

Ethnography Learns From Direct Sales

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Abstract

By applying the “learning from looking elsewhere” approach we offer recommendations for the advancement of ethnographic practice derived from a study of direct selling distributors. The article is based on a long-term field study (observations and interviews) conducted among sales forces for a global direct sales cosmetics company. The study is supplemented with the inclusion of auto-ethnographic vignettes from the authors’ personal experiences as ethnographic researchers and supervisors. We develop a typology of four coping strategies’ currently functioning in direct selling organizations: 1) offer routine to follow; 2) make the task manageable; 3) offer emotional purpose; and 4) provide an opportunity for gradual immersion. This typology can be usefully applied for categorizing, communicating, and developing strategies for ethnographic practice. Finally, new aspects of basic academic activities for organizational ethnographers are identified.

Introduction

In *Surviving Fieldwork: A Report of the Advisory Panel on Health and Safety in Fieldwork* published by the American Anthropological Association, apart from the important issues of the hazards of HIV exposure for anthropologists, the guide suggests specific means for handling loneliness and social tension (Howell, 1990; see also Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000). As the publication shows, it is not ever easy for an uninvited

stranger to enter a community or organization and study it. Diverse examples of such fieldwork challenges are consistently discussed within all disciplinary traditions where ethnography is applied, including management. This paper contributes further to the growing body of methodological knowledge on the challenges of ethnographic practice. In it, we reflect on techniques that could be used to prepare junior ethnographers for handling, emotional difficulties of fieldwork.

During this effort, we asked ourselves what we can learn from direct selling distributors. In that manner, the problem is approached in an uncommon way, instead of analyzing the experiences of ethnographers only, as is usually done, we directed our attention to practices of those who are not researchers, but face similar challenges of self-motivation, moral justification, unpredictability, and blurred boundaries between private and professional life in their own work. The starting point for this endeavor was the observation that anthropological fieldwork produces similar issues and obstacles as those experienced by a direct sales force. The presented findings are grounded in empirical material gathered during an ethnographic research project on transnational multi-level marketing organizations operating in Poland. This article is an attempt of “learning from looking elsewhere” (Hine, 2001, p. 67) an approach sometimes used to characterize ethnography (Miller, 1997). The aim was to learn from direct selling a new perspective about ethnography and offer suggestions on how we can be better researchers and supervisors.

The first part of the article reviews the literature on the challenges that ethnographic fieldwork poses. The empirical section presents a typology of coping strategies that are already functioning in direct selling organizations. Then we conclude, and illustrate with examples, that this typology can be usefully applied to categorize, communicate and develop new coping strategies for ethnographic practice. We argue that new aspects of basic academic activities (e.g. codifying research methods and gaining approval of the Institutional Review Board) can be acknowledged if interpreted through the presented framework offered here. Highlighted in the article are the aspects of a formal research methodology and the IRB process that has not yet been explicitly discussed in the literature. This reinterpretation is needed, as it allows us to gain a better understanding of how some academic practices can help or hinder handling the unique challenges of ethnography.

The Challenges of Ethnographic Fieldwork

The Darker Side of Ethnography

The diverse aspects of “being there” are indeed analyzed in the literature (Pritchard, 2011). Ethnographic fieldwork is a very intense experience for a researcher, as they may face social tension (Howell, 1990; Kloos, 1969; Manyoni, 1983), conflicting loyalties (P.A. Adler and P. Adler, 1987), moral and ethical problems (Hatfield Jr., 1973; Jarvie, 1969), temptations (El-Or, 1992; Newton, 1993), and other difficulties (Jemielniak, and Kostera, 2010). There are a growing number of accounts that focus on these troublesome elements. As a result emotional, ethical, safety, and identity challenges must be repeatedly addressed. In the literature, personal issues finally gained recognition as an important methodological problem and promoted from marginal problems to a more central issue due to the observation that good research findings are determined not only by proper research design and researchers’ deep knowledge about methods, but also by what researchers feel or sense while executing the fieldwork. As Munkejord demonstrates (2009), emotions can influence researcher decisions. The author writes how he abandoned further scrutiny of some important situations in his fieldwork because of the negative emotional reactions it could evoke. As an example, the researcher, while on the research site, was more willing to join a discussions of three or more people than when only two persons were talking, as the latter situation made him feel uncomfortable.

Discussion on the emotional and ethical difficulties that appear during the research process was initiated because “ethnography is not about a method of data collection, but a way of engaging with the world around us” (Cunliffe, 2010, p. 233). Hence, the knowledge that human limitations are inevitable has come under methodological scrutiny. This trend is a specific aspect of the partially overlapping discussion on “academic emotions” that are relevant not only for any research practice (Campbell, 2002; Whiteman et al., 2009) but also for theory building (Weick, 1999).

In this stream of research, the observation that fieldwork involves a special kind of “emotional labor” is thus a crucial one. The term was coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild in a study of the service sector (Hochschild, 1983) and strongly influenced a lot of research, including that on organization studies (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Fineman, 2000; S.J. Tracy and K. Tracy, 1998; S. J. Tracy, 2000).

Within the stream of writing on the emotional dimensions of ethnography, an interesting study was presented by Pollard who interviewed anthropology PhD students from the UK. Her article presented “a range of feelings as experienced by 16 interviewees: alone, ashamed, bereaved, betrayed, depressed, desperate,

disappointed, disturbed, embarrassed, fearful, frustrated, guilty, harassed, homeless, paranoid, regretful, silenced, stressed, trapped, uncomfortable, unprepared, unsupported, and unwell” (Pollard, 2009, p. 1). This extensive list is not the complete list, but it is a good example how emotional actual fieldwork can be.

A review of the classic anthropological literature shows that all such tensions and difficulties were also experienced by the first generation of fieldworkers. What was characteristic was that early ethnographers like Malinowski or Franz Boas kept their descriptions of the community separate from their subjective reflections on the personal problems they experienced while working in the field. Only in diaries (Malinowski, 1967), letters (Yampolsky-Boas, 1958), and autobiographies (Powdermaker, 1967) did the fieldworkers describe what happened behind the scenes. For example, in his letter diary, Boas writes about a feeling familiar to many contemporary ethnographers: “Sept. 25th. Today was my worst day since I have been here. I learned practically nothing as I had to spend the entire day running about in search of new people” (in Yampolsky-Boas, 1958, p. 315). Troublesome intimacy between ethnographer and informants was also recognized very early on, as the quote from Evans-Pritchard’s shows: “An anthropologist has failed unless, when he says goodbye to the natives, there is on both sides the sorrow of parting” (1951, p. 79).

Ethnographic Problems Are Not Unique

Pollard points out that that pre-fieldwork training may not always be adequate. Some of her informants commenting on this problem indicated: “Pre-fieldwork was absolutely fucking useless.” “It was the worst course I’ve ever done.” “The training is shit.” “There was zero preparation for actual fieldwork.” (Pollard, 2009, p. 18). We share these concerns about pre-fieldwork training when confronted with actual emotional, motivational, ethical, and social tensions. One possible explanation for this failure rests in the unpredictability of any ethnographic encounter (Jordan and Dalal, 2006; Lewin et al., 2002). These characteristics make any complete preparation of a novice researcher almost impossible. Nevertheless, as an academic community, we are still obliged to master the ways we can help researchers, especially those who are new to the field.

In 1972, an article by David Nash reviewed the anthropological literature regarding the process of doing fieldwork (Nash et al., 1972). The usefulness of this kind of discussion was not acknowledged by all. Harvey R. Bernard, commenting on Nash’s article, wrote: “[...] my own experience in training graduate students in the field [...] indicates that reading the self-evaluating literature of our colleagues will not shorten the aging process by a single month” (Nash *et al.*, 1972, p. 553). Despite such doubts as Bernard’s, a reflexive, self-conscious ethnographic literature has flourished in the past three decades.

An important portion of the literature on ethnographic challenges is on the experiences of those who in order to conduct their fieldwork had to leave their home country. This characteristic seems to be especially true for British anthropology where PhD students need to spend a year or longer in the field, in most cases outside the UK (Barth et al., 2005). We in turn started our exploration from our own experiences as researchers and advisors for our home-country or not-so-distant research sites. An important consequence emerged from the dissimilarity of these two types of approaches when writing about such ethnographic challenges.

First, many difficulties reported by ethnographers who spend at least a year in a geographically and culturally distant country may be interpreted as an element of culture shock. Those researchers shared most of their troubles with others who spent extended period of time abroad. For example, difficulties in re-entering the home country were repeatedly described not only in the context of ethnographers and their experience, but also in the context of expatriate managers (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Murdoch and Kaciak, 2011), and Peace Corps volunteers (Arnold, 1967). Authors' writing about the ethnographic experience in many instances treat fieldwork problems as though they were isolated difficulties and challenges characteristic of ethnography only. The empirical material, what seems to be a methodologically proper first choice, comes from authors' own experiences when conducting an ethnographic study (Down et al., 2006; Haynes, 2006; Munkejord, 2009). In some cases it is supplemented by the accounts of other researchers (Pollard, 2009).

A crucial point in our article is the observation that the difficulties and challenges of ethnographic practice can have diverse sources and natures, and most, if not all, of them are not specific to ethnography alone. We suggest that a close observation of how groups of non-ethnographers who operate in situations similar to ours and experience similar difficulties could become a new positive driver for change in the ethnographic community. If analogies between ethnography and other realms occur, they are rather peripheral. Michael Humphreys' article (2006) could be an exception as the author draws a parallel between teaching research methodology and learning to play a musical instrument. In this example, the references to musical training were extensively utilized. However, even in this article, musical training served more as a metaphorical frame than being grounded in research analogy. In our opinion, the advancement of organizational ethnography needs new drivers to avoid the dangers of inbreeding. Such drivers could originate from centering on the scrutiny practices of other professions, groups, and communities that share certain characteristics with ethnographers. In that way, we can foster the further development of our own method of "learning from looking elsewhere" (Hine, 2001, p. 67).

Sue, a student from Pollard's study, suggests that "many of the skills she used to cope with the situation were those she had learned outside her academic training – when working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) before she started her postgraduate study." (Pollard, 2009, p. 16). Intrigued by this statement, we wonder what would happen if someone tried to shed new light on ethnographic practice using the findings from studies of NGO activists. Best positioned to take on this task are those ethnographers who are studying NGOs and thus able to confront their own experiences and compare them to the actions of other research participants. As a community of organizational ethnographers we do possess a huge amount of knowledge about other professions (A. Krzyworzeka and P. Krzyworzeka, 2012). This knowledge can be usefully applied for the benefit of teaching a certain qualitative methodology (Schilcher et al., 2007).

Our study focuses on the difficulties of fieldwork that emerge not from contact with culturally, geographically (including climate) distant reality, but rather from the specificity of the interaction between an ethnographer and research participants. This aspect gives us a narrower perspective, and thus, the findings will be more applicable to the organizational ethnography field, as in many cases, we study groups that are geographically and culturally close to our own cultures. The specificity of organizational ethnography is nicely grasped by Pritchard (2011) who presented her situated identity work in virtual, academic, personal, and research site spaces. Frequent switching between those spaces (Hunter et al., 2010) poses different challenges than a long, solitary life in a foreign country (see Yanow, 2009 for effective further exploration of differences between organizational ethnography and anthropological ethnography).

Research Methods and Research Sites

This paper is based on the empirical material derived from an ethnographic research project one of the authors conducted among direct sellers (hereinafter called "consultants") of Tracy Jo cosmetics (name of the company changed for this article). The research was a four-year fieldwork assignment that was based on participant observation while working as an interpreter of corporate events, including trainings and seminars), formal and informal interviews (a total of 53 interviews recorded with interviewees' consent), and shadowing the consultants (Czarniawska, 2007; Kostera, 2007). Although most of the research was conducted in Poland, the study does have a multi-site character because it was strategically situated in a multi-site context (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995). The beauty consultants the ethnographer met in Poland lived and worked in Canada, the U.S., Lithuania, Latvia, the Ukraine, and Russia, thereby creating a transnational community (Levitt, 2001).

Tracy Jo is a direct selling organization that applies a multilevel marketing model. Direct selling “is face-to-face selling away from a fixed retail location”. Multilevel marketing in turn is a marketing strategy applied by many direct selling organizations where the distributors’ earnings are based on two components: The distribution of products (margin) and the recruitment of new sellers (direct commission from Multi-Level Marketing, or in short a MLM, network).

This empirical material was then contrasted with the self-reflexive ethnographic literature and the authors’ own experiences. Several auto-ethnographic vignettes (Ellis, 2004) were presented to illustrate the similarities between direct selling and ethnography and the learning opportunities. In qualitative research, especially in ethnography, comparative studies are a controversial subject (Marcus, 1995; Noblit and Hare, 1988). We do believe in the importance of cross study inspiration, but due to high contextuality and the multi-variability usage of studies from different sites, it should be done not as a strict comparison, but instead as an open and flexible analogy. By using analogy we mean “looking for similarities and differences that help us see something familiar - perhaps too familiar - in a different way or from a fresh perspective” (Wolcott, 1999, pp. 244–245).

Four Coping Strategies When Direct Selling – Study Findings

Offer a Routine to Follow

Problem: Unstable and unpredictable working conditions

Meetings initiated by direct sellers are risky, as the prospective client can even refuse to talk with the distributor. The distributor usually does not know the person whom she is talking to actually is, what her needs are, if she has a sense of humor, what her financial situation is, etc. Unpredictable working conditions can result in a quite high risk of failure for a selling interaction (P. Krzyworzeka, 2011a; P. Krzyworzeka, 2011b). Direct sellers do not have the same sufficient support as that of a salesperson who is working in a regular shop. Usually, it is the distributor who initiates the interaction, and the meeting takes place in a private place or other setting originally designed for purposes other than merchandising. These circumstances make direct selling work much more challenging.

Solution: Routine sales talks and storytelling

In our MLM study, we encountered the routinization of distributor behavior similar to that described by

Robin Leidner (1993). In stories told by prospective clients who were attending MLM events, routinization seems to be the key characteristic. Karol, commenting on his meeting with a distributor who wanted to recruit him, said:

[Karol:] I told him, you see, I have an impression that you don't say it, you know, but that you quote something or somebody. I told him that, and I was wondering what his reaction would be. And he said he didn't understand.

Routinization is one of the main strategies that can help direct sellers gain control over an interaction. Memorizing “sales talks” also gives them something concrete to rely on in a very unpredictable situation.

At Tracy Jo, consultants are encouraged to start their client meetings by sharing a personal narrative about their lives before Tracy Jo, and how that life changed when a person started to work as a consultant. Messages are addressed toward people with different needs and aspirations so as to form a single coherent and very personal story.

Tracy Jo distributors master the art of storytelling and acquire excellent interaction skills. Apparently natural and ordinary behaviors are sequences of well-thought out, precise steps to achieve the desired goal. During our fieldwork in MLM, after a product presentation, a distributor would explain to a fieldworker what she did during meetings with clients. It turned out that the whole presentation was carefully designed. She usually closes her presentation as follows:

[Distributor4:] I then raise each product and repeat that 3in1 cleansing milk should be used twice a day-- in the morning and in the evening, in the morning and in the evening. The Anti-Age Hydrating Lotion [product name] in the morning and in the evening, in the morning and in the evening. This whole set is 168, whole set 168. Eye makeup remover 70, foundation 61, lipstick 50, lip-gloss only 50.

This technique was reported with pride, as in the consultant's opinion, it was an effective and persuasive way to present the prices. Crucial to the presentation was “hiding” the word “zloty” (*Polish currency unit*): *foundation 61, lipstick 50, lip gloss only 50*. She used “zloty” only when she was comparing her products to those of competitors to reinforce the positive price gap.

Make the Task Manageable

Problem: Low motivation due to independence and self-reliance

In the field, distributors often work without direct supervision and encounter problems known by many of us: Emotionally demanding work, lack of fixed hours and tasks, and unpredictable interactions with clients. All these can cause problems with motivation.

Distributors often feel anxious when they are about to start a direct selling interaction. One of our informants, a senior beauty consultant, when asked about the problems that she faces as a distributor, answered that postponing contact with a client or prospective clients is one of them. She stressed that it is also a problem for other consultants in her business group. They can stare at the phone for a long time. Another distributor told new consultants about her performance anxiety:

[Distributor1:] I often tell the girls that when I went to meet a client for the first time to sell insurance, I was in such a huge stage fright that I hovered around the building for about a quarter [of an hour], before I went in.

One of the most established Tracy Jo distributors, when delivering an important speech to thousands of distributors, made the “fear of making appointments” a central topic of her speech:

[VIP Distributor:] Stop being afraid of recruiting people and making cosmetics presentations. Have a look at the other person and see the invisible badge, saying “Please, make me feel important”. Have full trust in [the] Tracy Jo company [...]. Love yourself and love thy neighbour, and your life will be a great success. Remember, that courage inspires, and fear limits you down.

Solution: Eating the “elephant” one bite at a time

Different techniques developed in DSOs can help overcome this problem. Breaking a task into smaller chunks of activity is a basic technique used by distributors. The phrase, *You eat an elephant one bite at a time*, is often used when young consultants meet with a senior colleague to plan their career paths. To achieve higher status or to gain a prize in a company competition, a consultant will need to sell a certain amount of products and/or recruit a certain number of new distributors. Winning prizes and rising through the ranks will stimulate the actions of sales representatives, but reaching the goal usually is not enough. Consultants will break down a big task (e.g. get director status within a year) into quarterly tasks and then into monthly, weekly, and daily

tasks. After such a planning activity, usually coached by someone senior in the organization, the consultant knows what she has to do the next day and every day after that to achieve the goal she wants.

Provide Opportunities for Gradual Immersion

Problem: Ambiguous social relations

In MLM, family relations and other private relations are regularly transformed. New consultants are asked to compile a list of everyone they know-- family, friends, and colleagues-- and turn them into clients and business partners. The boundary between private and public life thus becomes blurred. In attending events organized by MLM distributors (product presentations, recruiting interviews, and sharing stories about distributors) established social relations are transformed into business relations, i.e., sister starts to buy products and become a client or decides to be a distributor herself. However, if someone close to sister takes the distributor's actions as inappropriate, that relationship can be harmed.

Adam, one of our informants who was not involved in direct selling, was invited to what he thought was a birthday party by his close friend, Jacek, an MLM distributor. Adam arrived at Jacek's home with a birthday gift. There he met two experienced distributors in suits and learned that a product presentation would be the highlight of the evening. "I heard the presentation, and I left; after that, we didn't see each other for a long time," recalled Adam. Some distributors see a danger in involving family members and friends in their business operations, and after inviting them to several unsuccessful events, they stop asking them to come. One of the informants said that for her the most difficult thing was to gain a reputation as a professional with people who had previously known her as a friend:

[Distributor13:] When we begin our work, we are convinced that our friends will be the best clients, but this is wrong. For them, I was not a professional in all this; they had known me from before. Naturally, I did make them a presentation of cosmetics. But later I stopped talking about Tracy Jo. I mean I still tell about it in context of my work, my achievements, but not about cosmetics. There even was a moment when my husband said I should stop talking about cosmetics, because they could feel some pressure, and they may not want to buy.

Solution: Warm marketing and gradual immersion

In MLM, apart from setting a routine and dividing large tasks into smaller, manageable ones, Tracy Jo,

the studied company adopted a strategy of gradual immersion. One way of introducing new consultants into the selling field was the Powerful Start program. A new consultant who makes presentations to 30 people in the first 30 days of her program receives a P&S brooch. She does not have to sell anything; she just has to show the cosmetics, improve her presentation skills, and learn about the products. She is encouraged to start with her close friends and family. After this start-up program, the new consultant is much more experienced, but what is more important is that in all likelihood, she earned more money than she expected and has enjoyable memories of the presentations that she made to her friends.

Diverse varieties of this strategy exist among other people involved in direct selling. Some distributors used the expression “warm marketing” to offer products and business opportunities to family members and friends. This nicely formulated metaphor shifts the focus to the cozy aspects of interactions with acquaintance. The first phase of a distributor’s carrier is presented as a learning opportunity without any direct emphasis on performance as measured in financial terms.

Offer positive emotional purpose

Problem: Perceived unidirectionality of interaction and threat of exploitation

Unidirectionality in direct selling is a real problem. A distributor enters other people’s lives uninvited and tries to sell them something. This problem was already visible in the above examples, especially in the birthday event case. Each time distributors initiate a contact, they are exposed to the uncomfortable thought that most likely they are more desperate to close the transaction than retain a prospective client. In fact, what they gain is bigger, as it is their life and reputation as a carrier at stake.

Solution: Refer to higher values

The literature on direct sales stresses this point, showing how direct selling organizations choose to support their distributors by providing motivational tools. David Schweingruber and Nancy Berns described some of those tools:

Dealers [selling books] describe the book field as a world of deep negative emotions that must be dealt with emotionally, not rationally. They believe, in fact, that money is an insufficient reason to sell books [...]. Instead, company managers recommended they focus on “something more” than money (Schweingruber and Berns, 2005, p. 690).

The “Something more” in direct selling is a precise “emotional purpose” and is delivered during training sessions. One of the more popular “emotional purposes” is a “service-mindedness” that redefines selling as providing a service to the customer.

Tracy Jo consultants describe their work as providing a professional service and “enriching women’s lives” (taken from the Tracy Jo mission statement) by educating women and giving them access to a unique business opportunity. Distributors prefer to call themselves “entrepreneurs” and stress the independence and creativity of their work (Biggart, 1990). Another strategy is to present the seller’s job as something more valuable, namely, a professional service or a way to utilize to enrich other people’s lives (Cahn, 2006; Pratt and Barnett, 1997; Pratt, 2000) and not simply as a salesperson for a product.

They avoid presenting their operations as simply sales and recruiting; instead, they emphasize the professionalism, and the willingness to help others. As Ewa, a beauty consultant, declared:

[Distributor5:] First of all, I am the kind of person who loves to help. It is a sort of my merit, I hope. I like to help. I’m really happy when I see these women, who even don’t really buy anything, but they leave smiling and smug, and I serve as their advisor, because I believe so, that we are actually doing [an] advisory, we’re consulting. It is very important to me.

From this redefined perspective, being a consultant then resembles volunteering in a charitable mission rather than just undertaking a business operation in a market economy.

Analogies to Ethnographic Practice

Corresponding Challenges

The presented set of four problems and solutions resonates with our own experience as ethnographic researchers. Learning about the challenge of self-reliance in direct selling, one of us (Pawel) recalled a vivid picture from the past . We present that reflection here as a short narrative:

I was a second-year anthropology student. I was supposed to live in the Dyatlovo region of Belarus for several weeks and conduct some interviews and observations. One day I was planning to visit Malducie, a predominantly Catholic village. It was not going to be my first time in the village, I knew almost everyone there, but there were two or three families that I did not know well and needed to meet.

That day I was planning to interview those families. I had left my room in Dyatlovo early in the

morning and made the 45-minute walk to Malducie. As I approached the village I started to feel anxious about meeting new people. When I was close to the village, I sat down and decided that it was not a good time to bother the villagers, since they were certainly going to be milking their cows. The thought calmed me, and an hour later I was still not sure if I could enter the village because it was breakfast time. It would then be time for the second milking, followed by lunch. Finally, I started my first interview at 3:00 in the afternoon. For the sake of completeness, I have to mention that it was summer, and the weather was really nice.

Pawel attributed his procrastination to laziness, but this kind of indolence is symptomatic of the kind of work we describe here. Other ethnographers have also shared their own stories about postponing the precise moment of establishing interaction with their informants. Strolling down the streets of the village to “familiarize” oneself with the local topography was a legitimate excuse for many of our students and colleagues to avoid starting a conversation with research participants.

The problem of ambiguous relations is even more striking; however, in ethnographic research social relations often change in the opposite direction to direct selling situation. These relationships begin as professional ones, but then they become more personal. An ethnographer can never be a genuine insider. First, he or she is constantly gathering data and analyzing events, even when these events are very informal. Informants/friends can forget that they are part of the “community under study”, but in truth, they are always being observed. For people living in small communities it can be difficult to define the presence of an outsider.

They were often trying to match the ethnographer with categories they were already familiar with, such as Jehovah's Witnesses. Another category applied by informants from the former Soviet Republics was that of a spy. Similarly, another author of this paper was considered to be a management spy, when he conducted long-term observations and interviews in a software company. A list of these examples could be as long as the list of practicing ethnographers.

Meetings initiated by ethnographers are also risky because researchers, similarly to direct sellers, operate in unpredictable working conditions. First, people can refuse to cooperate. That refusal could be the result of a lack of trust and/or the ethnographer's ambiguous position (Dominika Latusek, 2008). Next, problems can arise during an ethnographer-informant interaction. Hiding the truth from the ethnographer is one of these problems.

Finally, there is the exploitation problem. The participant-researcher relationship for many scholars is

unequal because almost always it is the ethnographer who benefits from that interaction. When we look at fieldwork from the perspective that knowledge about another culture is “the currency of our careers” (Hertz, 2003, p. 473), then question becomes “What do we owe those people who help us gain knowledge?” (Hertz, 2003, p. 473). Shulamit Reinharz, in her landmark work, *On Becoming A Social Scientist*, makes that same very strong argument, juxtaposing traditional social science research to the emotions found with the crime of rape:

The researchers take, hit, and run. They intrude into their subjects’ privacy, disrupt their perceptions, utilize false pretenses, manipulate the relationship, and give little or nothing in return. When the needs of the researcher are satisfied, they break off contact with the subject (Reinharz, 1984, p. 95)

Corresponding Coping Strategies

The blurred boundaries between effective social roles and unequal and exploitative relations are aspects that ethnographers closely share with direct sellers. The main difference is that ethnographers have a great deal more moral social capital that they can spend to justify their actions than do direct sellers. Knowledge, education, and scholarship are a sufficient and arguably viable excuse for undertaking ethnographic research that is built on unequal relations. Direct sellers, in contrast, try to build their capital by referring to fields that have a higher social recognition. We frequently had an opportunity to observe students who were trying to find their own sufficient justification for bothering innocent people, i.e. doing ethnography. Most were justifying themselves by appealing to such highly valued concepts as scholarship and knowledge.

Ethnographers from Warsaw University developed their own approach for “eating the elephant”. Students who are working on their undergraduate thesis (the elephant) are supposed to spend several weeks doing field research. To overcome “fieldworkers’ indolence”, supervisors set a minimum of two interviews for each fieldwork day. Although ethnography should not be reduced to interviews alone (Yanow, 2009), the need to establish a routine became very important, and the easiest way to meet that routine was to encourage, even require students to count the number of interviews that they conduct in a single day.

One of those students upon entering the PhD program at another university simply changed one routine into another. During her undergraduate training in Poland she internalized the two-interviews-per-day rule. At her new University in Great Britain, she planned to conduct traditional long-term fieldwork in Russia. Facing one year in the field, she had to replace her undergraduate researcher’s routine with another. An experienced researcher suggested that she take an A4 size notebook, set a lower limit of field notes (for example three pages

per day), and try to meet that limit every day. Even if nothing happened on a given day, she would have to take three pages of notes, even if they were just about the view she saw from her window.

Another useful routine that ethnographers often use is a narrative one, equivalent to the distributors' "sales talks". Each ethnographer has his or her own way of introducing himself or herself to people in the field and opening the conversation. As we learned from our examples, this introductory part of the ethnographic performance, as time passes, becomes actually a routine and becomes its own personal narrative: A kind of ethnographic "I Story" as it were. Talking about oneself is not only an icebreaker in ethnographic practice; it is also the result of being perceived by young researchers' as being unequal in their relationships in the field. Sharing details from a researcher's private life is a way for researchers to share something about themselves with their informants.

The nearest ethnographic equivalent to the gradual immersion strategy is entering the field through local authorities or organizations (for the ethnographer it can be through a village community).

A Learning Opportunity for Organizational Ethnography

Methodology should be a routine that makes life easier

The most cited article from the "Field Methods" journal is *How Many Interviews Are Enough?* This is a perfect illustration of a cry for the methodological routine that exists among many qualitative researchers. We suggest looking at methodology as the lead coping strategy that ethnographers apply in response to field-work unpredictability.

Ethnography in some traditions, especially within mainstream socio-cultural anthropology, is only minimally codified and in many cases leaves the researcher with only vague guidelines. Nonetheless, outside this steam a considerable amount of effort is invested in the development of qualitative research methods. Codifying research methods and devising new techniques is an ongoing process to which the QROM journal, among others, is always contributing. A few such attempts from recent years are the three framing practices in shadowing (Vasquez et al., 2012), methodological emotional reflexivity (MER) in grounded theory (Munkejord, 2009), and five levels of reflexivity for writing organizational ethnography (Mahadevan, 2011). This trend can be seen as a means of offering a precise routine that other researchers could follow.

The role of learning more about effective research methods rests not just in improving the quality of the output by establishing rigor and relevance (S. J. Tracy, 2010). Codified research methods also offer something

concrete in the context of the uncertainty so often embedded in a typical ethnographic encounter. Following a methodological routine does not necessarily produce better research findings than the “spend a year in the field”, “hanging around”, and/or “do not forget your notebook and pencil” approach. Consider the examples of the very first anthropologists who produced groundbreaking research without practicing sophisticated research methodology. On the other hand, research methods do make life and the work easier, for sure. Both the researchers and those who evaluate their work (reviewers, degree committees, and journal editors) benefit from this formalization, as more well-developed methodology does facilitate the communication within the academic community and does help researchers control and adapt to challenging working conditions.

Ethical committees as a source of emotional purpose

In the U.S., researchers filling out an IRB form need to specify what, if anything, research participants will gain from a study. This administrative process has the potential to make scholars more aware of the moral value of their endeavor. The Polish equivalent of the IRB is much less formal and more flexible than the US one, as most Poles do not formulate explicitly the direct and indirect benefits a project will produce. We can speculate that being forced to be explicit about the possible benefits of a project does not always result in any increase of self-confidence. Self-confidence will develop if ethnographers succeed in convincing themselves that a project can actually achieve a positive impact. However, another scenario is also possible. As a result of the IRB procedure, researchers’ perceptions of the unidirectionality of ethnographic encounters can be reinforced, especially if they are not able to articulate a plausible moral justification for their research during the research design stage.

When conducting our first ethnographic projects, we were not obliged to write in precise terms about the benefits of our research on a studied community and as a result when faced with the exploitation dilemma we could quite easily refer to a vaguely defined “contribution to the body of knowledge”. That is not to say that we should abandon this crucial part of IRB; rather, our aim was to highlight the double-edged sword quality of this administrative process for delivering an emotional purpose.

A case for the importance of emotional purpose

To successfully complete any ethnographic project, a solid positive moral justification for doing fieldwork is crucial. As we have already discussed, the academic version of ethnography possesses a relatively high moral capital. However, when the very same researchers, using the same methods, skills and knowledge, operates for commercial purposes, then their effectiveness as fieldworkers, only because of the change in the

purpose for which this knowledge is produced, can be compromised. We have observed a failure of several young ethnographers in their fieldwork only because of a lack plausible moral justification. Below we present a short auto-ethnographic vignette about a group of junior ethnographers, including one of the co-authors, who experienced the challenges of conducting commercial ethnography

It is a story about a group of ethnography students from Poland who were trying to conduct ethnographic fieldwork for a market research agency. We used the word “try” because almost all failed as market researchers for that company and soon quit. Of a dozen fieldworkers, only one still practices commercial ethnography working for another agency.

The research agency, one of the first in Poland, specializes in ethnographic research, and its founder and president is a psychologist. He recruited these fieldworkers mainly among sociology, psychology and anthropology students. In many respects, commercial fieldwork seemed to be less challenging. Research participants were recruited by an external agency, so the gaining of access process was rather trouble free. All junior researchers got the same precise manual describing how a researcher should behave while in the field and what the teamwork rules were. Detailed research scenarios accompanied by debriefing sessions were delivered before the beginning of every project.

Several days after completing the fieldwork everyone was obliged to present a report. A template for the report forced authors to graphically (diverse font colors) differentiate interviews quotes, descriptions, interpretations, personal opinions, and uncertain conclusions. The productivity of the system was stunning. Thanks to this well-defined routine, a single researcher, after three full days of participant observation, was able to produce – during a single week – 50 thousand words as a report. Within several weeks the research team was able to prepare hundreds sometimes even thousands of pages of research material.

As the CEO declared in conversations with one of the authors, one of the biggest problems with managing researcher teams was dealing with the ethical and emotional problems that the junior researchers reported. He could not understand their problems, the most serious of which was the ethical problem of exploitation. For him, all such dilemmas seemed superficial and naïve.

What was interesting was that upon accepting the market research job, the fieldworkers fully understood that the study was going to be done strictly for business purposes; the problems appeared during the research. For some, it was really hard to maintain motivation and high concentration was needed during intensive participant observation when, for example, a family participating in the research (ordered by an

advertising agency) openly declared their anti-consumption approach to life. The researcher knew that the findings were supposed to help the corporation to enhance the pervasiveness of their marketing. During the course of this research, family members gradually became aware of the ambiguity of the situation in which they had agreed to participate. This disapproval was not formulated explicitly, but the researcher could sense the growing tension which then exposed him to high emotional stress.

Sharing stories between team members about this kind of problem did not help, and even less useful were conversations with academic ethnographers, i.e., colleagues and former teachers. Evidently, university training had not prepared junior ethnographers to invade other people's privacy to serve the specific needs of their business clients (Dariusz Jemielniak, 2006). At the same time, ethnographic sensitivity, observation skills, and writing skills of young researchers were highly appreciated by the management of this agency.

The problem observed in this local example is also visible at a more general level. There are a considerable number of researchers who are operating commercially and using ethnography. Marietta Baba (2006) states that they operate in market research, design research, and organizational research. From these three groups appear design ethnographers who are the most active and the fastest growing community (Estimation based on attendance at the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference and reading messages from an "anthrodesign" listserv). One interpretation of this phenomenon could be that design ethnography offers the most appealing emotional purpose, i.e. creation of new products and services and helping to improve the lives of people.

Conclusion

Four basic coping strategies were presented in this study: 1) offer a routine to follow; 2) make the task manageable; 3) offer emotional purpose; and 4) provide an opportunity for gradual immersion. The typology derived from the examination of direct selling distributor practices. We believe that this framework could be also useful for thinking further about the ongoing challenges of ethnographic research.

The typology was then applied to organize coping strategies already in use in the ethnographic community. The framework also has the potential to facilitate identification of other useful practices by exposing the crucial challenges of our work. Identified positive coping strategies can be then shared across our community. This is an especially promising vision as different disciplinary, national, and institutional traditions can offer very diverse input. Finally, the framework can serve as a further guideline for those who are willing to

work on new strategies to help ethnographers deal more effectively with crucial challenges.

However, the most important outcome from this closer observation of direct selling is not the typology itself, but rather a deeper understanding of the role that certain of these practices do play in service and service-type jobs. We acknowledge the importance of the routine in ethnography only because of our discovery of the role of routinization in direct-selling. Similarly, the power of emotional purpose would not probably occur or be recognized as a valuable category if it was not so exposed in the community we were studying. In short, an exaggerated form of direct selling practices drew our attention to certain analogical qualities also seen in ethnography.

By taking into consideration the need for routine, emotional purpose, gradual immersion, and manageable tasking that exists also in ethnography we can see in a new light such fundamental practices as developing research methodology, submitting proposals to IRB, precise research design and planning, and gaining access. According to our interpretation, codified research methodology can a useful routine to follow and the IRB process as an effective and positive way of developing emotional purpose that can serve as an workable moral justification for doing ethnography.

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