Revisiting Ethnography in Organizational Communication Studies

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Organizational Communication and Ethnography: Setting the Scene

Sarah J. Tracy and Bryan C. Taylor

This forum considers recent trends in *organizational communication ethnography*, a distinctive tradition of qualitative research. Historically, ethnography has been valued for its unique ability to generate nuanced findings that vividly explain *how* communication is meaningful and consequential for organizational actors. Customarily, ethnographers pursue this ideal through distinctive practices. These include *embedding for extended periods* in routine organizational settings; *generating detailed, descriptive data* from their observation of, interaction with, and interviewing of organizational members; *preserving* those actors' indigenous meanings for their artifacts and

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activities; *using inductive and hermeneutic approaches* to analyze that data (i.e., that permit the emergence of categories); *and "writing up" lengthy narrative accounts* that invite readers to empathize with depicted organizational scenes.

The communication discipline does not lack for overviews of ethnography (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Tracy, 2020b), including those in the field of organizational communication (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001; Tracy & Geist-Martin, 2013). These texts serve practical functions in exposing readers to methodological knowledge and guiding their development of research projects. But practicality is not the only relevant standard for assessing ethnography's status within organizational communication. Alternately, we might view ethnography as a *significant symbol* for our *scholarly community*. That is, ethnography has not only provided *technical knowledge* for conducting organizational communication research—it has also shaped the field's *self-understanding* (e.g., as endorsing a humanistic conception of social science). Ethnography subsequently enables the performance of *a particular kind of identity* in organizational communication studies, one contrasted with alternate epistemologies (e.g., positivism) and researcher roles (e.g., experimentalist). As a result, we can appreciate how, as ethnography evolves, it stimulates collective feelings such as *nostalgia, anxiety*, and *aspiration*. That evolution invites us to reconsider deep, interconnected questions of *what we do, how we do it*, and *who we are*.

We believe this perspective usefully illuminates recent trends in organizational communication ethnography and their implications. Historically, the ethnographic tradition was institutionalized as the communication discipline integrated the interpretive and linguistic "turns" of late 1970's western social science. Philosophically, this change hailed researchers to use reflection and empathy in understanding situated knowledge arising from their collaborative interaction with social actors. It stimulated the development of qualitative methodologies suitable for "reading" and critiquing the *cultural* and *political* dimensions of organizational communication. Responding with curiosity and enthusiasm, trailblazing ethnographers conducted studies that advanced the field's understanding of how phenomena such as *performance, ritual, ideology, resistance*, and *storytelling* operated in the workplace (Taylor, 2017). Among members of the field's older generations, certain features of this history have been romanticized (Kuhn, 2005) in tales evoking bold careers, key innovations, and enduring legacies. And as with all such myths, new generations of scholars have explored and built upon their decay.

In this forum, we isolate and clarify these developments and discuss what they portend for ethnography's future in organizational communication. Four leading ethnographers responded to our invitation to reflect on how their

careers demonstrate trends in the field's evolving relationship with ethnography. Those reflections are followed by commentaries from early career-stage and senior ethnographers. Collectively, these contributions illustrate the persistent diversity and vitality of ethnographic research conducted in organizational communication, as well as forces serving to constrain—if not threaten—its continued development. As a result, they raise important questions concerning the field's ongoing stewardship of its ethnographic inheritance. Before turning to those contributions, we first provide a foundation by discussing six observations, partly arising from our own ethnographic careers.

First, a recent meta-analysis of publications in *Management Communication Quarterly* (Stephens, 2017, p. 133) suggests that *traditional conduct of ethnographic research in our field is declining*. Granted, approximately two-thirds of the articles published in our flagship journal from 2001 to 2015 used *some* form of qualitative methods. However, closer analysis shows that increasingly fewer of those qualitative studies make use of *observation*,[1] which is a distinctive method of ethnography. Taking its place are increased uses of interviewing, discourse analysis, and content and rhetorical analyses of online data.

Second, *this apparent decline in conventional ethnography may be attributed to several trends* (Taylor, 2017). These trends include: (a) radical transformation of organizational structures and cultures produced by economic globalization, which have *both* expanded *and* complicated traditional conception of ethnographic research sites; (b) the neo-liberalization of academic-professional life, characterized by overwhelming workloads of teaching and service labor that reduce scholars' available time for conducting ethnographic research; (c) tenure and promotion standards encouraging scholars to rapidly publish numerous, condensed studies in specialized journals that enforce shrinking word-counts; (d) a generational shift occurring in the field's ethnographic community, brought about by the retirement and untimely death of some of its leading members; (e) fragmentation of the field's preferences for the form and content of ethnographic research (e.g., for "realist tales" vs. autoethnography; discussed further below); and (f) renewed competition for methodological legitimacy, created by post-positivist promotion of "big data" collected from social media platforms as the *desideratum* of communication research (Bisel et al., 2014).

Third, *organizational barriers to the successful conduct of ethnography appear to be growing*. Here, three examples of related trends may suffice. The first trend involves increased reluctance by organizational authorities to grant ethnographers access, attributable in part to organizational concerns over protecting intellectual property and preventing mandatory reporting by researchers of discovered wrongdoing (Harris, 2019). Second, cultural norms

for organizational communication are evolving in response to innovation in information and communication technology (ICT). The effects of ICT innovation on organizational communication are, of course, not direct, singular, or determinate. However, to the extent that contemporary ICT incentivizes the practice of short, transactional, disinhibited, and/or hyper-strategic communication, it may undermine ethnographers' traditional use of *embodied dialogue* and *sustained negotiation* to develop an ongoing research presence with organizational members (Tracy, 2020a). A third trend involves growing civil unrest related to the rise of identity-based politics and social justice movements. The workplace manifestations of these conflicts are themselves a rich object of ethnography. They may also, however, stimulate reactions of mistrust and opposition among organizational members, based on the perceived divergence between their interests and those of ethnographers. Whether occurring singly or together, these trends undermine ethnography's conventional reliance on researcher displays of *curiosity, vulnerability*, and *improvisation.* They threaten the legitimacy of *trial and error* as a means for ethnographers to connect and learn with organizational members (Jensen et al., 2019).

Fourth, *the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the conventional contexts of both organizational communication and ethnography*. In many organizations, employees must now adapt to work-from-home policies and the rise of Zoom culture. In others, ethnographic research is charged with the morbid aura of public health and personal risk (e.g., in studying front-line health-care providers). Of particular interest is how the new regime of remote work and online meetings has transformed the conduct of participant-observation. For example, it is now a very different (but perhaps not impossible) task for ethnographers to "shadow" the work-related movement of organizational members through a laptop camera (Gill et al., 2014).

Fifth, ethnography exists in a complex—and potentially awkward—relationship with our field's reigning theoretical perspective, the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO; Brummans & Vézy, in press). The number of CCO-related ethnographies is relatively small, conducted primarily by affiliates of the program's "Montreal School." These studies vary significantly in how they conceptualize and practice ethnography (e.g., as participatory vs. non-participatory). This paucity is partly because of CCO's (ethno-) methodological heritage, which emphasizes the transcription and analysis of audio- and video-recorded interaction, and its relatively materialist onto-epistemology (e.g., influenced by Actor Network Theory). These elements differ with key, inherited premises of cultural anthropology and sociology that have historically shaped organizational communication ethnography. Those premises alternately emphasize the reflexive study of

symbolically-mediated, intersubjective meanings, as they arise experientially for ethnographers through their immediate encounters with organizational members. However, this tension between traditional and CCO approaches (e.g., regarding conceptions of agency; preferred units of analysis, etc.) is by no means static. CCO ethnographers, for example, are increasingly adopting "post-qualitative" (see St. Pierre, 2021) methods that enable them to trace both the human/linguistic and non-human/extra-linguistic processes of organizational becoming. Time will tell how this development will influence CCO and non-CCO ethnographies in the field.

Finally, ethnography continues to serve as a powerful resource for advancing our field's projects of increasing organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion—for example, by de-centering western conceptions of organization itself (Cruz, 2014). In this process, frequently, ethnographers surface communication phenomena that organizational members may be unable or unwilling to acknowledge and discuss. In probing the mundane sediment of organization, however, ethnographers frequently encounter ethical issues arising from the phenomena of struggle (Rivera, 2015), tragedy (Miller, 2002) and trauma (Cruz, 2016). These conditions may inspire critical ethnographers to engage in projects of judgment and advocacy, which may in turn conflict with traditional scholarly values that de-politicize social-scientific research (e.g., detachment and neutrality).

Although our comments above have emphasized some challenges currently facing organizational communication ethnography, we conclude by noting two positive trends. First, *we celebrate the growing benefits created for our field, our employing institutions, and our communities by ethnographic projects serving the goals of social justice and community engagement* (Mesmer et al., 2020). These projects frequently illuminate contexts and issues of communication that have been overlooked or ignored, including those associated with international and trans-national organizing (e.g., Cruz, 2016; Dutta, 2019). They also explore consequential, high-risk, and technology-intensive industries (e.g., construction, finance, insurance, real estate, and utilities) and elevate the concerns of groups that have been marginalized because of their members' age (Way, 2013) or sexuality (Eger, 2019). Second, *we see much promise in the use of digital media for organizational ethnography*. Three related advances here include researchers' use of photo- and video- methods that enable their participants to contribute self-produced data (Wilhoit, 2017); depiction of "multicommunication" conducted simultaneously by organizational members across different channels and platforms (Stephens, 2012); and exploration of growing incursion by biometric and artificial intelligence technology into the conventionally human, symbolic,

and ideational realms of organizational communication (e.g., as platforms for change programs of "digital transformation").

Finally, we briefly note two types of reform we believe may help to sustain the ethnographic tradition within organizational communication. The first is *greater support provided by employing institutions for early-career leaves and interdisciplinary collaboration* among their tenure-track faculty (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). The second is *more targeted recruitment by graduate programs of professionals*, who may already enjoy access to ethnographic research sites through their current and former employers (see, e.g., Baron et al., 2018).

We turn now to short essays and responses from our contributors. As reflections on career experience, these narratives are both unique and synergistic. They depict *how* ethnographic research programs develop in the field of organizational communication, *what types* of forces enable and constrain their development, and *how* scholars can negotiate those forces. To help focus their narratives, we asked our contributors to respond to the following five prompts:

- How has the status of ethnography in organizational communication changed since you were first exposed to this tradition?
- What recent trends make you optimistic about the future of ethnography in organizational communication?
- Which trends make you pessimistic?
- How do you navigate any tensions between these trends in your own work?
- How do you see the current crises of a viral pandemic, economic collapse, and racial injustice affecting organizational communication ethnography?

First, Will Barley recounts his lifelong fascination with the practical conduct of "work," which has guided his study of how STEM-organizational actors shape interaction through their design and use of artifacts. Second, Shiv Ganesh recounts his participation in our field's developing identification with the interests of globalization and social justice. That work has required him to maintain a delicate balance between traditional needs, to bound field sites and center disciplinary interests, and to embrace the benefits of flexible research design and interdisciplinary scholarship. Third, Laura Ellingson advocates for the ethical and intellectual benefits of conducting embodied ethnography, particularly in light of COVID-19's disruption of the sensual dimensions of organizational communication. Fourth, Andrew Herrmann traces the resurgent appeal of autoethnography as a means of

evoking the authentic experience of organizational actors—particularly, groups of employees and stakeholders who are commonly excluded by dominant conceptions of industry and professionalism. These contributions are followed first, by Rebecca Rice's reflection on themes of crisis and hope in our current ethnographic moment, and second, by Boris Brummans' unorthodox use of *haiku* poetry to crystallize this forum's recurring themes.

In conclusion, we hope that this forum will stimulate reflection and discussion concerning our field's stewardship of ethnography, both as a venerable methodology and a key element of our communal story.

The Action around Interaction: The Value of Organizational Ethnography for Theorizing Communication and Work

William C. Barley

I have always been curious about how and why people do their jobs. This curiosity grew as I started my first job in the automotive industry and realized my day-to-day experiences were far more politicized and irrational than the functional descriptions my managers used to shape my expectations about my job. This trend continued as I started systematically observing workers: people rarely did their jobs in the ways they *said* they did them. Being there revealed the fascinating, but subtle ways that communication shaped work practices. My goal in this forum contribution is to lay out a rationale for the continued value of ethnographic work as affording opportunity to develop, critique, and expand how we theorize organizational communication. My argument centers on how ethnography uniquely reveals otherwise invisible labor and leads us to challenge our assumptions, which is particularly important as our discipline reflects critically on its practices, structures, and values.

Goffman (1983) famously argued that social interactions are *the* site where social orders are negotiated. This argument always appealed to me because it centers communication dynamics—if interactions order our world, it follows that communication is the mechanism by which such ordering occurs. Further, the perspective that interactions (re)construct meanings, identities, and structures aligns with recent arguments in our community viewing communication as the *site* where organizations are constituted (e.g., Kuhn et al., 2017). Yet, despite the importance of interactions for organizing, studying interaction alone is insufficient to capture the complexities of how communication pervades work.

Ethnographic methods shine for their unique possibility of revealing deeply constitutive roles that communication processes play *outside* of, as

well as within, interactions. Taylor and Van Every (2011) argued that *because* interactions are sites of negotiation, we should expect individuals to take explicit actions within and between them to shape the direction for the collective. Goffman (1959) described this labor outside of, but referential to, interaction as "staging." He illustrated this concept by invoking the work of a real estate agent meticulously cleaning a house to create the appearance of comfort, and a radio host rehearsing their phrasing in order to appear relaxed during their performance. Despite its clearly communicative nature, the success of staging relies on its invisibility during interaction, which makes the labor of staging difficult to reveal without the uniquely situated affordances of ethnographic methods.

To illustrate this claim, I want to share three quick examples from my own fieldwork of how "being there" in the spaces between interactions let me see subtle tactics by which individuals engaged in staging labor to establish authority over future interaction episodes that would have otherwise been invisible. Each example comes from my fieldwork studying STEM contexts. STEM contexts have always appealed to me as field sites because they lend themselves to revealing the centrality of communication in organizational contexts where the value of interpretation and negotiation are often downplayed in dominant discourses of objectivity (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Latour & Woolgar, 1979). Thus, observing communication in STEM holds the possibility of re-centering the situated practices of ordering (Kuhn & Jackson, 2008; Leonardi, 2015) and uncovering the subtle work of staging to illustrate the deeply constitutive role communication plays in organizing (e.g., Cooren et al., 2008; Vásquez & Cooren, 2013).

My first example comes from our fieldwork studying cross-occupational collaboration within a global automobile manufacturer (Barley et al., 2012). When my co-authors and I started observing engineers at work, it became immediately obvious that engineers spent a majority of their days navigating jurisdictional battles about how to design the "best" car possible. One of my favorite excerpts from this project followed Carol, a safety and crash engineer, choosing to exclude data from a chart she was building for an upcoming meeting where she anticipated a potential fight with her peers. By anticipating her peers' values and excluding data that she believed might instigate conflict, Carol demonstrated a complex staging action that would have been *entirely* invisible had we not shadowed her during moments of mundane work. If her tactics of excluding information effectively circumvented conflict, she would have staged a future cross-boundary interaction in a manner that would invisibly secure her authority over the vehicle design—by controlling the contents of the representation before an interaction, Carol "won" a potential fight before it even happened.

A second example comes from my fieldwork observing atmospheric scientists developing applied weather forecast technologies (Barley, 2015). A core tension driving work in this site was scientists' need to balance their own goals of producing new scientific knowledge with their applied partners' practical objectives. Again, the tactics by which researchers managed this tension were *only* apparent when observing scientists at work outside of meetings or interviews. One example I observed surrounded researchers' choice to "nudge" how they visualized the results of their forecast models because they learned their current representational practices were leading their peers to distrust the model. The labor involved in shifting this representation produced meaningful organizational outcomes: it satisfied applied collaborators while protecting the researchers' ability to keep working inside their models. And, the power of this labor drew heavily from its invisibility to operational forecasters during interactions with the forecast model.

My final example comes from fieldwork studying the labor of organizing emergency pediatric transfers at a Children's Hospital (Barley et al., 2020). I was shadowing "Diane," a member of the hospital's transport team, as she engaged in a series of phone calls to coordinate the emergency transport of a teenage girl with an unknown mass in her abdomen. Diane had already secured authorization from Pediacare's physicians to transport the patient when a phone interaction with the referring hospital revealed important new information about the patient's medical history. After hanging up, Diane described the deliberative process by which she ultimately decided *not* to call Pediacare's physicians to share this new information.

Here, I want to focus on a potential counterfactual of imagining ourselves having only been present for the phone calls between these practitioners or having captured this case via post-hoc recollection. Although our data would have still been very rich, we would likely have missed at least two important implications revealed during this observational moment. The first implication has to do with the role of Diane's expertise in facilitating coordination at Pediacare. Diane's colleagues valued her capacity to *know* when additional communication was unnecessary, because this capacity helped ensure transports could occur in the quickest and safest way possible. The second has to do with authority: as a nurse, Diane perceived her occupation to exist in tension with that of many decision-makers within the hospital. Her capacity to *avoid* interactions with physicians served as a powerful source of her authority over the coordination process and one that would have been invisible had we not been there to see her action.

Each of these excerpts exemplifies a moment when being there to see staging work challenged my assumptions about communication processes and revealed the subtle ways that workers challenge and establish authority in

their work. This centering of otherwise unseen labor—and challenging of assumptions—is what makes me so optimistic about the continued importance of ethnography in organizational communication. As the opening essay of this forum argues, our discipline is in the midst of a time of reflection, where we are being called on to look more deeply at the practices underlying the visible interactions occurring within our discipline. I believe that organizational ethnography will continue to be a useful tool for helping us engage in this reflective process.

Plus ça change: Globalization and the Ethnographic Imagination

Shiv Ganesh

Looking back, I view my preparation for an ethnographic career as having been intensive, shocking, and sometimes traumatic. It involved working as a social work researcher with impoverished under-trial prisoners in Mumbai, following people as they were brutally processed through a convoluted justice system, and trying to identify what conducting an effective and just intervention might mean. This experience attuned me to ethnography in its fullest sense; as an immersive, longitudinal, and multi-methodological engagement; as an epistemic and ethical stance; and as a form of praxis. I continued to learn these lessons over five projects spanning two decades, and a sixth which has just begun. Issues of globalization and social justice have been critical and generative to all of them.

The first, my PhD project, begun in Delhi in 1998, examined transnationalism, governmentality, and technology in an environmental non-government organization (NGO). I started the second in 2002 amongst a group of NGOs in the Indian state of Goa, studying postcolonial alignments of grassroots agendas for change with global discourses of sex trafficking. After moving to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2005, I began my third project in the form of research with groups of global justice activists. This work evolved into another project 5 years later on technology and activism—this time based on the work of a global platform collective called Loomio. In 2016, after a 14-year gap, I returned to India, this time studying the displacement and silencing of indigenous Adivasi communities in Bandipur district in South India and their repositioning at the margins of a global neoliberal development apparatus. And finally, in early 2020, several colleagues and I began a transnational study of transparency and organic cotton supply chains that connect Sweden with India.

This self-conscious reflection highlights three major shifts in how I have "done" ethnography over the last two decades. For one, the sites

themselves have shifted from treating organizations as containers within which ethnographic studies "happen," to an emphasis upon multiple spaces and events in which organizing activities coalesce, strengthen, and disperse. My 2012 study of the Occupy movement, which led to my engagement with Loomio, for instance, traced logics of aggregation. It focused on how those logics produced activists in particular locations, upended traditional notions of protests as being outcomes of organizing, and positioned organizing as the outcome of protest events (Ganesh & Stohl, 2013). My current project on organic cotton supply chains stretches across continents and implies multiple contexts and histories that configure consumption and production across a wide range of organizations, cooperatives, and activist groups.

Second, I can see a shift in emphasis from description and critique toward action and praxis. I clearly remember explaining to a scientist at the NGO I studied for my Ph.D. that I was a student of communication and his impatient response: "Well, what do you do with it?" Most researchers have been asked that question, but to me it stood in stark relief with those activists and friends, who I joined a decade later at protests against the Trans-Pacific Partnership, who took it as given that my presence there was useful, and who occasionally helped with directing my attention to people, slogans, or events (Ganesh, 2014). More recently, I have taken to writing public opinion pieces even as my fieldwork progresses, given the broader needs of the movement for Adivasi rights in India. In my last project, our team incorporated "micro-interventions," situated, small-scale, issue-based action in the context of long-term ethnographic engagement, to help with immediate community exigencies related to health, water, and rights.

A third and related shift is that my work has become more collaborative. Like most uncertain early career scholars, I did fieldwork in a way that was both individualizing and marginalizing. In contrast, my recent ethnographic projects have all been collaborative for many reasons, including my increasing confidence as an ethnographer; the increasing acceptability of collaborative work; or maybe even because my last four projects have been externally funded. Such collaboration has taken two forms; working with other scholars, and working with participants. My work with Cynthia Stohl on technological transformations in activism, for example, involved a multi-year ethnographic engagement with Loomio, a platform collective that facilitates digital decision making amongst activist groups (e.g., Stohl et al., 2018). This work stretched my own skills as an ethnographer when it resulted in collaborating with the collective itself to do some large-scale quantitative analysis of activist organizing archetypes. Working with the collective and subsequently

with other NGOs as coauthors has, in a sense, flipped some conventional dynamics of participant observation: not only was I, as a researcher, actively acting upon and impacting the research scene—but the "participants" were impacting how instruments were being designed, what data were being collected, and what modes of analysis were proving useful. In addition, participants were even active in placing our collective work in public fora.

Consistent with the famous French adage used as the title of this contribution, it is precisely because there have been major changes that crucial things about ethnographic work have stayed the same. Here, my experience likely mirrors those of others. Perhaps foremost, ethnography continues to be a quintessentially inefficient mode of knowledge production. This means, first, that to be good, it has to be laborious, regardless of whether or not the ethnographic site is a single organization, a community, a platform or an app. Ethnographic engagement demands a lot. It takes time, energy, and emotional commitment, and in the process, you can be sure to confront your worst demons, from doubts about your own self-worth and tendency to procrastinate, to doubts concerning the relevance, value, and importance of the project. It is also why I advise students to pick something they care about, because they will have plenty of occasion to question it over the next several years! Another dynamic that makes ethnography classically inefficient is the fact that one never knows how productive it is going to be in terms of publication. I published four pieces from my PhD research, but precisely one piece from the follow-up project on trafficking (Ganesh, 2007). For years I considered that to be dismal. I would even refer to it as my "failed" ethnography—until I realized I had derived plenty of insights from that project that informed not only how I prepared for and conducted subsequent projects, but also how I thought about theory and research themselves.

A second constant, perhaps an idiosyncratic one, is the fact that in all my studies, communication has started as *background* (or at least, ground) before eventually becoming *foreground*. That is, my work has started by centering issues of justice, inequity, and collective action, whether those relate to globalization, economic inequality, or indigenous displacement (Ganesh, 2018). There have been moments where I have wondered whether this focus made me a weak (organizational) communication researcher, especially during my feeble early attempts in the field to explain to participants how my efforts were "communication"-related. At other times, however, fieldwork has shown me vividly that starting from a place that involves a problem regarding justice or equity enables all of us to see how communication is implicated in every aspect of our being in the world. The current organic cotton project, for instance, is helping me see how transparency itself is a visual communication practice that actually constitutes what counts as sustainability and which

organizes and arranges an entire global apparatus, starting with the soil in which cotton is grown in South India and refracting back into endless consumption practices across Europe.

A third constant in these projects is that, like most organizational communication scholarship, they have been animated and inspired by debates, discussions, and controversies that occur as much outside the field as they do inside it. I first found inspiration during my Ph.D. for doing ethnographic work on globalization from Burawoy's (2000) sociological work on extended case studies. Similarly, my use of neoliberalism and governmentality as key constructs in that project came from the work of another sociologist, Rose (1996). It is only fitting that the ethnographic study of globalization, justice, and organizing be cosmopolitan and interdisciplinary. It is difficult, if not impossible, to study globalization and be bounded by site, object of inquiry, or academic domain. Additionally, it would be profoundly ironic if, following decades of critique of the container metaphor, organizational communication ethnographers succeeded in perpetuating that metaphor as an image of the field itself. If there is anything that this recounting of my ethnographic work could claim to teach its reader, it would be to continue to reach across boundaries in order to better understand our own place. Doing so would, in fact, be in the finest traditions of the ethnographic imagination.

Excess, Embodiment, and Ethnography

Laura L. Ellingson

I have an unruly body. Following bone cancer, staph infections, several "salvage" surgeries, and the amputation of my right leg, my body-self is inescapably intertwined with the biomedical technologies' that saved my life, and then threatened my life, and then saved it again. I limp along fairly well, both grateful and exasperated, keenly aware that I practice ethnography in and through my marked body. Between my reflexivity and primary focus on studying communication in healthcare settings—a deeply body-centered topic—it never occurs to me to pursue disembodied data collection or representational strategies. In the more than 20 years I have been practicing and writing about ethnographic inquiry, embodiment theorizing has become a compelling force. Even as many qualitative researchers opt for less time-intensive and geographically constrained forms of data collection, I suggest that embodied ethnography is alive and well in organizational communication research, and I fully expect it to persist—the COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding.

Organizational communication scholars have long rejected models of organizations as containers; to study organizational communication is to

study people communicating and organizing. Likewise, critical theorizing of embodiment rejects the metaphor of the body as a container for the self, in favor of understanding "the body . . . [a]s simultaneously physical and affective, social and individual, produced and producing, reproductive and innovative" (Jones & Woglom, 2015, p. 116). Thus, to conduct organizational ethnography is to have ethnographers' body-selves intra-acting (Barad, 2007) with participants' communicating and organizing body-selves. Critical theorizing of gender, race, disability, sexuality, and other embodied, intersectional identities has long pushed back against the stubborn myth of the ideal worker who exists only to serve the organization. At best, the ideal worker has no body at all, and at worst *his* perfectly functional body never breaks down, requires accommodation, or has dependents who disrupt his availability (Acker, 1990). Female employees cannot be ideal workers, given their excessive (hetero-) sexuality, propensity to leak, and persistent role as family caretakers. The bodies of LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, disabled, and other marginalized groups also frequently fail to conform to organizational ideals (e.g., Harter et al., 2006; Jones, 2020). Moreover, even the most privileged bodies inevitably exceed bodily boundaries when measured against impossible ideals.

Embodied ethnography pushes back against supposedly bodiless organizational norms through practices that involve occupying shared space, participating in interpersonal interactions, and engaging with material objects (Ellingson, 2017). Ethnographers attend to rich sensory details in and through the fluidity of identities and practices of embodied and emplaced body-selves of participants and researchers (Jensen et al., 2019). Embodied ethnography in organizational communication draws on diverse theoretical and methodological traditions, including sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), feminist new materialisms (Grosz, 2018), posthumanism (Barad, 2007), evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004), practice theory (Hopwood, 2013), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and post-qualitative onto-epistemologies (MacLure, 2013). Moreover, organizational communication ethnography overlaps with subfields such as health communication (Willer et al., 2020) and spans interdisciplinary fields, including critical management studies (Beavan, 2019) and education (Hare, 2020). In the following, I briefly explain four strengths of embodied ethnography that make it irreplaceable as an organizational communication methodology.

First, embodied ethnography links the material and discursive as joint foci in research without resorting to simplistic functionalism. One recent embodied ethnography described how workplace food and drink rituals at four businesses shaped and reflected organizational cultures (Plester, 2015). Workplace food and drink rituals welcome new members and wish exiting members well, celebrate individual, team, or organizational milestones, share seasonal

holidays, or establish socializing routines, such as Monday morning bagels or Friday "happy hour" drinks. Sharing food with co-workers can create ambiguity around organizational messages of goodwill and care, or conversely, control and manipulation. Such events become materially and discursively ritualized through repetition and development of norms.

Second, embodied ethnography illuminates the power of actants, or non-human agentic objects in/as organizational communication, resonating with the CCO perspective's emphasis on materialism, albeit through a focus on participants' strategic use of objects rather than the researcher's creation of material data objects. Mahadevan (2015), an ethnographer of Indian-German heritage, studied an IT development center in India. Specifically, she examined two embodied performances for women engineers and managers within this male-dominated workplace. She observed that, when promoted to management, women engineers stopped eating meat dishes to conform to the more elite practice of vegetarianism. In addition, women managers' workplace clothing choices formed a double-bind. Wearing a "traditional," feminine sari signaled that they were not "modern" enough, while wearing figure-conforming, Western pant-suits risked revealing a failure to perform rigorous bodily discipline (i.e., thinness). In this case, both food and clothing exerted agency as nonverbal communication about the women managers' identities.

Moreover, embodied ethnography enables collection of data about practices and activities that would be otherwise unknowable. For example, Hopwood (2013) explored an organization that provided 24-hour assistance and training to families staying there to address parenting challenges. Hopwood described the embodied practice of caring for a baby:

> I am in a darkened room, there is soothing music playing quietly. . .
>
> Light enters through a gap in the door, enabling me to see the four-month-old baby boy. . . I am rocking the cot [crib] forwards and backwards on its wheels. . . I am conscious of how my feet are planted on the floor, the grip of my shoes keeping me in place as I push and pull the cot. . . I notice that my "shushing" has developed a rhythm in synch with the cot motion, sh-sh-sh-shhhhh. I feel the air brushing past my lips, aware of how slight changes in their shape affect flow and sound. (Hopwood, 2013, p. 228)

Hopwood's senses enabled him to see, listen, touch, and smell the work of the caring organization; he learned practices through his body that could not be understood through talk.

I note one final strength: embodied ethnography makes explicit that researchers' embodied standpoints are central to ethnographic design, data collection, analysis, and representation. Make no mistake: embodied standpoints are at the center of *all* data practices (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Yet (post-) positivist, interpretive, and, ironically, much critical scholarship, fails to adequately address the ways in which research practices are rooted in researchers' and participants' embodied experiences as they intra-act. This choice likely reflects efforts to establish credibility by deemphasizing the messy process of how the research-sausage gets made. Since my ethnographic beginnings, I have taken the risk of identifying openly as a cancer survivor with impaired mobility and chronic pain and reflected explicitly on how my identities produced (and are produced by) my research findings (Ellingson, 1998). My white and heteronormative privileges have undoubtedly facilitated my successes, while my gender, disability, and explicit descriptions of bodily failures during fieldwork have rendered me more vulnerable.

While I am optimistic about the enduring promise of embodied ethnography, I am not naïve. I recognize neoliberal pressures for scholars to produce copious publications in short time periods and continued bias against ethnographic research by funding organizations and far too many hiring or tenure committees. I know that marginalized scholars encounter racism, ableism, cis-sexism and heterosexism, and ethnocentrism that make it more difficult to secure organizational access necessary for ethnography, and concerns over liability have made it tough for any ethnographer to access some settings. Digital ethnography is now common (even if not to my taste), raising provocative questions about the performance and obfuscation of embodied identities and practices (re)encountered through mediated access to organizations (e.g., email, Zoom, Slack). I have explored interviewing and arts-based research practices as primary methodologies in some projects, forgoing ethnography. Finally, the pandemic has (rightfully) placed an indefinite hold on most embodied ethnography. Nevertheless, I remain certain that embodied ethnography will persist for the same reason that in-person education, work, and social events will also resume eventually—because we remain viscerally aware of how much we miss out on when we remain at a distance.

Organizational Autoethnography as Applied Research

Andrew F. Herrmann

Recently, someone told me that organizational culture research in our field is dead (see Taylor et al., 2013). I don't believe it. Consider the related case of

organizational autoethnography, a method that is particularly useful for investigating organizational cultures. Although the phrase "organizational autoethnography" may seem oxymoronic, it's not. Autoethnography is personal, written in the first-person, laden with emotion and reflexivity (Ellis et al., 2011). In contradistinction, organizations are groups working together in systems toward a common goal within auspices of power and culture (Deetz, 1985).

Organizational autoethnography doesn't fit neatly into our managerial and organizational communication disciplines. Nonetheless, the organizational autoethnographic tradition is over a century old, and organizational autoethnography is prolific (Herrmann, 2020). Autoethnographers write about education (Poulos, 2010), family business (Lindemann, 2017), health care organizations (Brommel, 2017), technology (Herrmann, 2018b), churches (Kramer, 2018), sports (Trujillo & Krizek, 1994), and more. Organizational autoethnography seems hidden because it is published across multiple disciplines.

Ellis et al. (2011) noted that autoethnography includes three parts. Selfhood and subjectivity ("auto-") is utilized to interpret and represent ("-graphy") the beliefs and practices of a group or culture ("ethno-"). While first person positionality is a necessary component of autoethnography, it is not sufficient (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). Autoethnographies start with "an *individual* researcher, who interrogates their self and their positionality within larger social contexts" (Herrmann, 2017, p. 1, emphasis in the original). Autoethnography presupposes the personal is saturated within the social, personal biases, intersectionalities, and subjectivities (Adams et al., 2015). The "ethno" of autoethnography can include doing fieldwork, examining both discourses and Discourse, becoming an insider, conducting ethnographic interviews, guiding conversations, scrutinizing grand narratives, and examining documents to gain emic cultural understandings (Adams et al., 2015; Krizek, 2003). Autoethnographies must include the "ethno-," recognizing that the cultural is personal and the personal is cultural. Last is "-graphy." Autoethnographies are evocative, full of emotion, and more existential than academic (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020). Autoethnographies illustrate "everyday life, which is always first person, deeply felt, rooted in our past, not always rational, and often messy" (Goodall, 2004, p. 188). Autoethnographers write texts that are accessible to larger audiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Therefore, autoethnographers use the modus operandi of literature, including dialogue, narrative vignettes, foreshadowing, conversations, flashbacks, short stories, and poetry.

So, what makes an autoethnography an organizational autoethnography? Organizational autoethnographers write first person personal experiences to

appraise, assess, and critique organizational cultures and practices (Herrmann, 2020). Critical organizational autoethnographers envision liberating people from harmful organizational forces. Moreover, organizational autoethnographers produce unique and innovative understandings of the powerful dynamics at play in and around organizations. Let's briefly consider some examples.

Denker's (2017) piece about working at a dive bar offers an unsettling portrayal of the bar as a site of heteronormative discourses and practices while doing "dirty work." She explored her participation in the sexualized performance she called "Kathy the Bartender."

> *At work I am Kathy. Kathy likes to giggle. Kathy thinks that your stories are immensely interesting. Kathy thinks your job sounds really complicated and stressful. Kathy thinks that you deserve to relax, in fact why don't you just have another. Kathy tells you that your kids are adorable. Kathy says that your girlfriend is lucky to have you.* (p. 28, emphasis in the original)

Additionally, Denker examined the economic conditions and familial discourses that led her to slogging through shifts in the dive bar, and the manifold dilemmas and subjectivities animating her organizational life.

Arnold (2020) provides an example of the value of autoethnography for organizational learning. In this piece, she tells the horrific story of losing her son Davis via stillbirth. She recounts what she later told a hospital administrator.

> Do you realize that minutes after I handed over my son's dead body I was wheeled past the well-baby nursery and past rooms where new mothers were nursing their infants? I saw healthy babies being taken to their waiting families. All night I heard babies crying because my recovery room was right next to every other postpartum recovery room. (p. 213)

Arnold subsequently worked to create a bereaved parent community, started a nonprofit, and through her work, the hospital changed policies for stillbirthed children and their parents.

Finally, Hunniecutt (2020) wrote a piece about the anxiety, depression, and self-harm ideation she experienced after she separated from the US Army National Guard.

> When I was experiencing psychological darkness and my own crisis of identity my first few months out of the guard, I did not talk about it. I pretended separating from service was not impacting me, and I denied myself time and space to mourn the loss of structure and community I was undoubtedly experiencing at that time. (pp. 129–130)

Having not seen herself in the extant veteran research, Hunniecutt now works at the Chez Veterans Center to improve the lives of veterans. These examples suggest that organizational autoethnography is not some transcendental narcissism, but has real world utility for organizations.

Some suggest that only insiders can write organizational autoethnographies. I find this problematic. It potentially reifies academics' stories over others'. It reifies the organization as a container metaphor and denies the multiple, partial, and simultaneous status of organizational memberships (Weick, 1979). Differing positionalities offer possible directions for the future of organizational autoethnography (Herrmann, 2020). Organizational autoethnography can be done from numerous subject positions: employee, gamer, fan, client, volunteer, supplier, visitor, etc. For example, I wrote about identity and communication a comic book shop from a regular customer's perspective, noting how "geek culture" developed in interaction with employees reifies masculine norms (Herrmann, 2018a).

In this way, organizational autoethnographies don't have to be about formal organizations, per se. They can be about *organizing*—the complex, organic, and dynamic process of circulating energy to create (dis-) order. Webb (2020), for example, has shown how she adopted the concept of polyamory as the organizing metaphor for running her two businesses simultaneously. Adams (2020) discussed how the culture of queer bars can serve to organize patrons' relational lives, as well as their personal safety.

In conclusion, while autoethnography may currently seem liminal within organizational communication, we do well to recall experimental and trailblazing efforts (e.g., De La Garza, 2004; Pacanowsky, 1988; Taylor, 1997). Building on those precedents and the energy of current movements, we should consider how our field can fully join the interdisciplinary resurgence of organizational autoethnography.

Response from an Early Career Scholar

Rebecca M. Rice

This forum, much like the year 2020, has brought up new questions, issues, and paths forward in ethnography. It was impossible to read these essays without thinking of my recent research, a virtual ethnography of one U.S. county government's COVID-19 response. Here, I touch on three themes I saw across the forum essays and put them in conversation with challenges and observations from my own recent ethnography.

First, the authors grapple with the increasingly virtual nature of organizational life. Their essays seem to view this evolution as a potential constraint

on ethnography, pointing out how technology disembodies us as researchers and poses challenges to our ability to gain understanding of backstage "scenes" of organizational life. Simultaneously, the condition of increasingly virtual work invites ethnographers to step into a future where virtual spaces are unignorably part of organizing. Online work is very much part of our real work experiences, even more so recently (Hallett & Barber, 2014). Rather than seeing the push toward virtual organizing as a loss of richness in data, we can explore it as an essential part of life in 2020 and beyond that actually *increase*s our understanding of organizational life.

I suggest that, based on this forum's contrasting expressions of optimism (for example, Ganesh's encouragement that we continue to decenter Western experiences, and Ellingson's call to consider nonhuman actants), that virtual ethnography can expand our boundaries and understandings beyond static organizations to engage *the communicative conduct of organizing across space and time*. Virtual ethnography makes communication technologies visible and present in organizational interactions, even when our participants do not acknowledge their presence. Virtual ethnography also allows us to transcend distance and travel constraints in ways that can facilitate more international collaboration. Finally, in my current project, I see the potential for virtual ethnography to increase our organizational access. In my COVID ethnography, the fact that participants met virtually seemed to eliminate the traditional concerns that a researcher could be "in the way" and instead allowed for relatively unobtrusive observation.

A second point of convergence in the essays is that ethnography seems incompatible with current academic pressures to publish quickly. Ganesh's statement that ethnography is "a quintessentially inefficient mode of knowledge production" resonates with my experiences as an early career scholar. When people hear of the number of hours that my COVID research requires, they often express their hope that it is "worth it," meaning that it will lead to numerous publications. The scholars in this forum seem to defend against ethnography's time-consuming nature by invoking value. Barley makes this argument clear when he states that ethnography allows him to observe the "back stages" that would otherwise be invisible in work. I also believe ethnography can be aligned with current calls to produce knowledge that appears "useful" to the outside world, allowing us to argue for relevance. I encourage the scholars in this forum to continue to argue for that value and to recognize their ability to hire ethnographers, agree to review ethnographic work, and mentor upcoming ethnographers.

Perhaps early career scholars have no choice but to internalize optimism as a survival mechanism. Even so, the focus on praxis in ethnography that Ganesh discusses can increase access to organizations and our value for our

universities and communities. For example, I currently see promise in the relationship between volunteering and ethnography (Garthwaite, 2016). In my current study, I have taken on the role of a volunteer in the COVID-19 crisis response. Doing so has given me greater access, led to me seeing my research participants more as co-creators of knowledge (Lewis, 2012), and created embodied knowledge about organizational practices as Ellingson describes.

The final theme I see in this forum is that ethnography holds promise to make the researcher visible. The authors invite us to consider how the challenges of 2020, including racial injustices, economic collapse, and COVID-19 affect our ethnographic work. I have heard from colleagues working in these areas who feel overwhelmed by the gravity of their projects. Ellingson's invitation to consider embodied standpoints remains relevant. Even if research has gone online as we sit at home, researcher identities, bodies, and practices are still implicated in the relationship among knowledge, organizing, and technologies. My continuing ethnography this year has highlighted the potential for ethnography to become a *resilience practice* (Rice & Jahn, 2020)—that is, resilience is both something I *study*, and something *that studies me*. As our field's ethnographic research from this challenging period appears, I hope we do not erase how ethnography helped us understand our embodied experiences, both in and out of the field.

Seven Haiku for the Ethnography of Organizational Communication

Boris H. J. M. Brummans

The contributions to this forum inspired the following response in the form of seven non-traditional haiku-style poems. Several of these poems are based on the works of process philosophers such as William James, Brian Massumi, and Alfred N. Whitehead. Kind thanks to Camille Vézy for providing valuable comments and suggestions. This text is dedicated to my dear Japanese friend and colleague, Toru Kiyomiya.

> there is no relation between
> the subjects in the field and me
> only fields of relations unfolding[2]

> doing ethnography requires faith in
> one another like coordinating protests, robbing trains,
> or the incepting of dreams[3]

knowledge about an organization is
not the organization coursing through your veins
and passing through your being[4]

organizations are series of events
stretching out beyond the horizon and back
waves of activity and potentiality[5]

emic understanding is merely possible
when in the midst of everything i
lose myself inside the storm[6]

gliding together across the surface
we move in a dance of expressions
it takes two to shadow[7]

white horse standing alone, peacefully
affects and affected by this organization's trans/formation
every constituent, human, other-than-human, counts[8]

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Notes

1. That figure declined from 29% of all empirical studies published by the journal during the period 2001-2005, to 11% in the period 2011 to 2015.
2. Based on Lapoujade (2020, p. 15) and Massumi (2011, pp. 34–37).
3. Based on James (1897, pp. 24–25) and the film *Inception* (Nolan & Thomas, 2010).
4. Based on James (1917, pp. 478–479).
5. Based on James (1912), Massumi (2011, pp. 1, 32–34), and Whitehead (1967, 1968, 1978).
6. Based on Brummans (2014).
7. Based on Vásquez et al. (2012).
8. Based on Brummans and Vézy (in press).

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