Submission to Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management

Contingent Ethics in Critical Ethnography

Rory Ridley-Duff, Sheffield Hallam University

Faculty of Organisation and Management

June 2006

Contact: roryridleyduff@tiscali.co.uk

4 Rosehill Close
Penistone
Sheffield
S36 6UF
South Yorkshire
England

Dr Rory Ridley-Duff is a writer/consultant/lecturer whose doctoral research established how friendship, courtship and parental interests shape entrepreneurship and systems of governance. His research interests in gender and workplace democracy evolved out of directorships in two employee-controlled businesses combined with 15 years of consultancy work in the social economy.

Submission to Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management

Contingent Ethics in Critical Ethnography

Abstract

Methodology/Approach

Critical ethnography carries an implicit obligation to understand and expose hegemonic regimes of truth within a social setting. In this paper, the issues that arise are elaborated by presenting a critical ethnography of the research process itself.

Findings

Exposing hidden social processes puts both researcher and research participants at risk contributing to complex ethical dilemmas. Two methods were established to mitigate the impacts of this. Firstly, discourses were created using ethnographic data from different participants as a means of protecting identities while preserving the authenticity and plausibility. Secondly, consideration of the sense-making process brought about a framework for selecting which data to present. This offers a 'contingent ethics' approach that enables a balance to be struck between protecting the participants' well-being and a researcher's obligations to report findings honestly.

Practical implications

Participants can be protected during dissemination not only by changing their name and altering their biographical details, but also by creating coherent discourses from multiple participants and presenting their words through a single character. This not only affords greater anonymity when reporting sensitive findings, it preserves authenticity. Secondly, it affords sufficient protection to a researcher (as participant) to engage in epistemic reflexivity without endangering their friends and family.

Originality

The paper offers a new technique for ethnographers and critical ethnographers that enhances the ability to engage in epistemic and methodological reflexivity during fieldwork, analysis and writing up.

Keywords: Research Paper, Ethnography, Ethics, Gender, Governance, Management Control

Introduction

Ethnography is an approach that enables researchers to discover systems of meaning within a culture and then report the results in the form of a story, or stories. In doing so, the researcher enters the world of the research subjects in an attempt to understand, not simply observe, how they interpret the world and rationalise decisions in particular social contexts (Agar 1986; Van Maanen, 1988; Schwartzman, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Brewer, 2000; Gill and Johnson 2002).

There is an assumption that "'experience' underlies all understanding of social life" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 3) and that an ethnographer can reveal not only what happens, but the social relations and processes that explain their logic. Moreover, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 18) argue that ethnographers can be used as a source of data: the reaction of both researcher and participants to change reveals culture. Douglas (1976, p.16) notes that "the researcher's knowledge of his own feelings becomes vital". By using a journal to record descriptions and feelings, the researcher's reactions become part of the data used to develop theory.

In this paper, I present a critical ethnography of a research study to illustrate the way that various interests shape the research process and influence the truths that emerge. Secondly, the paper explores the way that issues emerge in the field and can change the direction of theory development. In this instance, a study that originally had worker democracy as the focal point of a corporate governance study changed focus when gender issues repeatedly surfaced in governance dynamics.

The Process of Sense Making

Psychologists have noted that people differ in their propensity to distort the world when faced with contradiction (see Miller, 1962; Sutherland, 1992; Buchanan & Huczynski, 1997; Aronson, 2003). In the rush to study and quantify distorting effects, there has been rather less discussion about why differences occur. Reliability in scientific enquiry rests on understanding why there is so much diversity of perception when we are faced with equivocation and ambiguity (and even when we are not).

Aronson (2003) reviews the impact of "cognitive dissonance" theory (Festinger, 1957) to understand "distorted" perception[1]. Dissonance, however, is also central to the noticing, unravelling and resolving of contradictions (Weick, 1995, p. 46):

> *A key event for emotion is the interruption of an expectation. It makes good evolutionary sense to construct an organism that reacts significantly when the world is no longer the way it was…Once heightened arousal is perceived, it is appraised, and people try to construct some link between the present situation and 'relevant' prior situations to make sense of the arousal. Arousal leads people to search for an answer to the question 'What's up?'*

An emotional reaction, therefore, is always to be investigated and understood. A keen awareness of ourselves as emotional beings is important for a deeper understanding of research and cultural processes. While the prevailing view is that we should not allow emotions to distort our perception, Weick's interpretation suggests that suppressing emotions also distorts perception. Indeed, it is the main contention of dissonance theory is that distortion occurs because psychological processes occur that reduce the emotionality of perceived contradictions.

Weick reviews the dangers of emotion in research. Firstly, he found that our emotions can impact in two ways. Lack of information or experience can incline us to substitute less plausible explanations if our current understandings turn out to be false. One reaction, therefore, is to simplify our conceptual models to eradicate dissonance. Alternatively, however, we may react by suspending judgement until we have more data or a more plausible explanation.

Secondly, we may recall experiences with the same emotional rather than social content. If we do this, we may construct conceptual models based on dissimilar cases because of the similarity of the emotional impact. Alternatively, if we construct conceptual models based on similar social content, we can reduce the emotion we feel through improvements in understanding. Weick argues, therefore, that emotions are central to self-awareness, but can either distort or increase our understanding depending on the way we handle dissonance (see also Goleman, 1996; Glass, 2002).

Hochschild (1998) and Crossley (1998) take a different view, that emotions themselves are cultural phenomena. Weick's observation that emotions result from an interrupted expectation requires that we have expectations in the first place. Where do expectations come from if not from an awareness of 'typical' behaviour? Emotion, therefore, is more than a cognitive ability, it is also a cultural and contextual variable developed and evolved from experience (see Goleman, 1996).

Goleman's work – while identifying emotion as a second body of knowledge - has been criticised for its individualist outlook. Hochschild (1998, p. 7) contextualises individual experience by discussing the way an "emotional dictionary" develops. While personal, it is impregnated with cultural experiences and meanings that guide and constrain our emotional responses. As Crossley contends (1998, p. 19):

> *We expect in many cases to be able to argue people out of their emotions, particularly if those emotions are deemed either inappropriate or unreasonable. We might say to a person, for example, that he or she has no reason to feel angry and is being silly…[This] differentiates emotions from sensation. It would be absurd if we were to try to argue a person out of their toothache, for example.*

Emotions, therefore, become an integral part of a "mutually meaningful, intersubjective world" (Crossley, 1998, p. 20). Their validity can be subjected to the same rigours and challenges that Habermas applies to the written word. Emotions, whether deemed appropriate and rational (or inappropriate and irrational) can be chosen deliberately (Goffman, 1969) or invoked like a reflex (Goleman, 1996). Learned responses can be as expressive and natural as our native tongue. Self-awareness of these responses, however, can reveal our understanding and perception of cultural influences.

Sensemaking, therefore, is more than careful observation of events, people and behaviour. It derives from an intellectual and emotional awareness that social phenomena we often ignore (in others) or suppress (in ourselves) are part of a rich body of evidence about cultural values and social rules. The researcher's feelings can reveal anomalies between their own culture(s) and another culture to provide clues about *both* cultures. If one person reacts to a situation with laughter, but another with anger, these signify differences in the interpretation of an event. Similarly, if a workplace contains much evidence of laughter without anger, or lots of anger without laughter, this may tell us something about events in the workplace. Alternatively, it may tell us which emotions are met with approval and disapproval within a particular cultural context.

The belief systems and values of the researcher cannot sit outside this discussion:

> *How, precisely, is a garrulous, overdetermined, cross-cultural encounter, shot through with power relations and personal cross purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more-or-less discrete 'otherworld', composed by an individual author?*

(James Clifford, cited in Van Maanen, 1988, p. 1)

An ethnography can only ever be a personal account of the how research participants regard their world. The way the researcher's belief systems are handled as part of the narrative is one of the problematics of analysis and presentation. Researchers may make wonderful repositories of cultural data, but they are not neutral vessels of experience because they cannot prevent their *a priori* perspectives from influencing the way data is collected and analysed. Let me therefore, consider whether this perceived problem can be turned to advantage.

Ethnography as Politics

Hammersley attempts to answer the charge that ethnography is political (1992, p. 15):

> *...if political advocacy is the function of ethnography, why is the politics so rarely made explicit? And on what basis are we to distinguish between ethnographic insight and political prejudice?*

The difficulty is illustrated in the work of Kasmir (1996). While openly admitting that her ethnographic study of the Mondragon Co-operatives was intended to provide a working class perspective, the author is not sufficiently forthcoming on the way that her own political views impact on her interpretation. For example, in discussing the background to a strike, the author understates the significance of strike leaders attending "clandestine" Marxist meetings (Kasmir 1996, p. 113). No comment is made on the modus operandi of Marxists, particularly their use of political agitation in the workplace to encourage class-consciousness through active participation in disputes and strikes.

While the views of strikers and strike sympathisers are given some prominence, the views of non-managerial *workers* who voted the strikers out are notable by their omission. Therefore, what might have been an interesting exploration of why one group of workers voted out another, the conflict was recast as a traditional 'class' conflict between capital (management) and workers (labour), rather than a 'value' conflict between different groups of workers.

Clough (1992) rightly questions whether ethnography describes or constructs reality. She considers how the authors of ethnographic texts use narrative techniques popular in the mass media to present their findings as authoritative and valid. The results, she contends, are no more than social constructions masquerading as neutral descriptions in the service of a political interest. She calls for a more critical approach that unravels the discourses of different individuals and groups so that the *a priori* assumptions of both researcher and researched are clearer (see also Van Maanen, 1988; Putnam et al, 1993; Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Dey, 2002).

Megginson (2002, p. 5), discusses the difficulty of unravelling our own embededness in the research process:

> *Research is always fed by emotion. And by the agenda of the person that is doing the research. This can lead us into dead-end despair. However, there are directions over the wall at the end of this course, one direction starting from the depersonalised conventions of research, takes us through being explicit about our own place in the account, from using personal stories to using other peoples' personal stories. To seeking pattern and meaning behind these stories.*

Ethnographers, therefore, can help readers of their research by adopting an epistemologically reflexive approach that extends beyond the researcher's impact on the research subjects (Hammersley 1992) to the way the researcher's own values, political and philosophical commitments impact on analysis and evaluation (Holland 1999, Johnson and Duberley, 2000).

A critical ethnography, therefore, needs to provide an account of how different perspectives come into being and are promoted or suppressed within a culture. These accounts are not 'objective' in an absolute sense because they remain a product of cultural and historical conditions. It is not possible to claim they are eternally useful and valid but they may have relevance for a long period (for as long as they are considered by their advocates to have practical utility). In this sense, critical ethnography can benefit from the adoption of a pluralist perspective through the application of epistemological *and* methodological reflexivity (see Putnam et al, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Laughlin, 1995; Lodh and Gaffikin, 1997; Blyler, 1998; Holland, 1999; Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Dey, 2002; Snow, Morrill and Anderson, 2003; Koro-Llungberg, 2004).

The Ethics of Handling Dissonant Data

An acceptance that a researcher will encounter different ways of thinking, and different claims regarding the truth, has ethical implications. Different stories are embedded within data. By comparing public accounts of events with the private thoughts and feelings of the actors, the gap between private and public worlds of meaning, and the impact this has on unfolding situations, becomes clearer. But it also creates ethical dilemmas. As Megginson writes (2002, p. 12):

> *When we gather information, are we gathering [private] information or [public]? If we are gathering [private] information what are we doing with it? Does the [private] remain private? Minimising damage means no change, not getting to the root of the problem.*

His view is that the "poisonous, difficult, complicated stuff" has the most value because anomalies between private and public data reveal the hidden social processes that effect relationships. They reveal the difference between what is sayable and what is said, to whom we can and cannot say things, the things that we *do* say that we do not really feel, the cultural discourses we support in public but have reservations about in private and the social events we attend and the behaviours we adopt publicly that privately we avoid (see Goffman, 1969). In each of these cases, asking "why" enables us to work backwards through the data to search for patterns and anomalies to drive theory development.

But is it acceptable to bring private information into the public domain without the formal consent of research participants? Secondly, what if our interpretations and explanations are controversial? As Gummerson argues, bringing out certain things may embarrass people or "trigger the anger of powerful people" (Gummerson, 2000, p. 111). Despite this, they may be of such importance that they cannot be ignored.

Nowhere is this more acute than the taboo on sexual behaviour in organisation theory. As Hearn and Parkin (1987, p. 13) argue, "organisations…become obvious places for the development of sexual relationships, be they unspoken glances, mild flirtations, passionate affairs, or life-long arrangements". Despite this, management texts usually ignore sexuality to the point that "you would imagine organisations, so finely analysed, are inhabited by a breed of strange, asexual eunuch figures…" (ibid, p. 4).

While feminist-inspired contributions have articulated the way that sexual attitudes have a deep-rooted impact on social control, status and career progression, the way that sexual relationships are implicated in the development of workplace hierarchy and governance processes is still the subject of considerable confusion (Townley, 1994; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Hearn and Parkin, 2001; Collinson and Hearn, 2001; Wilson, 2003; Farrell, 2005; Ridley-Duff, 2005).

For Burrell (1984) this is symptomatic of a culture where 'civilisation' contributes to a desexualisation of the workplace. Suppression of sexuality becomes a tacit management control strategy so that "work itself involves drawing on libidinal energy and diverting it into work objects rather than sexual objects" (Hearn and Parkin, 1987, p. 12). In such cultures, sexual behaviour comes is constructed as "*mis*behaviour" (Ackroyd and Thomspon, 1999) whenever it is expedient to do so.

Foucault (1976), however, takes a different view. He considers the silence on sexuality as the appropriation of power. Talk about sex has not stopped, it has been appropriated by different professionals (the media, church leaders, psychologists, psychiatrists, criminal justice lawyers, legislators, HRM departments etc.) to control the discourse. Appropriating the right to define what 'sex talk' is (and is not) allowed becomes part of the management control toolkit.

For now, we need to note the complexity of the problems that may occur, and the likelihood that both researcher and research participants may feel deeply uncomfortable at the emergence of hidden social phenomena.

In the next section, I illustrate these issues by presenting a critical ethnography of my own study into workplace culture at Custom Products Ltd. This will clarify the methodology, the different interests trying to control research results, and how gender emerged as an issue during the research. I construct *discourses* for different groups of participants and present a story in which they are retold through fictional characters. I appear in the ethnography as Andy[2] (when an 'outsider') and also contribute to Ben's discourse[3] (as an 'insider'). Tim represents my supervisory team (containing 3 people) while other participants (Harry, John and Brenda, Diane, Charlie and Larissa) represent distinctive discourses at Custom Products.

A Critical Ethnography of a Critical Ethnography

In 2000, Harry and Tim established a relationship to investigate the workplace culture at Custom Products. Initial findings were presented at a conference in 2001. In 2002, after reading Andy's book on social enterprise governance, Harry invited him for a drink and they developed a friendship. In September 2002, Andy was recruited by Harry and Tim to XYZ Consultants. Andy agreed to undertake further research into the culture at Custom Products.

The focus of the study was initially discussed with Tim.

> *At our meeting on 20th December we talked about methodology for studying Custom Products and agreed we should adopt an ethnographic approach. Tim recommended me some books, one of which I'm reading now. I feel there is resistance to me doing much 'survey' oriented work during the study so I want to outline my thoughts here.*

During discussions on epistemology, Andy recalled a sexual harassment case he investigated to explore subjectivity and objectivity in data collection and analysis. It also reveals some of his attitude to gender issues.

> *What struck me (and my co-investigator) was the language used to describe the harassment. All the women bar one described the behaviour as sexist and oppressive. All the men described the behaviour*

as 'just the way that V is' - they found ways to understand and explain the behaviour as individual in origin, whereas the women attributed it to V's socialisation or 'being a man'.

The only woman who did not label V as sexist was my co-investigator and she (interestingly) was the only woman who did not subscribe to a feminist ideology. I must stress that the actual behaviour described by all the individuals was very similar. There were personal comments regarding attitude or integrity that were upsetting and distressing to both men and women. In all honesty, I could not say that V's behaviour towards men and women was different. If he was a harasser, he was so equally to both sexes.

Through this exploration of his own experience, Andy started to recognise there were multiple "realities" rooted in cultural experiences. It also alerted him to potential problems:

It was the first time I realised that socialisation makes us interpret the same facts/behaviours differently. In this respect, I fully support the 'interpretative' viewpoint that we've been discussing in our methodology lectures. Individuals do apply their own set of meanings to behaviours and events that they witness. Until this investigation, however, I felt that men and women were more similar than dissimilar in their reactions to events, this investigation changed my mind. I could now see how being imbued with a feminist perspective (or any ideology) fundamentally alters responses.

In applying this to the research in hand, Andy conceptualised the issues as follows:

Its significance for our research is that I believe, sincerely, that you learn different things through different methodologies. Each represents a different view of reality. I think participant-observation will reveal only part of how individuals think. My position 'on the inside' of the community will give me only a partial view. It was only when I stood back [during the sexual harassment investigation] and investigated it from the 'outside' that I learned another important aspect of its social life. The judgement of men and women differed because of their own socialisation, interests and prior knowledge of social relations.

At this stage, Andy focused on the academic literature regarding management control (Berry, Broadbent and Otley, 1995), institutional theory (Giddens, 1990), ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and body language (Pease, 1997; Glass 2002). In Putnam et al (1993), the issue of researcher interventions is discussed at length. Critical theorists argue that intervention is desirable to expose the different interests that shape management hegemony. Some of these, however, were in evidence in meetings prior to fieldwork between Andy, Tim and Harry:

Before the main meeting itself, Tim and I had a while to talk about Custom Products. It struck me that Tim is highly sceptical and at one point asked whether this was just a "New Wave con". It was quite strong language and made me cast my mind back to the communitarian texts that I'd reviewed the day before that suggested such an environment is oppressive.

During the meeting, Harry (the Managing Director of Custom Products Ltd) argued for a positivist approach so that the benefits of the culture could be proved. Andy wrote to Harry regarding his desire for certainty in the findings:

Coming from a practitioner tradition, I (like you) hanker after certainties that what we believe is 'best' can be validated by research. When I was studying at Leeds, we were taught research methodology by a psychologist … and she also believed strongly in hypothesis testing (a technique derived from natural sciences). Tim is from a newer school of management thought which argues that these techniques are

not adequate to investigate the complexity of organisations. In particular, they cannot adequately uncover the values and meanings that drive people to behave in particular ways.

I sympathise with your view that the research "needs to provide evidence in support of 'a better way' of doing things". However, I am concerned that I don't cross the line that separates research and political activism. If you have found 'a better way' the evidence will speak for itself and my task is to accurately and fully describe it within the rigour of an academic framework.

These entries illustrate Tim's scepticism and Harry's conviction regarding Harry's "better way" of governing at work. Andy, as an ethnographer, navigates these different interests while attempting to establish his own. Even before the fieldwork has begun, different parties have divergent expectations regarding the outcome.

The Emergence of Gender Links to Governance

Twelve months into the study, Andy wrote to Harry and John regarding the emergence of gender as a governance issue.

I was tempted to look at a 4th issue (gender equality/inequality issues) but thought it would overwhelm and divert the focus. I think you would be interested in some of the findings in this area, and the thinking it has provoked.

No response was received. Tim was initially cautious about letting Andy focus on gender issues as he also felt it would divert attention from more pressing issues. However, two further incidents arose over the next 6 months. Firstly, it emerged that a person's career progression had been blocked after they refused to desist from workplace relationships. Secondly, one of Andy's principle informants (Ben) was disciplined by Brenda 10-months *after* inviting Larissa for a drink. Ben was disciplined not for any specific misdemeanour (they did not go for a drink) but over the allegation that he *desired* a sexual relationship.

Brenda, Ben's head of department, regarded his drink invitation as 'immoral'. Ben objected on several grounds: that the allegation itself was untrue; that the accusation was driven by Brenda's own sexual jealousy; that objecting only to his behaviour was inconsistent with the company's equal treatment policy for men and women. Andy summarised the issues:

Stereotypes about the sexual behaviour of men are preventing people from assessing the viewpoint that Ben had work motives as well as personal ones in extending a drink invitation to Larissa. Ben has been heard on this, but does not seem to be understood. If others deem a sexual motive as unimportant to them it is irrelevant from Ben's perspective; it is the automatic and continued assumption that Ben was motivated by sex that is significant. This not only triggered the conflict, but has prolonged and sustained it.

Stereotypes about the sexual attitudes and behaviour of women are preventing people from assessing the viewpoint that Brenda may have had sexual or personal motives in challenging Ben's behaviour. The issue here is denial of the extent that women are affected by sexual desire at work, or that sexual attitudes might affect their management behaviour. In this area, Ben's views have been and continue to be ignored by everyone.

With the emergence of this conflict, Andy went back over his data and found a series of incidents that were similar.

> *The intolerant attitude to men is captured in some HR practices. I learned that John warned incoming women about Ben – it gave him a reputation as a womaniser. Ben's view - recorded after a social event - was that women latch onto him because he is a good listener (and also, in my opinion, because he is good looking). He comes across to me as a private person who does not go out much. The question here is who is doing the chasing!*
>
> *Charlie, a production worker, also has a reputation for being "over friendly". In the summer months Brenda and Diane are careful to ensure the younger female temps are not allocated to the department in which he works. I found him extremely friendly, and Diane said the same. Young women apparently find it uncomfortable to work with him, but instead of reassuring them that he is friendly to everyone, they keep young women away from him. The bias is towards protecting women and stereotyping Charlie as threatening.*

Decisions and choices regarding who works with who were being made on the basis that some men present a risk to some women. This shaped social relations within the workplace. The impacts of this (unwritten) policy did not just affect Ben (an office worker) and Charlie (a production worker), but also John (a director).

> *John said he'd got into trouble twice. He felt there was a dual standard around men making comments, or flirting, and women flirting that also operated against senior staff.*

John, who separated from his wife about six months earlier, told Andy about a relationship he desired. Brenda, however, warned him against pursuing it. Ben received a similar warning from Brenda that "flirting always leads to trouble" when she conducted his job appraisal. However, the issue became significantly more complex (from a research perspective) when Andy found Brenda *encouraged* a female manager to begin a relationship with a male director only weeks after he left his wife. Furthermore, Harry (the MD) had a workplace affair before marrying one of his employees. She eventually became a director.

Andy's theorising, therefore, began to change. It was not, perhaps, a blanket gender issue so much as a power issue in which sexuality was being used as the way of controlling or marginalizing particular people within different groups. When Andy started to articulate these findings, he found Harry impatient.

> *I talked to Harry about what I perceived to be inconsistent and unequal treatment, and I could see he was quite exasperated about it. He felt this was all about Ben's emotional needs rather than "objective" research. We had quite a frank discussion and I basically said that I was exploring the experience people have in the organisation. His response was to suggest I was being subjective.*

Harry felt this was a "fruitless line of enquiry" and started to question the value of the research. It impacted on Andy as follows:

Harry was having serious doubts tonight. He said I was digging myself into a hole. I am what I am and have to use that as a strength to get at things that are currently being obscured. It is not going to be what other people want to hear and, because of that, I am going to get labelled as subjective.

These issues came together in a meeting to discuss one of Andy's research papers.

Then, we talked about the gender issues. They thought there was not over-strict control. John challenged my version of our discussion by saying we discussed it only in terms of status. My journal entry, however, definitely notes that we discussed the gender dimension too and that he reported a gender-based double-standard. I have a story that John told me about a sales rep that he wanted to go out with, but that Brenda had told him not to approach her. I could tell at the time that he still wanted to, and was still considering it. Its hypocrisy. Harry courted his wife at work. Why is John being discouraged from dating someone who does not even share the same office?

They took on board my comments about some of the production staff but they did not see the gender dimension in the issue with Ben. I expressed the view that there would not have been an 'enquiry' if Ben had been Belinda - I pointed Harry to another incident where the genders were reversed and no 'enquiry' took place. He sees differences in these cases but I still find the inconsistency bizarre.

Methodologically, the raising of gender and the issue of emotional health started to create methodological problems. Brenda wanted to limit access to staff and requested that she be briefed on "issues" arising out of *each* staff interview. Andy felt that this would affect people's openness, the way he conducted interviews, and breach the principle of confidentiality. As a result, he collected data informally from people outside the management group. When Andy reported these to Harry, he dismissed the findings as "errors" in Andy's judgement.

Tim was still in two minds regarding a theoretical connection between gender and governance, but Andy felt sure he had established a relationship between hierarchy development and gendered behaviour that ran counter to assumptions in patriarchal theory. This, plus the issue of emotional health, presented Andy with his most difficult methodological and moral dilemma. How widely should he report the discord between management rhetoric and the accounts provided by members of staff?

I've received this poem from someone who feels they are 'dying' inside the company. And now I've had someone in tears on the phone. I suspect, but cannot prove, that there are people who have suffered so much emotional distress there that they have been signed off for long term sick leave. I feel I can understand the pain on both sides. I've sent papers to Tim, John and Diane. And I've contacted other people outside the management group to begin the process of authenticating what is going on.

I'm scared - I don't mind saying it. Sometimes you have to make a judgement and this is such a point. What I will not do, either for the research or in life generally, is leave people suffering when I know they are suffering. I've not enjoyed this - but I've got to do it. That is my obligation as a researcher. A critical ethnography has a commitment to expose power relations and bring about a situation that might lead to emancipatory change. This is a research commitment, but it is also my commitment as a human being.

The reaction to his intervention was swift. For allegedly failing to obey Tim's instructions about obtaining the consent of Custom Products managers before checking findings with staff,

Andy was disciplined by XYZ Consultants. Harry terminated the research contract and also insisted that Andy be removed from a research committee organising future joint research.

The data Andy collected, however, contributed to the authentication and development of the links between culture, gender and enterprise governance. In April 2005, his analysis found expression in a conference paper in which he concluded:

> *The framework and theory developed …opens up the possibility that the social processes by which one person comes to admire, help, rely upon, and submit to the authority of another has its roots in a bonding process that evolves over time between two people. Gender impacts on this process, as do economic considerations. The result is a relationship in which both parties submit to the other in different ways at different times. This being the case, theories of hierarchy that derive their inspiration from the market (Williamson, 1975) or contractual relations (Berle and Means, 1932) will need revisiting in order to account for, or accommodate, the social processes discussed here.*
>
> *I reviewed the behaviours that are typically characterised as patriarchal and suggest that their origin may lie in behavioural responses to matriarchal power. This supports an alternative gender discourse that patriarchal and matriarchal value systems co-exist at work and mirror those constructed in the home. …Social norms are ultimately worked out in our closest relationships. Out of these, the next generation is born, raised and socialised and the process of negotiation starts again.*

Conference Paper, April 2005

Discussion

In critical ethnography, the lack of an explicit agenda can induce participants to talk freely about matters that they do not realize will become the focus of the study. This applies to the researcher as well. The emergence of gender as an issue may have been possible only because it was not clear how important this issue is to governance practice. In this research, it created particularly difficult ethical issues.

Within codes of ethics, as with any normative system, contradictions occur between different values. Which values matter more? At what point, and how frequently should participant-observer inform participants what they are researching? How can the researcher do this when they are committed to allowing theoretical concepts to emerge? What is the ethical balance between suppression of findings at the insistence of ‘powerful’ people, and the researchers’ right to use accounts that were freely given? Should participants actively trying to influence a researcher’s interpretation of events be able to suppress their attempts? Is it ‘wrong’ for a researcher to challenge a manager claiming to speak for ‘the overwhelming majority’ when in possession of data from others who also claim to speak for ‘the vast majority’? Should the researcher remain silent, duck and dive (as one colleague put it), or

bring out the contradictions to see what happens? These are some of the dilemmas it became necessary to navigate.

The nature of critical ethnography is that participants (including the researcher) will encounter difficulties and contradictions (see Thomas, 1993). A study of culture is not conducted under conditions of calm in a cosy interview room with cups of coffee. Nor is it always possible to anticipate the impact of particular questions. It is real life, happening in real time, sometimes raw and deeply emotional. An ethnographer's obligation, in a participant-observation environment, is to use knowledge of the culture to act in ways that are consistent with it while noting down the events, feelings, dilemmas and outcomes for the purpose of later reflection.

It was put to me by a colleague that a researcher studying drug addiction would not themselves take the drugs. I agree with this sentiment but would add that living with the drug addicts, sleeping rough to see how it feels, staying with them when police arrive and allowing oneself to be deliberately mistaken for an addict are all valid strategies for learning. It can be dangerous, for sure, but the person best placed to assess potential risks and benefits is the researcher. If "misjudgments" are made, so long as the health of the researcher and participants are not endangered, they can yield highly valid insights.

Gill and Johnson (2002, p. 60) argue that "producing a more comprehensive study is never justified by putting the job of an informant at risk". It is easy to agree with this statement in the abstract. It fails, however, to capture the complexity of situations that occur in the field. Sometimes not intervening leaves informants at risk.

The paper on critical theory and ethnography (Putnam et al, 1993) is relevant here. Stanley Deetz argues that critical researchers have an obligation to intervene so that the power relations between managers and workers can be exposed. John Van Maanen, however, cautions against interventions unless there is a moral case, but confessed that he had occasionally made such interventions. The protagonists in the debate both agree that interventions are justified, but differ in their reasoning.

Aronson (2003) describes the dilemma as one between the value of freedom in scientific enquiry and the need to protect the dignity of human beings and their right to privacy. How, in this instance, could both be preserved? Concern for the health of some research participants required an intervention, but had impacts on other participants. The choice was not between harm and no harm, but between different levels of harm to different people.

The path followed had consequences for some people (including me personally) but in the circumstances, it was hard to see a better alternative. At the time, I chose to recount only my own experiences and hoped that any anger would be directed at me rather than other parties. But I underestimated the participants' trust in me. The intervention, in the sense of creating an environment in which bullying and gender issues could be productively discussed, did not work directly. Indirectly, it contributed to an understanding of how emotive these issue are. Over the longer term, it contributed hugely to the development of understanding.

Making Ethical Choices – Taking a Lead from Research Participants

How do I justify – on ethical grounds - the inclusion of particularly sensitive data? My view here is to suggest that the standard should be set by the claims and concerns of the research participants themselves. At Custom Products, the company vision is to "offer people with shared goals and values the opportunity for continued **personal** and **professional** development…" and the leaflet sent to potential recruits states that the company "is structured in a manner that allows people the freedom of expression and involvement they require in shaping the direction of their **lives** and **careers…"**[4]**.**

These claims are very specific. The company intends to impact on members "personal lives", not just their "professional careers", and this provides an empirical justification for paying special attention to the intersection between the two. If, in a company that sets out to allow people "freedom of expression…in shaping the direction of their **lives**…", it is found that directors' are inhibiting such freedoms, then the contradiction is worthy of close scrutiny.

Moreover, if inconsistencies arise regarding which company members are encouraged and discouraged from engaging in sexual behaviour (and also that company directors volunteer themselves for sexual games during company events), then it becomes legitimate for a researcher to consider the purpose of sexual behaviour in governance[5]. Lastly, if participants feel it is acceptable to challenge the moral conduct of others while oblivious to their own, then it is sensible to consider the impacts of perceived hypocrisy on the evolution of conflict.

The result is a *contingent ethics* approach, in which the standard is set with reference to the findings of the research. The researcher explores what participants choose to make relevant and consider the question "why?" If the data and theorization offends sensibilities, it may be that the cultures described are offensive when judged by alternative criteria. Each reader's emotional reactions provides insights into *a priori* perspectives and values.

Unraveling Ben and Andy

The issue of representing the researcher is a central issue in critical ethnography. In this case, Ben was constructed out of four cases. Sometimes, Ben's relationship with Andy reflects dialogue between participants and myself inside Custom Products. But in other parts of the ethnography, my own experience is used to create a dialogue between myself as participant and myself as researcher. Why this choice?

It resulted from a realization that aspects of my experience were common to others inside the organization while other experiences were related directly to my research role and previous life experiences. It was put to me that conflicts arose because some of my behaviour was incompatible with my role as a researcher. This view, however, was not consistent with the empirical data that was collected. For example, it was considered quite acceptable to have drinks with staff early in the research, and sexual behaviour (both towards me, and by me) was not simply allowed to pass unchallenged, but even welcomed and encouraged. Later, as was the case with other organization members, this was re-constructed as inappropriate to serve managerial ends.

When my (and several others) behaviour was reframed as "inappropriate" it revealed how a person's status oscillates between insider and outsider within their peer groups. This is reflected in changing sexual attitudes. As Thompson and Ackroyd (1999) comment, such recasting of workers' behaviour is a useful management technique when there is a need to exclude or reestablish control over organization members. When exercised, however, it contributes to the creation of counter-cultures that are hidden from managers.

John, for example, while an obvious and repeated target of sexual behaviour by Diane, was cautioned by Brenda about pursuing a relationship. At the very time John was being discouraged from pursuing a woman socially, Brenda *encouraged* a relationship between a female manager and her director. Casting behaviour as "appropriate" and "inappropriate" was contextually related to shifts in influence and power. Member's status vacillated from "insider" (when encouraged to be sexual) to "outsider" (when discouraged from the same).

Conclusions

Ethical problems arise when research participants confront aspects of themselves that do not match their self-image. While it is not the job of researchers to court controversy, it is in the nature of research to create it. Reporting new perceptions of truth (i.e. reporting that which is

hidden by a culture) *will* create controversy. In an odd sense, the value of a research project is proportional to the amount of controversy it creates.

In ethnography, the most acute dilemmas relate to data collected in informal settings, or about non-formal aspects of organization life. If, for example, a key member of staff responsible for upholding corporate values expresses private reservations and concerns after a drunken night out, is it the responsibility of the researcher to report this or discard it? Are these data unreliable or the most reliable? My view is that data obtained when the constraints of a culture have been removed by a *change* of social setting are the *most* reliable (see Hammersley, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

It is precisely the presence of the researcher in so many different settings that allows them to "penetrate the various complex forms of misinformation, fronts, evasions and lies' that are considered endemic in most social settings" (see Gill and Johnson, 2002, p. 165). Not reporting or using them leaves the ethnographer open to the charge made by Ward and Werner (1984) that the ethnographer will undermine their research if they fail to report and consider dissonances between different data.

The separation between Andy and Ben creates greater authenticity, plausibility and epistemic reflexivity through the capture of dialogue between past experience and present action. While I could not experience social life in *precisely* the same way as others, or draw *precisely* the same conclusions, by matching my behaviours and feelings to those reported to me, it is possible to construct *authentic* and *plausible* insights. Through the creations of discourses, a new way is offered for the researcher to be a "research instrument par excellence" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 19) by using "the researcher's knowledge of his own feelings" (Douglas, 1976, p. 16) to provide deeper insights into a culture.

Researchers need to balance their responsibility to consider the well-being of participants with responsibility to theorize about how data changes in different settings. But, if faced with a choice between falsification or reducing the hazards to research participants, then the latter can only be done to the extent that the former does not occur. If the findings are not to participants liking, is it the proper response of a researcher to lie to them, or change findings to make them feel better? My feeling is that this cannot be justified any more than deliberately deceiving or harming research participants in order to gain greater scientific understanding.

Participants, however, can be protected during dissemination not only by changing their name and altering their biographical details, but also by creating coherent discourses from multiple participants and presenting their words through a single character. This not only affords greater anonymity, it preserves authenticity. Secondly, it affords sufficient protection to a researcher (as participant) to engage in epistemic reflexivity without endangering their friends and family.

---

[1] "Cognitive dissonance" emerged during fieldwork as a concept deployed by senior managers to understand employee resistance to 'shared values'.

[2] I found this enhanced my ability to critique my own behaviour, values and impacts.

[3] Ben's discourse is constructed out of four cases (three participants and myself). My contributions are based on journal entries made while in the field.

[4] Internal company document agreed by managers, and a promotional leaflet sent to potential recruits.

[5] Particularly when human resource staff tell the stories to newcomers during induction sessions.

References

Ackroyd, S. & Thompson, P. (1999) *Organizational Misbehaviour,* London: Sage Publications.

Agar, M. (1986) *Speaking of Ethnography*, London: Sage Publications.

Alvesson, M. & Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research,* London: Sage Publications.

Aronson, E. (2003) *The Social Animal,* Ninth Edition, New York: Worth Publishers.

Berry, A., Broadbent, J. & Otley, D. (eds) (1995) *Management Control: Theories, Issues and Practices*, Macmillan Press Ltd

Blyler, N. (1998) "Taking a Political Turn: The Critical Perspective and Research in Professional Communication", *Technical Communication Quarterly,* Vol 7, No. 1, pp. 33-52.

Brewer, D. (2000) *Ethnography,* Open University Press.

Buchanan, D. & Huczynski, A. (1997) *Organizational Behaviour,* Third Edition: Prentice-Hall Europe.

Burrell, B. & Morgan, G. (1979), *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis,* Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Clough, P. (1992) *The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism*, London: Sage Publications.

Collinson, D., Hearn, J. (2001) "Naming Men as Men". In S. Whitehead, F. Barrett (eds), *The Masculinities Reader* (2001), Cambridge: Polity.

Crossley, N. (1998) "Emotion and communicative action" in G. Bendelow and S. J. Williams (eds) *Emotions in Social Life,* London: Routelege.

Dey, C. (2002) "The use of critical ethnography as an active research methodology", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol 15, No 1, pp. 106-121.

Douglas, J. (1976) *Investigative Social Research: Individual and Team Field Research,* London: Sage.

Farrell, W. (2005) *Why Men Earn More,* New York: Amacom.

Festinger, L. (1957) *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Giddens, A (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Gill, J., Johnson, P. (2002) *Research Methods for Managers*, London: Sage Publications.

Glass, L (2002) *I Know What You're Thinking*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Goffman, E. (1969) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotional Intelligence*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gummerson, E., 2000, *Qualitative Methods in Management Research,* London: Sage Publications.

Hammersley, M. (1992) *What's Wrong with Ethnography*, London: Routledge.

Hammersley, M., Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 2nd Edition, London: Routledge.

Hearn, J., Parkin, W. (1987) *Sex at Work: the power and paradox of organisation sexuality*, Wheatsheaf.

Hearn, J., Parkin, W. (2001) *Gender, Sexuality and Violence in Organizations: The Unspoken Forces of Organization Violation,* London: Sage Publications.

Hochschild, A. R. (1998) "Sociology of emotion as a way of seeing" in G. Bendelow and S. J. Williams (eds) *Emotions in Social Life,* London: Routelege.

Holland, R. (1999), "Reflexivity", *Human Relations*, Vol. 52, No. 4, pp. 463-482.

Johnson, P., Duberley, J. (2000) *Understanding Management Research*, London: Sage Publications.

Kasmir, S. (1996) *The Myth of Mondragon*, New York: State University of New York Press.

Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2004) "Impossibilities of Reconciliation: Validity in Mixed Theory Projects", *Qualitative Inquiry* 10(4), 601-621.

Laughlin, R. (1995) "Methodological themes: Empirical research in accounting: alternative approaches and a case for 'middle-range' thinking", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability,* Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 63-87.

Lodh, S., Garffikin, M. (1997) "Critical studies in accounting research, rationality and Habermas: A methodological reflection", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting,* Vol 8, pp. 433-474.

Megginson, D. (2002) *Research as Personal Unfolding,* Manchester: The Revans Institute for Action Learning and Research, University of Salford.

Miller, G. (1962), *Psychology: The Science of Mental Life,* London: Penguin Books.

Pease, A. (1997) *Body Language (Third Edition*), Sheldon Press.

Putnam L. L., Bantz, C., Deetz, S., Mumby, D., Van Maanen, J. (1993) "Ethnography Versus Critical Theory: Debating Organizational Research"*, Journal of Management Enquiry,* Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 221-235.

Ridley-Duff, R. J. (2005) *Communitarian Perspectives on Corporate Governance,* Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

Schwartzman, H. (1993) *Ethnography in Organizations,* London: Sage Publications.

Snow, D., Morrill, C., Anderson, L. (2003) "Elaborating analytic ethnography: Linking field work and theory", *Ethnography,* Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 181-200.

Sutherland, S. (1992) *Irrationality: The Enemy Within,* London: Constable.

Thomas, J. (1993) *Doing Critical Ethnography,* London: Sage Publications.

Townley, B. (1994) *Reframing Human Resource Management: Power, Ethics and the Subject at Work,* London: Sage Publications.

Van Maanen, V. (1988), *Tales from the Field: On Writing Ethnography*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ward, J, Werner, O (1984) "Difference and Dissonance in Ethnographic Data", *Communication and Cognition,* Vol. 17, No. 2/3, pp. 219-243.

Weick, K. E. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations,* London: Sage.

Wilson, F. (2003) *Organizational Behaviour and Gender (2nd Edition)*, Aldershot: Ashgate.