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The Broad and the Narrow in Ethnography on Organisations[1]

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Conference Essay:

Conference on Ethnographic Organisational Studies. St. Gall, 19-21 September 2002, organised by Thomas S. Eberle and Christoph Maeder

Key words: ethnography, organisations, systems, qualitative methods

Abstract: The aims of this essay are twofold: to review a recent conference on ethnographic organisational studies in St. Gall and, based on this, to examine some shortcomings of ethnographic approaches to organisational studies. Such shortcomings include the non-specificity of the conceptualisation of organisations and, to a lesser extent, the relative lack of reflection on epistemological and procedural issues of the empirical method. Nevertheless, the conference was a success in that it highlighted the variety, flexibility, and scientific value of ethnography for the social and political sciences.

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1. Introduction

Ethnography is well established in social anthropology and is rapidly expanding into sociology, psychology, organisational studies, and other allied fields. Despite the so-called interpretive or hermeneutic turn in the social sciences that has also influenced and, some would argue, undermined this discipline (REINHARDT, 2002), ethnography has clearly established itself as an important alternative to other qualitative approaches as a method for the applied social sciences. Ethnography was the specific thematic focus of the Swiss Sociological Association's Research Committee on Interpretive Methods in 2002, and it will continue to play an important role in the European Sociological Association's Research Network on Qualitative Methods, given the research interests and expressed goals of its recently appointed chair, Thomas S. EBERLE. Partly as a result of the promotion of this method in Switzerland, an international conference on ethnographic organisational studies was organised by EBERLE and Christoph

1 This report will also appear in the *Bulletin der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Soziologie/Schweizerischen Vereinigung für Politische Wissenschaft* in 2003.

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MAEDER, and held in St. Gall in September 2002. Its explicit goals included an exploration of the following questions (Conference Programme, 2002, p.4):

- How to conceive of an organisation?
- What theoretical concepts and frameworks to use for this kind of research?
- How to get at and document the lived experience of organisational members?
- How to assemble the diverse perspectives portrayed?
- What poetics to use in distributing ethnographic knowledge from organisational studies?
- What role does politics play in relation to management science? [1]

In addition, three "foci of interest" were listed in the programme: theoretical issues, methodological issues, and organisational ethnographies (ibid.). The ambitiousness of the programme and its goals was reflected in the proceedings of the conference. To discuss systematically what went mostly right—and occasionally wrong—I have organised this report into three parts: an outline of the major themes implied by this conference, a brief review of selected conference contributions, and suggestions for future endeavours of this nature. [2]

2. Themes of the Conference

Given the conference theme and its broad goals, I would have assumed that the presenters would theorise about ethnography and illustrate how it can play an important role in organisational studies. Whether or not these expectations were met depends on how broadly or how narrowly we want to define the terms "ethnography" and "organisation". [3]

2.1 Ethnography

There are many ways to conceive of ethnography, most of which are highly contested. The definition of ethnography by HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON (1995, p.1) is one of the most frequently cited in the field:

> "... we shall interpret the term 'ethnography' in a liberal way, not worrying much about what does or does not count as examples of it. We see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or sets of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research". [4]

As "liberating" as such non-specific definitions are in the sense that they refrain from delimiting ethnography from methodological approaches and methodical procedures of many other qualitative (and some quantitative) studies, one could argue that such broadness not only muddles the distinction with other methods, but, more importantly, may threaten the integrity of a social science project

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because the research question, data collection and analytical method, and the raw data are highly interdependent (BERGMAN, 2002). If data collection and data analysis methods are theoretically and empirically unclear, then it is difficult to judge whether the research question can be answered from the data, and whether specific interpretations can be sustained from vague theoretical and empirical starting positions. As SPINDLER and SPINDLER declare: "without a unique subject matter as well as a methodology, there is no discipline" (1992, p.60). This concern is indeed sustained, though unintentionally, by HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON themselves (1995, pp.1f.):

> "... there is a sense in which all social researchers are participant observers; and, as a result, the boundaries around ethnography are necessarily unclear. In particular, we would not want to make any hard-and-fast distinction between ethnography and other sorts of qualitative inquiry. Given the broadness of this definition of ethnography, as well as its emphasis on data collection, it is not even clear to what extent ethnography is limited to analytical approaches categorised under the label 'qualitative methods'". [5]

A more narrow definition of ethnography can be found in JOHNSON (2000, p.111): "An ethnography is a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do". This definition includes a purpose (to describe), a means (observation of behaviour), and a target (people in a social system). Leaving aside for this report essay the question of what social life, culture, and social system actually mean, we can nevertheless conclude that this definition is more specific with reference to its purpose and its target. Of course, some ethnographers would argue that, in contrast to ethnomethodologists[2], their activities are not limited to the detailed description of micro-interactions, but include explanation, abstraction, theorising, and prediction. Also, they not only observe, but may conduct interviews and surveys. Obviously, such extensions would lead us back to broadening the definition and, therewith, to admit into the methodological category of ethnography more research and more researchers—thus reintroducing opaqueness into its approach, theory, and processes. Consequently, while a narrow definition may exclude too much, a broad definition may exclude too little. [6]

It was quite apparent from the tremendous variety of the presentations at the conference in St. Gall that ethnography was defined rather broadly. While the wealth of themes and approaches may have confused the uninitiated, the conference convincingly demonstrated the multifaceted possibilities of application of ethnography—broadly defined. The presentations as a whole emphasised

2 According to GARFINKEL (1991, p.10), "[t]here are good reasons for ethnomethodological studies to specify the production and accountability of immortal, ordinary society—that miracle of familiar organisational things—as the local production and natural, reflexive accountability of the phenomena of order. Among those reasons is making discoverable one of those phenomena of order, but only one, namely what analysis incarnate in and as ordinary society, as practical actions locally and interactionally produced and witnessed embodied details, could adequately be". Or, as BUTTON (1991, p.5) states far less poetically but slightly more accessibly: "Ethnomethodologists seem quite incapable of plainly stating how they see, for example, action, without reference to some study of action. Even that seems to be so damningly trivial for they end up talking about the structure of, for instance, greetings on, of all things, telephones, not action".

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multiple, case-specific illustrations of the effectiveness of ethnography. From their multitude—many of them excellent representatives of the method—the initiated observers were able to extrapolate for themselves many theoretical and procedural ideas and principles. [7]

2.2 Organisations

It is not uncommon to think of organisations as systems (PARSONS, 1951; LUHMANN, 1971). Most broadly, "[a] system is a structure of interacting, intercommunicating components that, as a group, act or operate individually and jointly to achieve a common goal through the concerted activity of the individual parts" (THOMAS, 1979, p.20). Given this broad definition, there is no need to qualify ethnography because by its definition—broad or narrow—its focus is always somehow related to systems and, by extension, organisations. In other words, because groups, tribes, families, communities, corporations, associations, clubs, etc. are systems or organisations in a broad sense, and because these are being studied by ethnography, the study of ethnography is automatically the study of some form of organisation or system. [8]

In a narrower sense, however, an organisation can be conceived of as a group of people intentionally organised within a formal structure to accomplish a common goal or a set of common goals.[3] Such an organisation would include for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, as well as clubs and all types of formal associations. It would exclude the study of families, tribes, or (sub-) cultures. [9]

While many of the contributions at the conference in St. Gall were indeed focussed implicitly on organisations in a narrower sense, they were ethnographic studies within specific organisation. Thus, it was not always clear to what extent these studies differed from the study of organisations in the broader sense, and how the specific knowledge derived from a particular study might shed light on either ethnography as a tool to study organisations, or, more abstractly, on organisational behaviour, members of organisations, and contextual influences on organisations. [10]

3. The Conference Presentations

The list of presenters was indeed impressive in that it included many key figures in the field. This gave a rare and valuable opportunity to demonstrate the wealth and value of ethnography as well as to explore divergent views. In addition, numerous Swiss researchers had the opportunity to demonstrate the richness of their work to an international audience. Intense academic exchanges into the early hours of the morning were facilitated by the excellent atmosphere, which was underpinned by the effective organisation and lavish hospitality by the hosting institution, the Soziologisches Seminar at the University of St. Gall. [11]

3 While intentionality and the pursuit of a goal or a set of goals may be a good starting point for defining a formal organisation, it is not necessary that all members share equally in these intentions or goals.

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Many excellent presentations were offered across keynote and panel sessions, ranging from studies on the Welsh National Opera Company in Cardiff by Paul ATKINSON, on mushrooming and restaurant kitchens by Gary Alan FINE (1996; 1998), on transcripts of life narratives by Jaber F. GUBRIUM (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2001), a repeat-attempt by David SILVERMAN to re-resuscitate Harvey SACKS for ethnographers (1998), on the phenomenologist and philosopher Alfred SCHÜTZ and his lessons for ethnography by Thomas EBERLE (e.g. 1999), on the advantages of "focused ethnography" by Hubert KNOBLAUCH, on analytic advantages of case comparisons between two therapeutic communities in the Los Angeles area by Darin WEINBERG (2001), and on welfare offices in St. Gall by Eva NADAI and Christoph MAEDER. In all, nearly 30 presentations were scheduled over two and one-half days. The participants from the eleven countries came from as far as Australia, Israel, and the United States, and from as close as St. Gall. In this section, I will present a few comments on individual presentations. Inclusions are in no way related to the pertinence, status, or entertainment value of the contributors or their work. [12]

The single most methodologically explicit and focussed presentation, i.e. the contribution that was most clearly tied to a distinctive research method, was, in my opinion, Paul ATKINSON's work on the Welsh Opera in Cardiff. Interestingly, his method for this study was strongly related to ethnomethodology[4]. This was evidenced by his wonderfully detailed descriptions of a string of micro-interactions, which he observed during the countless rehearsals he attended over the years, his reluctance to abstract from these but, rather, to produce, by way of explanation, further examples, and by his refusal to be bullied into more general conclusions when pushed by other participants during question time. For instance, when Gary Alan FINE suggested that ATKINSON ought to draw more general conclusions from his work, the latter responded that describing as honestly and as detailed as possible what has been observed is difficult enough. [13]

In a review of his past research endeavours to demonstrate a central theme throughout his work, Gary Alan FINE introduced a "peopled ethnography". In complete contrast to the ethnomethodological work by ATKINSON, and, to some extent, ethnography, FINE defended a "peopled ethnography", i.e. a discipline that ought to be theory driven, associated with other studies or embedded within a set of studies, conducted in multiple research sites, and generalisable with regard to social behaviour. Furthermore, he proposed to study the social dynamics of small groups, as well as to differentiate structures from interaction and to concentrate on structures, given that the agentic nature of interactions makes their systematic study difficult, if not impossible. Coming from an ethnographer, the emphasis on small, controlled groups, generalisable findings beyond a particular context, confirmation of findings through replication, and the separation of structures from interactions appeared initially surprising. For example, it is difficult to think of interactions independent of structures since interactions are usually thought of as structured according to roles, scripts, norms, values, habitus, culture, or whatever other label one wants to use; this

4 See Note 2.

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applies equally to experiences and expressions of agency. In other words, why should we study structures, if they do not moderate interactions and agency? Or, alternatively, what do interactions and the delimitation of agency tell us other than the context-specific presence or experience of some social structure? Given his background in experimental social psychology, however, these requests are less surprising as particularly experimental social psychology is interested in social or cultural universals that structure human interaction. Here, human responses are explained according to specific conditions that are experimentally or at least situationally introduced. [14]

An interesting disagreement arose between Jaber F. GUBRIUM's appeal for interviews as a vehicle for documenting life and work histories and narratives, and David SILVERMAN's dismissal of interviews because they were nothing but moment-specific productions and, thus, unreliable to document genuine experiences or states. Instead, SILVERMAN proposed to return to Harvey SACKS' writings on the methodological foundations of science and, indirectly, toward linguistically-oriented conversation analysis. I had a feeling that, whether or not by design, GUBRIUM and SILVERMAN were talking past each other. It is indeed true, and GUBRIUM is unlikely to disagree, that interviews are nothing but an interaction between interviewee and interviewer, sensitive not only to the vagaries of the interviewers' questions and probes, but also the current context and the social roles that each of the actors plays. It is also true that, accordingly, interviewees produce nothing but what they are able and willing to disclose under their particular circumstances, while interviewers hear nothing but what they are able and willing to hear, under their particular circumstances (FODDY, 1994; BERGMAN, 2002). Nevertheless, the reported information is thus not automatically a fictitious construct of the interviewees' imagination, i.e. only existent in the minds of the informants, nor is it automatically uninteresting for ethnography and sociology to find out how and why individuals make sense of something within these constraints. Accordingly, SILVERMAN presented an extreme view that gave rise to interesting debates. [15]

A wide range of issues were addressed throughout the sessions. Given the time limitations of such an event, there are always some areas that remain underdeveloped. In my view, these were particularly concentrated in three areas. First, none of the presenters, to the best of my knowledge,[5] explained in any detail how they *analysed* their data. They certainly gave wonderful examples on what information was collected and what conclusions were drawn from these, but a discussion on how to select that which is used from all other possible observations, how to sort and categorise these observations, and how to interpret and report them—all that was practically absent. While I would not expect such details at a conference that deals with a substantive issue, e.g. classroom education, health and risk behaviour, etc., I would certainly expect more methodological small print at a conference dedicated to a method. Second, we know very well about reflexivity and the role of the ethnographer during observing, noting down, sorting, and reporting (e.g. GEERTZ, 1979; 1988), so I

5 I was unable to attend all presentations because some of them took place in parallel sessions.

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would have expected more engagement with reflexivity, understanding, and interpretation, including the underlying and constantly present undercurrent of functionalism, which seems to pervade most ethnographic studies. Third, I would have expected more explicit discussions on formal organisations, how to study them, and the contribution of ethnography to their understanding and study. Instead, the presentations were mostly about an ethnographic study within or of, but not about, organisations. [16]

In all, however, the conference in St. Gall was wonderfully illustrative of, first, the many ways in which ethnography can be applied and, second, how flexible ethnography can be as a research method. It gave me many ideas about my current and planned studies, and it demonstrated the tremendous insight that this method could provide into the lives and contexts of individuals, groups, and organisations. Ethnography clearly must be considered as an important tool for the applied social and political sciences. [17]

4. Conclusions and Future Directions

It is quite rare to find so many leading scholars of one field in one place, willing to discuss their work, or, rarer yet, engage with the work of others. The exchanges between Swiss and international ethnographers in St. Gall were extremely fruitful in at least three ways: first, Swiss researchers were able to profile and discuss their work in front of an international panel of experts; second, it allowed for important public debates among international experts, particularly with regard to incongruities and often implicit assumptions; third, it introduced the current state-of-the-art and the most central debates in ethnography today to many Swiss participants. For me, the conference demonstrated the utility and scientific value of ethnography. [18]

Ethnographic studies in formal organisational settings are by no means new (e.g. ROETLISBERGER, DICKSON, & WRIGHT, 1939; GOULDNER, 1954; WEBB & WEICK, 1979), nor are they particularly rare, especially since the 1990s in Anglo-Saxon organisational studies (e.g. SCHWARTZMAN, 1993; CZARNIAWSKA, 2001; KATZ, 1997; ORR, 1996). As systems, organisations are a collection of parts, including administrative components, members, and environment, that are highly integrated. There is mutual influence and ongoing feedback among these parts, which may or may not contribute to various intended and unintended processes, goals, and outcomes. If we take a narrow view on what organisations are, we can come up with a variety of research themes that can be pursued effectively through ethnographic work, broadly or narrowly defined. A cursory review of subjects of inquiry within this context include organisational evaluation and its effects, organisational identity and members' commitment, stratification, management styles and decision making, group dynamics, types and degree of power, organisational cooperation and conflict, communication and learning, structural maintenance or adaptation, boundaries and their change, as well as explicit and implicit roles, norms, and values (e.g. GREENBERG & BARON, 1999; OSLAND, KOLB, & RUBIN, 2000). In addition, new trends in sociology including cross-cultural issues, globalisation, changes in occupational and

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organisational structures due to globalisation and urbanisation should also be within the scope of an ethnographic approach (cf. CASTELLS, 1996; URRY, 2000; BECK, 1999). Finally, a conference on a particular research method should definitively include some presentations on the step-by-step execution of the method and, if possible, a discussion of its epistemological and philosophical position. Even if such a project is fraught with problems and exceptions, it would be enlightening to practitioners and observers alike to see ethnographers' practices actually spelled out. [19]

The conference was a success in its demonstration of the breadth and success of ethnography. The conference presentations were particularly strong in demonstrating how ethnography can be used effectively. Less convincing was the application of ethnography in a narrower sense of organisational studies. This, however, cannot be blamed on the method, which is certainly capable of holding its own in this area. I am looking forward to seeing more ethnographic studies (narrowly or broadly defined) on organisations (narrowly defined). The many excellent examples presented at this substantively impressive and well-organised conference have illuminated part of the way. [20]

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