographic strategy. This can be advantageous in that the field-site for doing the research appears to follow on from the question and the participants to be included in the research can be more or less clearly defined ahead of doing the research because of the site chosen. Thus choosing to study documents in the IMF (exemplar one) establishes a setting (the IMF), narrows the participants to be studied (according to the

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documents to be selected) and establishes a series of practical questions regarding access and time allowed in the field. However, narrowly prescribed research questions also limit the exploratory scope of ethnography. Alternatively, choosing a broader question, such as researching the possibility of studying the internet ethnographically (exemplar ten), does not dictate a particular research field-site or particular set of research participants (however, as exemplar ten demonstrates, this exploration of methodological possibilities did involve the gradual development of a very specific study).

Types of ethnographic question

I have found in doing ethnographic research that one way to develop a research question is to think about the type of question to be addressed. Although the following typology is reasonably detailed, it is important to note that often an ethnography will cover more than one of these areas, that ethnographies sometimes shift between areas (as an exploratory strategy should allow) and ethnographers may always find new areas to work in or new types of question to ask (as ethnographers often seek to innovate).

A narrowly prescribed research question The work of Morrill (1995; exemplar thirteen) ethnographically engages with questions of conflict among corporate executives. This provides one way of thinking about an ethnographic research question. In Morrill's case the research question to be addressed prescribes some features of the ethnographic strategy. The question establishes that Morrill's interest is in top-level executives. In terms of thinking about where to study, what to study and who to study, Morrill's research question sets some parameters. It is not such a narrowly prescribed question, however, that a particular type of executive should be studied, or that executives from a particular region or nation should be studied. Even a narrowly prescribed research question then entails further work relating to location and access (see sensibility three), relations to be established in the field (sensibility four) and time to be spent in the field (sensibility five). A narrowly prescribed research question thus carries some restrictions, without entirely defining the research. Even in ethnographic studies which focus on a particular research question, experiences in the field can shape the direction of the study. Ethnographers should think carefully about developing narrowly prescribed questions prior to entry into the field and the commitments which follow from such narrow questions.

Utilizing a focal area Whyte's (1955) work (exemplar three) does not utilize a narrowly prescribed research question. Instead, Whyte establishes that the purpose of his ethnography is to provide an account of what goes on in the day-to-day activities of those living in a poor part of the USA. Whyte does not delimit his study to conflict (as Morrill does) or any other

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specific feature of life in the area to be studied. Instead, Whyte's approach is relatively exploratory (although see next section on Malinowski). Whyte is keen to understand and offer a portrayal of everyday life in a slum and is focused on organizing his ethnography in relation to what he finds happening in the field. Using a focal area as the basis for doing ethnographic research does not free the ethnographer from all constraints. Having selected a type of area (slum), a geographical region (Italian neighbourhoods of Boston), a specific location (the street corners of a particular Italian neighbourhood), there follows a series of further commitments. The participants to be included in the research are those people living around the street corner selected. This introduces some very specific access questions (how to become a member of this particular group) and sets some challenges for the ethnographer (particularly how to become a convincing member of an Italian neighbourhood street corner). Although Whyte's (1955) work appears to begin with a less narrowly prescribed research question, the development of an ethnographic strategy involves the successive building of commitments. Each of these commitments (such as access, field relations, time to be spent in the field) needs to be considered in relation to the developing ethnographic strategy. For Morrill, commitments had to be managed in relation to attempts to keep the research focused on conflict. For Whyte, these commitments (gaining access and time spent in the field) formed achievements in getting to know more about the community he was trying to study. The choice to base an ethnographic strategy around a region can be a useful way of developing an ethnographic focus without having to produce the kinds of commitments prior to doing the research that a narrow research question can entail.

A commitment to exploration It should not be assumed that Whyte's (1955) work is purely exploratory. Whyte had a specific political purpose in attempting to provide a picture of street corner life, counter to the mostly negative media stories available at the time of his study of street corner crime and poverty. The anthropological tradition of ethnography, such as the work of Malinowski (1922/2002; see exemplar two) has perhaps a more explicit exploratory aim. Malinowski presents his ethnographic experiences as an engaged exploration of a culture entirely foreign to his own. The study is exploratory in that Malinowski's aim is to uncover the organization of the society he is studying (this has problematic epistemological commitments, see sensibility two). This 'purely' exploratory approach to ethnography should not be overplayed, as many of these early anthropological studies also involved issues of European colonial management and at the very least involved introductions to the native culture by missionaries or colonial administrators (thus introducing the researcher on management terms). A commitment to 'pure' exploration is not then an achievable, practical research aim. Any ethnographic research is predicated upon particular needs (such as a need to get the research done in a particular

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time, fulfil a particular obligation in a course one is studying, meet the expectations of research funders, and so on). However, Malinowski's and Whyte's work demonstrate that in place of a narrowly prescribed research question developed prior to research, there are other ways of providing a focus for developing an ethnographic strategy (which can be as open as seeking to ask 'what is going on in this particular area?' or 'what are the organizational features of this local culture?').

The pursuit of things There are a variety of other ways of thinking about the development of a focal point for an ethnographic strategy. One of these is provided by the work of Harper (1998; see exemplar one). Harper's strategy is to follow, first, the career of information in a particular organization, second, organizational rituals which demonstrate particular features of the way the organization works and, third, constantly attempt to develop further observational opportunities in the field in line with experiences that develop during the research. Harper's study of organizational documentation thus combines carrying into the research a reasonably narrow research question with attempts to strike a balance between strategic commitments (such as following documents) and exploration (seeking further opportunities for observation in line with field experiences). Other similar focal points can be found in the work of Suchman (1987; exemplar eight), who looks at the development and testing of particular technologies in workplace settings. In Suchman's work the pursuit of documentation is replaced by the pursuit of photo-copier testing.

Methodological development Hine's (2000) work on virtual ethnography takes methodological development as its focus (see exemplar ten). In place of a narrowly prescribed research question, a commitment to exploration of a particular area or the pursuit of a specific aspect of organizational activity (such as documentation), comes a study of the possibility of using ethnography to study the internet. This methodological focus involves the development of particular research commitments as the study develops. Hine selects a particular event (or series of events) surrounding a particular legal case as it develops both in traditional media and on the internet. Hine uses this event to pursue the questions that arise in attempting to produce a virtual ethnography. Such methodological development provides a focus for the production of an ethnographic strategy free of many commitments prior to doing the research. In Hine's case, the internet is available for study and she is in a position to set the parameters of the research. In line with previous ethnographic focal points, as the research develops, Hine builds a series of commitments in attempting to develop an ethnographic means of studying the internet.

Theoretical development An alternative focus from exploring possible methodological developments in ethnography is provided by the work of

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Latour and Woolgar (1979; exemplar four) who seek to develop some specific theoretical insights. They argue that the study of science and scientists can be devised ethnographically and that such ethnographic study can offer a picture of the day-to-day activities of what goes on in a laboratory. For Latour and Woolgar, this study of the day-to-day accomplishment of science offers a distinct alternative to what were contemporary philosophical analyses of the nature of, for example, scientific discovery. Latour and Woolgar use their study of the practices of scientists to argue for the development of alternative ways of conceptualizing science, scientists and the production of order through laboratories (this study is also noted for its methodological originality, see exemplar four). Pursuing this kind of theoretical aim (that there might be an alternative way of conceptualizing what goes on in the organized world of the laboratory), also carries with it particular kinds of commitments: to find a laboratory to study; to uncover ways of engaging with scientists in action; and figuring out ways of understanding and reproducing accounts of scientists and science. For management researchers, a theoretical focus could involve pursuing ethnographic research to question, challenge or contribute towards any number of traditional management research areas (accountability, strategy, outsourcing, and so on).

Practical questions A final potential focal point around which to develop an ethnographic strategy is the possibility of addressing a practical question. With the move of ethnographic research into organizational settings, practical questions are becoming an increasingly common feature of ethnographic work. Exemplar fourteen, based on some of my own work, looks at the kinds of issues raised in trying to enter into an organizational setting not just to produce an account of that setting, but also to produce an account which has some practical resonance for the members of that setting. In exemplar fourteen I present some of the ethnographic work I have been doing in university settings. This draws together both ethnography *of* and ethnography *for* the particular setting under study. Practical ethnography (see Conclusion) often involves a protracted period of negotiation, prior to entering the field, which establishes some of the questions to be addressed during the research. I have always found it useful to carry my own ethnographic strategy into such negotiations in order to manage my way around questions I will not answer (either because they are beyond the scope of the research or the scope of my interest) and establish at least the direction of the early stages of the research project (which areas of the organization will be studied, why they are of practical import, what kinds of things it might be possible to say about those areas). These negotiations also involve frequent reiterations (by me) of the importance of the exploratory aspects of ethnography and of the need to frequently revisit the ethnographic strategy with members of the organization to see what we are doing and where we might go next. Using practical questions as a focal point for the development of an ethnographic strategy involves a clear

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emphasis on using the strategy as a process for bringing people together (see the section on 'what is an ethnographic strategy?' above).

Building a strategy

How to turn a question into a strategy

In outlining some of the differing broad types of question an ethnographer might seek to ask it should be clear that different types of question come with different forms of commitment. We can see that a narrowly conceived research question carries with it particular demands in relation to the location that will be studied, the participants required for the study, perhaps even the length of time the ethnography will require. We can also see that more exploratory research questions carry far fewer or at least less rigid commitments. With more exploratory questions, commitments to a particular location, to a particular set of participants and to a length of time to be spent in the field are developed as research progresses. However, I have suggested that even narrowly prescribed research questions should also retain the possibility for further exploration as the ethnographer gains more experience in the field and can make more informed decisions regarding the appropriateness of the research question.

Once an ethnographer has established an initial type of question to be asked and the broad area which will form the subject of ethnographic investigation, a more detailed initial strategy can be developed. I have always found the following areas to be frequent features of my ethnographic strategies (however, given the variety of forms of ethnographic research entered into, some readers may find other areas more or less relevant). Each of these areas will provide the basis for subsequent discussions, but it is worth briefly stating how each can be utilized in building a strategy. First, I pay close attention to the possible locations to be ethnographically studied. This can involve drawing up a long or fairly short list of possible organizational settings. I analyse these potential field-sites in terms of their suitability for the research I want to pursue and in relation to a range of practical questions (such as how easy will it be to get to each location). I have always found it necessary to have more than one potential field-site in which to do the research. Second, closely tied into issues of location, I make some initial considerations of access. Looking at my list of potential field-sites, I assess my likelihood of being able to gain access to the site, to spend an amount of time in the site and to spend time talking with the members of the particular site (similar discussion can be found in the work of Morrill, 1995; exemplar thirteen). Assessing access then leads into more detailed assessment of time (how long do I want to spend in the field?; how long do I estimate the study will take?), observation (how will I go about doing the observation?; how will I collect observational material?; how easy will it be

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to collect such material?; how sensitive will such material be?), ethics (particularly incorporating into the strategy that the work will adhere to a professional code) and exit (how long do I want to stay in the organization?; do I want to predetermine the exit point?; am I going to make any promises to the organization regarding my exit, such as providing feedback?). For me, such considerations are brief prior to entering the field. As the study develops I will enter into much more detailed analysis of these areas.

Building each of these areas into an initial strategy can prove helpful for three purposes here. First, the strategy can be used in negotiating access to the organization. Having something to present and having some confidence in what I am asking for has proved useful for me in gaining access to organizational settings. However, I have also always found that an important feature of negotiating access to an organization has been to emphasize the exploratory scope of ethnography, that the strategy is there for all parties to revisit and that we should schedule some discussion during the research regarding the progress (and any changes in direction required) of the research. These negotiations also form ethnographic moments which can reveal a great deal about the way the organization operates (see sensibility three).

Second, the strategy can be useful once research is under way. A particular problem with doing ethnography (see sensibility four) is that the ethnographer works hard in building relationships in the field but can lose any sense of ethnographic distance. That is relations in the field become the focus for development and the research itself slips into the background. Having a strategy (even one that requires constant development and reassessment) offers the ethnographer something to prise them away from the field, to remind them of their research project and to enable them to re-introduce some ethnographic distance to their actions.

Third, an ethnographic strategy can document the expectations that the researcher carried into the field. This can be useful for providing an analysis of the role of the researcher in carrying out the research. Briefly stated, such analysis can form an important part of ethnographic research in making available a methodological account of an ethnographic study which subsequent readers can use to assess the study (for more detail on this, see sensibility two). Retaining a version of the assumptions the ethnographer carried into the field can help the ethnographer reflect on the journey they have been on in doing any particular piece of research.

Ethnographic strategy in action

It may appear that having considered a focal point for the ethnography, a type of question to be asked, the commitments that question entails and some possible details of the proposed study (such as location and time), ethnographers would have completed an amount of strategic work.

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However, I should emphasize here that an ethnographic strategy is only preparatory work for entering the field. The ways in which ethnographic strategies are reworked, dumped, retained or otherwise adapted needs some attention.

Although reading ethnographic research often provides us with a sense that the ethnographer knew what they were doing, it is not always the case that an ethnographer sets out a narrowly prescribed research question early in the research and then adheres to that single question. Often ethnographic write-ups feature an analysis of the ways in which the question developed, how this led the ethnographer to engage in a series of practical questions and how these led to a further series of practical and theoretical insights regarding ethnography and what can be done. There are many differing degrees of messiness in this development of research questions and ethnographic strategies. I will present three very brief experiences from my own ethnographic work to illustrate this point.

Developing a strategy

In a recent ethnographic study of traffic regulation (particularly speed limits) in the UK, I constructed an initial strategy highlighting the importance of speed cameras (as prevalent across UK traffic management discussions, as controversial in media reporting, as a development drivers have been keen to express views on). Despite developing a strategy which focused on speed cameras, it was not clear where the action was taking place. Indeed, it was only after talking with various local authorities and some management consultants (who had previously been involved in setting up the first national programme of speed cameras in the UK) that I gained some sense of where and whom I could study ethnographically. It turned out that there were bodies called 'local safety camera partnerships' which had responsibility for installing, maintaining and publicizing cameras. Although studying traffic regulation in the UK, particularly relating to speed cameras, might appear to form the basis for a narrowly prescribed ethnographic strategy, this strategy was still subject to a great deal of developmental work in the early stages of the research. The strategy had to retain an exploratory aspect to incorporate these developments.

Stubbornly sticking to a strategy

Prior to the ethnography of traffic management I had been studying the introduction of new technologies to university settings (see exemplar fourteen). For this study I had developed a detailed ethnographic strategy in collaboration with the participants in the study. This strategy set out the technology projects I would study, the members of the university to be incorporated into the research and a commitment to present findings from the research. The strategy left open the kinds of findings that the research

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would produce. As the study progressed it became increasingly apparent that several of the areas of university activity, which had formed the basis for proposed research under the strategy, were raising difficulties in allowing me ethnographic access. In this case, rather than develop the strategy, I felt it was appropriate to stubbornly stick to the strategy and hold meetings with those who had agreed the terms of the original research. In this case the strategy proved to have utility in ensuring access promises were met.

Abandoning a strategy

My first ethnographic experience involved an over-ambitious study of English football fans travelling abroad. Counter to the media attention at the time directed towards supposed hooligans, I hoped to demonstrate that English football fans travelling abroad were actually organized, albeit boisterous, social groups. Needless to say, towards the end of my first match travelling abroad with the fans (during which the English team were losing 1–0), there was trouble. The stadium stewards locked the doors preventing fans from leaving the stadium (to prevent clashes with local rival fans). The English fans proceeded to break down the doors and exit the stadium *en masse* only to be met by riot police with shields and batons. During the ensuing fight I decided that my ethnographic strategy had been somewhat misdirected and my research project as a whole misconceived. There was little in the way of an ethnographic get out here (claiming to ‘merely’ be an ethnographer at this point did not seem a viable way of avoiding trouble). After half an hour or so of batons and shields, stones and bottles of urine being thrown, we were taken as a group to the airport and flown back to England where several fans were arrested. Abandoning an ethnographic strategy in this way emphasizes the importance of always being open to radical changes in research according to circumstance. An ethnographic strategy always needs to be made locally appropriate.

Summary

An ethnographic strategy is not a step-by-step guide to be slavishly followed in the course of an ethnography. Instead, developing an ethnographic strategy involves drawing together a range of ideas, principles, initial questions and assumptions that the researcher has prior to starting the ethnography. An ethnographic strategy can be important for negotiations at the point of entering the field and for establishing the early development of an ethnography. However, the strategy should be treated in a fluid manner, constantly available for redirection and should be treated as sceptically by the ethnographer as the field-site itself. An ethnographic strategy can form an initial attempt to scope out the kinds of things the researcher might do – it is only in doing the ethnography that further successive

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commitments (in terms of access and locations, field relations and time spent in the field) will be made, as the following sensibilities will highlight.

Recommended reading

- Burgess, R. (1984) *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research* (Routledge, London)
- Spradley, J. (1980) *Participant Observation* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York)
- Wakeford, N. (2003) 'Research note: working with new media's cultural interdiaries', *Information, Communication and Society* 6(2): 229–45